

Discuss the growth and impact of asceticism/monasticism upon the development of theology and church life in the Early Church era. Do not neglect its impact up on the theology of women.

The growth of Asceticism and Monasticism had a great impact on the development of the church in its early centuries. The idea of asceticism arose out of a number of sources including Plato's philosophy, Gnosticism, and Biblical teaching and examples. Plato felt that one must be willing to buffet and train his body as an athlete; to give up worldly comfort to really learn truth. The Christian Gnostics believed in cosmic dualism and felt that the battle between good and evil was very much seen in a human being made up of physical matter (evil) and a spiritual side (good). If the body was given some comfort, it would want more pleasure and eventually overcome the human spirit to the ruin of the person. Ninety percent of Gnostic sects practiced celibacy. There are some teachings of Jesus and Paul (in I Cor. 7) that allude to this kind of ascetic life, which also helped influence this practice of monasticism.

Because of the above mentioned influences, celibacy already seemed to be a practice in many circles of Christians, but was not yet a part of Christian doctrine. It was slowly expanded in church doctrine as a requirement for bishops, first only at the highest levels, and then further expanded to all levels of church clergy. Surely the practices of hermits and those in monasteries also had an impact on the church at large, in both practice and doctrine. If these spiritual individuals were able to practice these ascetic practices, then bishops would have to also do so to be seen as spiritual.

Since celibacy was an important part of the vows taken by a hermit (and later by monks), the doctrine of how to view and treat women became important. As a hermit, John Chrysostom wrote about suffering from the site of a woman. He was very much concerned about younger hermits giving up their vows and losing their spirituality, so he wrote about keeping oneself away from seeing women. Tertullian, who as a Montanist was a strict ascetic, gave up living with his wife to become celibate. He wrote letters to her expressing how a woman should dress in mourning since she was to blame for the entrance of sin into the world. As she dressed in a mournful state, she would not become a further temptation to men.

The importance of celibacy as a doctrine and practice gave rise to other doctrines about women. One such doctrine was known as the perpetual virginity of Jesus' mother, Mary. Since sex was seen as evil, surely Mary, as the mother of God, could not have been involved with it. It was taught that the siblings of Jesus mentioned in the Bible were either from an earlier marriage of Joseph, or were only close cousins of Jesus, not real brothers and sisters. Mary thus became a model for women who wanted to become chaste and serve the Lord as a virgin.

Jerome talks about Paula who traveled with him after the death of her husband. She established and oversaw some monasteries for women. So evidently the monastic movement was not just for men, but included women. There was, however, great care to keep men and woman separate.

Monasticism went through three basic stages including the Anchorite stage, Cenobitic stage, and Monastic stage (orders of monasteries). 'Rules' were eventually developed as practices for living for those in cloisters and monasteries. These rules usually included poverty, celibacy, and obedience to those in spiritual authority over them. But they also included regulations about how to live every aspect of life.

By going through these stages, monasticism was able to expand to include more people, both men and women, who could enter into an established practice. Otherwise many of these people may not have been able to make it on their own as hermits. So by these different stages,

with the growth of monasticism, it was actually able to make a larger impact on the church by including more people.

Eventually monasteries would provide for the gospel to spread more easily because monks could travel to monasteries in their own order and reach places that would otherwise be difficult to get to.