

**The Monastery in the Methodist Eye:
Rev. Merton S. Rice of Detroit and St. George of Choziba
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What connects the Monk and the Methodist? Monasticism has not – historically speaking – been a customary topic in Methodist circles. In *The Methodist Review*, for example, from *ante-bellum* America to the Second World War, while a wide variety of studies from antiquity to the present appeared, monasticism was ignored. The rare emergence of this theme only tangentially engaged it. One study, for example, portrayed John Wesley as a new St. Francis, while another presented the life of Francis as a role model, but added the qualification that the essence of Francis’s teaching was valuable, but the “monkish ideal is gone forever.”¹ The monastic contribution to the development of theology, its artistic and literary achievement, its preservation of classical and Christian texts (including the Bible), its missionary activity, and its emphasis on community in often hostile terrain – was overlooked. If the theme marginally surfaced, it was presented not as *perpetuating and preserving* Christianity, but as part of the Catholic tradition that *perverted* it.

This study examines the depiction of monasticism by one of the most influential voices of American Methodism in the first half of the twentieth century, Rev. Merton S. Rice of Metropolitan Episcopal Church in Detroit.² For thirty years (1913-1943), Reverend Rice was a towering figure in the Detroit pulpit. Under his guidance, Metropolitan Church experienced phenomenal growth, becoming the denomination’s largest congregation with over 7000 members by 1939.³ Rev. Rice’s influence extended far beyond the Michigan area, being recognized nationally as one of the twenty-five most influential preachers in America.⁴ His powerful presence can still be felt through his volumes of published sermons and through the monument of Metropolitan Church which continues to stand in the heart of Detroit.⁵

From Wesley to the Twentieth Century

Before turning to Merton Rice, let us begin with a reflection on monastic life by the founder of Methodism, John Wesley:

The corruption, not only of the heathen world, but likewise of them that were called Christians, has been a matter of sorrow and lamentation to pious men, almost from the time of the apostles. And hence, as early as the second century...men who were afraid of being partakers of other men’s sins, thought it their duty to separate from them. Hence, in every age many have retired from the world, lest they should be stained with the pollutions of it. In the third century many carried this so far as to run into deserts and turn hermits. But in the following age this took

¹ F. Tralasca, “Saint Francis of Protestantism,” *Methodist Review* 109 (November, 1926): 925-928; Oscar Kuhns, “Saint Francis of Assisi,” *Methodist Review* 87 (November-December, 1905): 868-887.

² Rev. Rice served as a Pastor of Metropolitan’s predecessor Woodward Ave ME Church.

³ *Detroit Annual Conference Minutes* 1939, 111; 1940, 105; 1941, 304; 1942, 110; 1943, 246; 1944, 110.

⁴ A. Douglas MacNaughton, *The Methodist Church in Michigan: The Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 201-202.

⁵ Metropolitan United Methodist Church, <http://www.metroumc.org/>.

another turn. Instead of turning hermits, they turned monks...This spirit of literally renouncing the world, by retiring into religious houses, did not so generally prevail after the Reformation. Nay, in Protestant countries, houses of this kind were totally suppressed.⁶

Wesley directly connected the Methodist movement which created zealous, close-knit communities within the larger Anglican Church, with the rise of monasticism which did likewise in the world of Late Antiquity. Separation from the world, Wesley explained, was essential for the pursuit of *true* Christianity. Wesley tied the monastic impulse of separation to his own Methodist movement. Wesley's doctrine of holiness and his emphasis on community, united by religious zeal and high ethical accountability, appeared, as he had noted, in line with the monastic tradition.⁷ Wesley also noted, however, that this historic form of Christianity had been excised from Protestantism by the Augustinian monk Martin Luther who bound monasticism and Catholicism together, rejecting the former as born from the latter.⁸ Protestantism, in all its varieties, forged its identity as *expressly and intentionally* un-Catholic, rejecting many practices that it chose to associate with this tradition.⁹ The Methodist outlook, shaped by the Reformation tradition, found no place for monasticism. Methodism could have no cloister.

While monasticism had been a dynamic force in the Christian world since the time of Antony of Egypt (d. 356), to the Protestant world it appeared like a relic of time past—part of the “monkish ideal gone forever.” The Reformation opposition to things monastic passed from the Old World to the New with the settlement of English, Dutch, and other Protestants whose enmity was not diminished by the fact that Protestants far outnumbered Catholics in the American colonies. This antagonism increased as immigration transformed Catholicism into the most popular form of American Christianity by the Civil War.¹⁰

In this background, the monastery loomed as a menacing outpost drawing the attention of Protestant defenders. In 1834, a mob – inspired by rumors of an imprisoned

⁶ John Wesley, “On Attending the Church Service,” Sermon 104, chapters 1-2, <www.ccel.org/w/wesley/sermons/sermons-html/serm-104.html>.

⁷ Recently, Methodists have begun to make the same connection, as one Pastor commented: “...had Wesley been born in a different Christian era he would not have founded Methodism, but monasticism. For the idea that the whole Church could be rekindled by the existence of small groups dedicated to living holy, disciplined lives goes right back to the Desert Fathers.” Trevor Hoggard “Why Methodism?” (A Paper Given at the Manukau School of Theology, Papakura, October 12, 2002), <www.trinity.org.nz/WhyMethodism.html> .

⁸ John Wesley, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” Sermon 68, chapter 10, <www.ccel.org/w/wesley/sermons/sermons-html/serm-068.html>: “When iniquity had overspread the Church as a flood, the Spirit of the Lord lifted up a standard against it. He raised up a poor monk, without wealth, without power, and, at the time, without friends to declare war, as it were, against the world, against the Bishop of Rome and all his adherents.” There are Protestant monastic communities, though they are relatively rare in contrast to their Catholic/Orthodox brethren.

⁹ For a brief discussion of this phenomenon as it related to the Virgin Mary see: Jason Byasse, “Protestants and Marian Devotion. What about Mary?” *Christian Century* 121, no. 25 (December 14, 2004): 28-32. Methodism also conceived itself as *intentionally and antagonistically* not-Catholic well into the twentieth century: Charles W. Ferguson. *Methodists and the Making of America. Organizing to Beat the Devil* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1983), 412.

¹⁰ For a brief account of religion in America, including the Protestant-Catholic interaction, see: Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land. 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) and John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2004).

nun—set upon the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, outside of Boston. When its demands were not met, the mob attacked, destroying religious artifacts and razing the building. The nuns evacuated their school children and fled to safety. Two popular literary accounts were published shortly after the assault: Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and the more infamous *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* published in 1836. This libelous anti-Catholic treatise sold over 300,000 copies by the start of the Civil War in 1861. *The Awful Disclosures* told the tale of a convert who became a nun in Montreal and, upon entering the convent, learned the lurid truth that she would be forced to engage in sexual relations with priests as part of her monastic duty. At this shocking discovery she “now felt how foolish I had been to place myself in the power of such persons as were around me.”¹¹ The book informed readers of secret passages, sexual abuse, infants baptized then murdered and buried in the basement, religious charlatans—all of which exposed the hoax of monasticism and its faith tradition. *The Awful Disclosures* sparked an investigation that, in turn, found no evidence substantiating allegations. The account was soon proven fraudulent. Maria Monk had not been a nun and her salacious tale—despite its resonance with anti-Catholic sentiment—was groundless. Regardless, hostility to things monastic continued throughout the century.

Behind the hostility was the historical reality (best left unmentioned) that Christianity had been significantly influenced and even shaped by monks. Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) captured the awkward tension that existed between historical reality and the Protestant anti-monastic attitude. Esteemed Puritan Minister Arthur Dimmesdale was viewed by his community as the very embodiment of Puritan holiness. In one passage, the reader follows the minister into his study where Hawthorne revealed the necessary steps for a Puritan divine to reach the pinnacle of his profession:

Here the pale clergyman piled up his library, rich with parchment-bound folios of the Fathers, and the lore of Rabbis, and *monkish erudition*, of which Protestant divines, even while they vilified and decried that class of writers, were yet constrained often to avail themselves.¹²

Enmity masked the debt that the Protestants owed to their monastic predecessors.

A major transformation of American Protestant perception of the monastery occurred with the Second World War—building on shifting attitudes and understanding earlier in the century. Whereas Martin Luther had turned his back on monasticism, setting the Protestant against the monk, in the post-war years the monk began to draw Protestants back. Monasticism served as an ecumenical magnet, from the Taizé community founded by Brother Roger in 1940 to the sixty books of the brilliant Trappist Monk Thomas Merton. Monks have been building bridges between worlds—Protestant and Catholic, Christian and non-Christian, religious and secular. A chaotic world craved the spiritual insight and community found—for nearly two millennia—in the monastic

¹¹ *The Awful Disclosures*, Chapter 6, <<http://www.reformation.org/maria-monk.html>>.

¹² Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ch. 9, “The Leech.”

orders.¹³ The change was even reflected in Hollywood which released Bing Crosby's *The Bells of St. Mary's* in 1945.

Today, scholars are reconnecting the Protestant to the monastic world, studying the links between Wesleyan Spirituality and the rich monastic tradition.¹⁴ Ministers can now openly draw on this tradition for inspiration, even bringing it to the light of day in sermons.¹⁵ Laypeople are also turning to the monastic world. A well-known Protestant devotee is Kathleen Norris whose *The Cloister Walk* (1996) describes her encounter with the 1500 year-old Benedictine tradition. The popularity of this book reflects not only the masterful style of the author, but also the public's interest in the monastic world. John Kiser's *The Monks of Tibhirine. Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (2002) recounts the heart-wrenching story of Trappist dedication, compassion, and devotion to community in the face of terrorism that they knew would overtake them. The Orthodox monks of New Skete in New York speak directly to the public through their popular and highly effective dog training books, most recently releasing *I and Dog* (2003).¹⁶ Monasteries throughout the nation are more accessible and more accessed than ever through websites, email, on-line catalogues, newsletters, and spiritual retreats. In a world of clutter, chatter, and momentary (but momentous) fads, the monastery seems, even for many American Protestants, a preserve of spiritual renewal and stability and source of much needed hope.

Merton Rice and the Methodist Image

Merton Rice stood on the boundary between eras, between the traditional Protestant image of the Catholic and the more ecumenical present. Absent from his corpus is the deep-seated anti-Catholicism found in Methodist sermons of previous decades. Present, however, is an image of monastic life that is rooted in invective and misunderstanding—to which we now turn.

Rev. Rice's sermon, "The Brook and the Barrel," published in 1936, was based on *I Kings 17: 7 and 17:16*.¹⁷ The sermon interpreted the story of the Prophet Elijah hiding from King Ahab in the Kerith Ravine. Elijah's hunger was alleviated by ravens and his thirst by a brook, until it ran dry. The prophet, obeying a divine command, then traveled to Zarapheth of Sidon where he was helped by a poor widow whose meager food supply was miraculously kept perpetually full.

Beginning with the Biblical text and Elijah's solitary time in the Judaeen wilderness, the preacher then took liberty to embellish the story in order to illuminate this solitary experience: "There was a strange satisfaction that came over the endowed prophet as he stretched himself in the cooling grass that was growing close beside the assuring brook."¹⁸ The brook ran dry *as a result of* the prophet's contentment. Rev.

¹³ On the Taize Community see <<http://www.taize.fr/en>>. On Thomas Merton, see his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948) and his monastery, <<http://www.monks.org/thomasmerton.html>> which has links to additional resources.

¹⁴ S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., Ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Mark S. Bollwinkel (Pastor, Los Altos United Methodist Church), Sermon "I Believe in the Holy Spirit" (April 12, 2000), <www.laumc.org/worship/sermons_33.html>. The monk (St. Jerome) is the hero in this sermon. The historical error, however, reflect the need for further education among Protestant pastors about monasticism.

¹⁶ On New Skete: <<http://www.newsketemonks.com/>>.

¹⁷ Ralph Milton Pierce, *Preachers and Preaching in Detroit* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1936), 203-216.

¹⁸ Pierce, 204.

Rice *inserted* causality between the dry brook (in the Biblical account) and the “strange satisfaction” of the relaxing holy man (absent from the Biblical account). The preacher transformed Elijah at the brook into a figure mired by apathetic laziness, resting comfortably, unconcerned for others and indifferent to the world. The preacher constructed a straw-man image in order to demolish it later in the sermon. The image he has built was, in fact, the Methodist representation of monastic life.

Through divine intervention, Elijah was pushed from this state of “selfish bliss” to a “heathen city” where a poverty-stricken “heathen woman” was making her last meal, after which she and her son faced starvation. At this desperate hour, Elijah arrived, asking for food. The widow answered with an act of inspiring kindness and fed him. The sermon contrasted the brook that had dried up when Elijah lived as a selfish solitary, with the “barrel that never wasted,” once Elijah had returned to the world. For only by actively working in the world, could Elijah help. Elijah the monk was a model of selfishness, but once he had thrown off his self-indulgent isolation, he became the model of Christian servanthood.¹⁹

To strengthen his portrait, Rev. Rice recounted a personal encounter that he once had with monasticism while on a trip to the Holy Land in 1910.²⁰ Along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, only a few miles from the ancient city, his guide (“the old sheik of a fellow”) stopped to point out a ravine known as Wadi Qilt, a “great precipitous gorge” which he claimed “is the brook Cherith, where Elijah was fed by the ravens.”²¹ Rev. Rice gazed down at the “dry, dead-looking country even when there is no drought around to emphasize it. We felt sorry for a few sheep and goats we had seen shunting pasturage along almost bare hillsides. Some wearied-looking camels of a caravan we had seen resting beside the way and smelling about dried little ditches for a few mouthfuls of dead grass.”²² As he stared into the ravine, something caught his eye: “Far below me and on the opposite bluff, I could see an old monastery named after St. George. It clings there like some great mud-swallow’s nest, but has been built as a place of confinement for troublous priests, a veritable ecclesiastical penitentiary. I could tell by the well-worn path which toiled a hard way up to it that they were depending there on folks rather than birds to bring food to them.”²³

In the eyes of the Methodist Pastor, St. George’s Monastery was divorced from its 1500-year presence where it witnessed cataclysmic political, cultural, and religious change, yet remained as a testament to monastic longevity—and was reduced to a desert penal colony. For Rev. Rice, the false holiness of the place was made transparent by reminding the congregation how the prophet had only *temporarily* resided there, before moving beyond this “selfish” phase of life to re-enter and to directly engage the world.

The embellishment of the Biblical narrative revealed the Methodist perspective. In this view, to separate oneself from others would *inevitably* result in the triumph of selfish desire. To the Methodist mind, the intensity and verifiability of one’s faith derived from the willingness to work for the transformation of society through active and

¹⁹ Ironically, a similar tale is found in the *Life of Benedict of Nursia*, the founder of the Benedictine Order. There the monk Benedict ensures an endless barrel: *Life of Benedict*, chapters 28-29.

²⁰ Elaine Rice Chabut, *Preacher Mike. The Life of Merton S. Rice* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1958), 75.

²¹ Pierce, 206.

²² Pierce, 206.

²³ Pierce, 207.

direct means. Christianity was only real through such engagement. This attitude is reflected in the work of Merton Rice's own Detroit Annual Conference (comprising the eastern half of Michigan and the entire Upper Peninsula) of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1936, the year the sermon was published, the Detroit Conference Committee on Moral and Social Reform declared:

'If we are to go on to perfection as Christian individuals, and as a church, we must adopt as our goal the Christianization of each particular area of our common life, such as public education, politics, private business, co-operative industry international affairs, race relations.' We would add the areas of commercial recreation, publicity and advertising, local, state and national government, marketing and merchandizing, race relations...Likewise in the field of civil liberties, due to the very nature of our religion, we must seek to guarantee the rights of freedom of speech, of the press, and of peaceable assemblage.²⁴

The true Christian must be involved in local, state, and national politics as well as in business, in recreational matters, in publicity, in advertising, and so forth. The Christian must be submerged *in the world* in order to change it. Long-standing separation from the world was therefore a fundamental mistake. Rev. Rice explained:

"Cherith means separated. It is an essential training in religion. The prophet was sent out there alone in preparation. *Not that such separation is an object worthy. That was the mistake made by the monk. He went off alone just to be holy by himself. That is no way to be holy. It would be useless holiness, even if it could be had so.*"²⁵

It was the position of Rev. Rice that *true Christians* were engaged in the business of world affairs and reluctance stemmed from *selfishness*, like one seeking to be "holy by himself." The Methodist tradition had no room for any monastic call, rendering the monk into a misanthropic hermit wholly divorced from the world, immune to its pain, and therefore unencumbered by any concern for it.

In order to maintain this view, Rev. Rice ignored the evident tie that noticeably bound the monastery to the neighboring world. The minister had seen that leading up to the monastery was a "...well-worn path which toiled a hard way up to it." He discerned that the monks must have been "depending there on folks rather than birds to bring food to them."²⁶ In order to maintain the disconnection, he put aside this observation, lest it jeopardize the image of "useless holiness."

George of Choziba and the Monastic Image

Monks, then as now, sought a life of prayer in community. This community and prayer, along with their work and worship, have long attracted those in the world who could not make such a sacrifice. The monastery became, in contrast to the sermon's image, a veritable *center* of community (hence the "well-trodden path)—not a menace to it. Christians visited the monastery for prayer and worship and looked to it for inspiration and hope, often bringing gifts to help the monks continue their work. The monk inspired the wider community, blessing it with the liturgical vocation and prayer. Far from a divorce, the monk—unencumbered by the routine obligations of society—was

²⁴ *Detroit Annual Conference Minutes* 1936, 81.

²⁵ Pierce, 208.

²⁶ Pierce, 207.

in a better position to survey the world, detached from its intoxicating movements, issues, and fads—political or social—of the day. Regardless of the state of the world, monks prayed, performed the liturgy, and persevered in community.²⁷

Nearly a century after Rev. Rice stood at the top of the ravine looking down on the monastery, the monastic life at St. George's continues. It persists in a manner that Rev. Rice did not understand since he failed to descend from the ledge to experience firsthand monastic hospitality. At St. George's this hospitality continued into the twenty-first century through monks like Father Georgios Tsibouktzakis who served there from 1994-2001. From that barren spot Father George provided hospitality to visitors as monks have done since Late Antiquity. On June 12, 2001, while driving back to the monastery the 34-year old Father Georgios was murdered by Palestinians simply for driving a car with Israeli license plates. Father Georgios was a victim of the violence of our world not because he was divorced from it, but because he was linked to it. In his life and service, he had been following a long-standing tradition of monastic life in the Wadi Qilt that stretches back to the fifth century when monks began to stream into the very ravine that Rev. Rice stood above.²⁸

The monastic movement, which began in Egypt in the late third and early fourth century, quickly spread throughout the Christian world.²⁹ The aim of monastic withdrawal was not escapist paradise, but detachment forced the monk into a confrontation with desire itself and opened the monk to a new perspective on human nature and community. Through this demanding venture, the monk became the highest standard for the Christian world, as a fifth-century historian explained:

...[monks] delighted only in what is good and virtuous...they lived in ceaseless contemplation of the Creator, night and day worshipping him, and offering up prayers and supplications...They accustomed themselves to be content with little, and approximated as nearly to God as is possible to human nature...Wholly absorbed in the worship of God, they revolted from obscene language...They overcame intemperance by temperance, injustice by justice and falsehood by truth, and attained the happy medium in all things...they provided for their friends and strangers, imparted to those who were in want, according to their need, and comforted the afflicted...their instruction, though clothed in modesty and prudence, possessed power...³⁰

The monk was not a deviant or aberration from Christianity, but was in effect the highest example of it.

The monk sought to follow the message of Christ without compromise, making every necessary sacrifice. The monk renounced property (*Matthew* 19:21), marriage and

²⁷ Stephen J. Patterson, "Askesis in the Early Jesus Tradition" in Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush eds., *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 1999): 56-57.

²⁸ Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966), 150-152; Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

²⁹ On early monasticism: Chitty, *The Desert a City*; Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism-Eastern Christianity" and Jean Leclercq, "Monasticism and Asceticism-Western Christianity" in Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff eds., *Christian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1986): 86-131; James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

³⁰ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, chapter 12.

family (*Matthew* 19:12, 29; *Luke* 20:34-36; *I Corinthians* 7:38, 40), and the ordinary routine of the world (*Matthew* 7:31 and 16:24-26). This sacrifice was reduced to ridicule by Rev. Rice, laughing at an "...old hermit who did actually live by the side of that little creek, subsisting upon four raisins a day until he died. I do not know how soon he died. I do know that anyone anywhere can live upon four raisins a day until death arrives. In fact, one could subsist on one raisin a week until he died."³¹ In contrast, by their withdrawal to the wilderness, the monk gained the *admiration* of others, both lay and ecclesiastical. The barrenness of the environment did not detract from this relationship, in fact, it enhanced it.

For the monk to choose a barren ravine as a place of residence was to abandon the world's comfort through voluntary exile. Even Rev. Rice acknowledged that this was no place of easy comfort: "The old dust-blown hills along the toiling way had all been so dry. That is a dry, dead-looking country even when there is not drought around to emphasized it. We had felt sorry for a few sheep and goats we had seen hunting pasturage along almost bare hillsides. Some wearied-looking camels of a caravan we had seen resting beside the way and smelling about dried little ditches for a few mouthfuls of dead grass."³² This was barren, desolate land, ripe with Biblical memories.³³ Ironically, Rev. Rice declared that if the secluded life held any validity "every canyon would be occupied."³⁴ The irony is that during the early Christian and Medieval period that was, in fact, what actually happened. This barren wilderness was paradoxically called "a city" do to the number of monks who ventured there, one of whom was George of Choziba in the sixth-century.³⁵

George, whose name the monastery now carries, had left his home in Cyprus to live the Christian life in the wilderness of the Holy Land.³⁶ In this desert city, George and monks like him assisted pilgrims who journeyed there to see the sights and visit the holy men.³⁷ The traffic made the monastery a center of hospitality and philanthropy: "...for this holy place is a shelter for the poor and for visitors, and not a shelter only for the rich."³⁸ To continue this ministry, monks performed the duties required to make the monastery function. George, for example, spent long hours in chores to provide for monks and visitors alike.³⁹ George's commitment to his brothers and to visitors reflected the love that monks cultivated in their spiritual practice. The *Life* recorded how:

He also took on the ministry of the cisterns that were along the road to Jericho. He would help and work along with the gardeners, too, and willingly perform each ministry. He was eager to

³¹ Pierce, 207. For more recent Methodist ridicule see, Rev. Matthew S. Farabow, Pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church in Winston Salem, North Carolina in his sermon "This is How you Do Church," <www.centenary-ws.org/sermons/2000/09_24.htm>.

³² Pierce, 206.

³³ Chitty, 14.

³⁴ Pierce, 211.

³⁵ *Life of Antony of Egypt*, ch. 14. Hence Chitty's title, *The Desert A City*.

³⁶ *Life of George of Choziba* is translated into English in Tim Vivian, *Journeying Into God. Seven Early Monastic Lives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 71-105. The original Greek text: C. House, "Vita sancti Georgii Chozibitae auctore Anonio Chozibita," *Analecta Bollandiana* 7 (1888): 95-144. .

³⁷ *Life*, 83-94 (ch. 15-17).

³⁸ *Life*, 90 (ch. 25).

³⁹ *Life*, 88 (ch. 23); 91-93 (ch. 29-30).

show great cooperation concerning the monastery's work on behalf of visitors, not only on account of the reward but also because he was eager and wished to be an example for the brothers.

In the bakery, in addition to his other duties, he would also heat up the oven. You all know what sort of difficulties and afflictions the place caused in the summer. For we often found the candles of the choir stalls in the sanctuary melting and dripping because of the extreme heat. But the old man would persevere in the same heat, lighting the woven two or three times a day—frequently on the day the slave was expected to work. Many of the brothers tried to do the same thing but were unable to do it by themselves without someone relieving them.⁴⁰

It is not hard to understand why the brothers admired George, believing that “this old man is made of iron.” George was the ideal for visitors and for his brothers alike.

Like Merton Rice, George also preached, making every effort to encourage his brethren in their Christian walk. He exhorted them to:

... acquire these virtues, beloved, I mean humility and piety, through which we will be beloved by both God and humankind. Let us take the yoke of Christ upon ourselves, and let us learn from it that he is gentle and humble in heart, and we will find rest and peace for our souls, and he will receive us as joint partakers in his eternal kingdom.⁴¹

Even a cursory look at monastic history challenges the image painted in the Methodist circle. The monastic life was neither *intrinsically* selfish, nor isolated.

The desert monastic world was in fact an international society. Visitors and monks from the lands of the Mediterranean and Middle East walked and worked side-by-side.⁴² The influence of the monks attracted others from even further still—drawing both friend and foe.⁴³ During the last and most destructive Byzantine-Persian War (602-629), the Zoroastrian Persians conquered the Holy Land and sought to kill or imprison the monks.⁴⁴ The monks survived this war as they would the many subsequent conflicts that shifted political power from Byzantine to Arab, to Crusader, to Turk, to European, to the present situation in which Father Georgios Tsibouktazakis was killed. The monk has been a presence in this barren spot and from here—connected to the world.

The monk seeks separation, as Wesley had explained above, as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. George explained it by counseling: “...do not think that it is the place that makes you a monk; it's the way you live...Intention is what counts...For the Lord says in the Gospels: ‘If someone does not deny father and mother and family and friends and even his very self, and take up his own cross and follow me, he cannot be my disciple.’ The cross, child represents every temptation and affliction and persecution, and suffering, even unto death for Christ's sake, and steadfast endurance.”⁴⁵

On The Methodist Image

The Methodist view portrayed the monk as turning away from the Christian life, failing to use his gifts for the betterment of mankind. It maintained that since monastic withdrawal did not directly affect society, it was anathema. The social commitment of

⁴⁰ *Life*, 88-89 (ch. 23).

⁴¹ *Life*, 82 (ch. 14).

⁴² *Life*, 89 (ch. 25).

⁴³ Chitty, 83, 156-59.

⁴⁴ *Life*, 93 (ch. 31).

⁴⁵ *Life*, 94 (ch. 33).

the Methodist view subsumed its whole understanding of Christianity itself. This was made clear by the *eisegetical* explanation that God had dried the book and forced Elijah from the solitary/selfish life to one of direct engagement with and for others. Rev. Rice constructed an image of Elijah alone in the ravine, overflowing with “contentment” in his “secreted place,” where he enjoyed the “comfortable confidence stretched out on the green grass that grew beside a trickling stream in the midst of the drought dried land.” Continuing to embellish, Rev. Rice imagined Elijah saying “[n]o man sees me; I see nobody. I eat my own meals. I drink from my brook.”⁴⁶ Elijah was consumed by his own selfish desire, apathetic to the world—he was made into the Methodist image of the monk.

Rev. Rice continued attacking the image, proclaiming that a “hidden servant is wrong. Faith in God is not a condition to be hidden in some secret canyon as a personal security policy. It is rather an endowment to carry into the midst of life to sustain need with. The great ministry of religion is not to endowment indulgence with a divine security. If this were the case every canyon would be occupied. Indulgent Elijah’s would be stretched out beside every available stream.”⁴⁷ The preacher went so far as to declare that “Elijah became self-centered while the brook ran full. He sent no invitations to famishing folks to come and drink at his brook. He would have forgotten other folks absolutely, had the brook ran on.”⁴⁸ In contrast to the selfish monastic, “a real man had rather starve among others to whom he could really be a compassion and a helper, than keep himself fat and even comfortable all along in self-centered indulgence.” Elijah discovered the needs of the world and responded *only after he left the monastic isolation*.⁴⁹ Rev. Rice called his congregation to enter the world: “God can’t build Him great and helpful prophets hidden away to live in a selfish comfort. What the world has to suffer, God’s people must know.”⁵⁰ Only by contact with the world, could believers understand and reduce its suffering. The one standing apart was therefore ignoring it.

Like Elijah, a believer can choose to engage or to enter “an easy place in which to sleep his life away,” to be a carefree monk or the Methodist person of action.⁵¹ Here again was the contrast between the image of the carefree monk *set against* the Methodist man of action. Rev. Rice ignored the connection between the monk and the community, and made no room for an assessment of the value of this form of communal life, or for the monastic sacrifice and its Biblical and historical roots, or for their continual prayer and liturgical work, or for the importance it clearly had for the wider community.⁵²

One monk, Girolamo Savanarola, did receive praise—but precisely for demonstrating seemingly un-monastic principles. Savanarola was a fifteenth century Dominican abbot in Renaissance Florence, fired by apocalyptic zeal, who preached with intense power and strove for radical social and political transformation. He lashed out against vices without the slightest concern for offending poor or powerful. He engaged in politics and diplomacy, siding with the invading French army, seeing it as divine

⁴⁶ Pierce, 210.

⁴⁷ Pierce, 211.

⁴⁸ Pierce, 211.

⁴⁹ Pierce, 210.

⁵⁰ Pierce, 212-213.

⁵¹ Pierce, 215.

⁵² Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush eds., *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

agency sent to help regenerate society to his theocratic ideal. The expulsion of the French and the backlash of his enemies, brought his theocratic reform crashing down. In 1498, Savonarola was arrested and executed.

For Rev. Rice, Savonarola was as an ideal role model. He did not hide in the monastery, but, motivated by his faith, engaged society—*directly, influentially, and forcefully*: “[W]hat wonder, then, that a man such as was Savonarola, of the finest moral sense and deepest spiritual convictions...What wonder that Savonarola did hide for a while in a cell. I was glad to step into that cell one day, and seat myself in the hard old chair he used. The great meaning beyond that cell of his there was that he never went there as a place for him to stay. He came forth with a blazing soul, aflame with convictions to destroy forever the hated sin from which he had fled...”⁵³ His retreat to the cell prepared him for the advance against sin. There is no value in the withdrawal unless it is followed by advance: “Never mind the cell unless from it you come forth. That is, after all, the strange fascination to my thought at Cherith with Elijah. Seclusion is no place for real life to be spent. You have no right to hide away unless you expect there to make ready to come forth.”⁵⁴ The furor of external activity reflected the intensity of the inner spiritual experience.

In Savonarola, Rev. Rice saw a parallel to the Methodist Episcopal Church of his day that also worked to transform society into what it perceived as the Christian ideal. It sought to make this *mandatory and compulsory*. The Church worked for legislation through the government with which it maintained a close unity, proudly asserting that “[t]he Patriotism of the Methodist Episcopal Church has never been challenged.”⁵⁵ The focus of this ecclesiastical lobby changed as the Conference spotlight was redirected from decade to decade. In Merton Rice’s Detroit Conference, attention had shifted from the sanctity of the Sabbath struggle which sought to mandate the closures of shops and ban sporting events on Sundays, to the temperance cause to outlaw alcohol, to marriage battles to legally define this relationship and increase the legal bar for divorce, and so forth. The church endeavored to make its position compulsory through legislation, motivated by the belief that it was “forced to demand whatever reconstruction of society is essential...” Morality would not be pursued at the individual level (where the monks pursued it), but would be imposed externally through the state. In this case, the individual would not have to choose temperance, because alcohol would be banned; the individual would not have to choose Sunday worship, because all temptations would be removed. The vigorous social reform under the theocratic guidance of Savonarola resonated with the Methodist minister who supported a similar effort in his own day.

George and the monastic movement, in contrast, did not seek to establish a democratic theocracy, nor were they tossed by the changing winds of each decade’s social and political movements, but neither did they sit idly in the monastic cell. Whether praying, singing Psalms, listening to scripture, working in the kitchen, or helping visitors in the dry valley, the monastery was a center of activity—a factory of prayer, worship and community. This factory did not change its production each decade, but continued to help adherents and onlookers find a truth more lasting than the particular cause of the day. These workers did not seek to compel society to be a certain way, but

⁵³ Pierce, 209.

⁵⁴ Pierce, 209.

⁵⁵ *Detroit Annual Conference Minutes* 1936, 57.

to eradicate vice from the self through daily worship, prayer, and their pursuit of holiness. George encouraged his fellow monks:

Therefore keep up the struggle, my brothers, to help one another for the sake of humility. For each person who is righteous (without being perfect) and receives those who are sick is conspicuous because he lives his life by advancing in true knowledge. But whoever thinks he is great and perfect in righteousness, as though he were on one of the saints, on top of all this, if he boasts and in trampling upon his neighbor denigrates him, this person's intentions and righteous deeds and boasting are a foolish vanity.⁵⁶

For his life long effort, George was remembered as “chaste, tranquil, poor, temperate, humble, full of love for everyone and, most of all, compassionate.”⁵⁷ George was a model of holiness, like a new Elijah. In contrast to Merton Rice's Elijah, the Biblical Elijah was viewed by monks as *the* monastic prototype.⁵⁸ Through the monastic life he “...found a new and more intimate way into a whole world's heart...”⁵⁹ It was, in fact, George's withdrawal that connected him to the world. This was the paradox that Merton Rice could not grasp by failing to step on the “well trodden path” before him.

This pathway—its spirituality and its contributions—however, were not yet clear to the Methodist eye in the age of Merton Rice. In the following decades, however, the situation has changed. For some observers, the longevity and survival of monastic life, against all odds, has consecrated it with legitimacy in its goal of fully living the Christian walk. Kathleen Norris has expressed it best:

When I think of all that monasteries have survived in the 1500-plus years of their existence—pirate raids, bandits, wars and revolutions, political and social upheavals of all kinds, dictators, tyrants, confiscation, foreclosures, martyrdom at the hands of kings, as well as co-opting by the wealthy and powerful—I find it amazing that they're still here...I suspect that it is the difference, the adherence to monastic bedrock, what once sister calls the “non-negotiables” in the face of changing circumstances, that makes monasticism so indestructible. Monastic communities traffic in intangibles—worship, solitude, humility, peace—that are not easily manipulated by corporate concerns, not easily identified, packaged, and sold...I expect they'll survive, with their difference, the absurdity of faith that attracts people to a communal way of life and give them the strength to persevere in it.⁶⁰

Respect for community connects the Methodist and the monk, but the understanding of the individual's relationship to and role in that community sends each down a different path. Reverend Rice concluded his sermon by praying that “[w]e would not selfishly consume Thy gracious benefits. We would share every richness with which Thou doest entrust us....”⁶¹ In the identification of those benefits and in the means by which they would be shared can be found the separation between the Methodist and the monk.

⁵⁶ *Life*, 100 (ch. 39).

⁵⁷ *Life*, 103 (ch. 58).

⁵⁸ Chitty, 14.

⁵⁹ Pierce, 215.

⁶⁰ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 22.

⁶¹ Pierce, 216.