

Monasticism

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[Trappist monk](#) praying in his cell.

Monasticism (from [Greek](#) μοναχός, *monachos*, derived from Greek *monos*, alone) is a [religious](#) way of life characterized by the practice of renouncing [worldly](#) pursuits to fully devote one's self to spiritual work. The origin of the word is from [Ancient Greek](#), and the idea originally related to Christian [monks](#).

In the [Christian tradition](#), [males](#) pursuing a monastic life are usually called [monks](#) or *brethren* (brothers), and if [females](#) [nuns](#) or *sisters*. Both monks and nuns may also be called *monastics*. Some other religions also include what could be described as "monastic" elements, most notably [Buddhism](#), but also [Hinduism](#) and [Jainism](#), though the expressions differ considerably.

Buddhist monasticism

Main article: [Buddhist monasticism](#)

The [Sangha](#) or community of ordained [Buddhist bhikkus](#) (similar to monks) and original [bhikkhunis](#) (similar to nuns) was founded by [Gautama Buddha](#) during his lifetime over 2500 years ago. This communal monastic lifestyle grew out of the lifestyle of earlier sects of wandering [ascetics](#), some of whom the Buddha had studied under. It was initially fairly [eremitic](#) or reclusive in nature. Bhikkhus and bhikkunis were expected to live with a minimum of possessions, which were to be voluntarily provided by the lay community.^[1] Lay followers also provided the daily food that bhikkhus required, and provided shelter for bhikkhus when they were needed.^[1]



 Young Buddhist bhikkhus in [Tibet](#).

After the [Parinibbana](#) (Final Passing) of the Buddha, the Buddhist monastic order developed into a primarily [cenobitic](#) or

communal movement. The practice of living communally during the rainy [vassa](#) season, prescribed by the Buddha, gradually grew to encompass a settled monastic life centered on life in a community of practitioners. Most of the modern disciplinary rules followed by bhikkhus and bhikkhunis—as encoded in the [Patimokkha](#)—relate to such an existence, prescribing in great detail proper methods for living and relating in a community of bhikkhus or bhikkhunis. The number of rules observed varies with the order; [Theravada](#) bhikkhus follow around 227 rules. There are a larger number of rules specified for bhikkhunis (nuns).^[2]

Buddhist monasticism, with its tradition of [councils](#) and missions, spread from India to the Middle East and eventually west. It proved to be a significant force for literacy wherever it spread. Christian monasticism followed in its footsteps in the areas where Emperor [Ashoka](#) sent missions.

The Buddhist monastic order consists of the male [bhikkhu](#) assembly and the female [bhikkhuni](#) assembly. Initially consisting only of males, it grew to include females after the Buddha's stepmother, [Mahaprajapati](#), asked for and received permission to live as an ordained practitioner.

Bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are expected to fulfill a variety of roles in the Buddhist community. First and foremost, they are expected to preserve the doctrine and discipline now known as Buddhism. They are also expected to provide a living example for the laity, and to serve as a "field of merit" for lay followers—providing laymen and women with the opportunity to earn merit by giving gifts and support to the bhikkhus. In return for the support of the laity, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are

expected to live an austere life focused on the study of Buddhist doctrine, the practice of meditation, and the observance of good moral character.^[1]


A bhikkhu (the term in the [Pali](#) language) or Bhikshu (in [Sanskrit](#)), first ordains as a *Samanera* (novice). Novices often ordain at a young age, but generally no younger than eight. Samaneras live according to the [Ten Precepts](#), but are not responsible for living by the full set of monastic rules. Higher ordination, conferring the status of a full Bhikkhu, is given only to men who are aged 20 or older. Bhikkhunis follow a similar progression, but are required to live as Samaneras for longer periods of time- typically five years.

The disciplinary regulations for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are intended to create a life that is simple and focused, rather than one of deprivation or severe asceticism. However, celibacy is a fundamental part of this form of monastic discipline.

Christian monasticism

Main article: [Christian monasticism](#)



 The [Monastery of Saint Anthony](#) in Egypt, built over the tomb of [Saint Anthony](#), the "Father of Christian Monasticism".

Monasticism in Christianity provided the origins of the words "[monk](#)" and "[monastery](#)" which comprises several diverse forms of religious living that are in response to the call of [Jesus of Nazareth](#) to follow him. It began to develop early in the history of the Church, modeled upon Old and New Testament examples and ideals, but not mandated as an institution in the Scriptures. It has come to be regulated by religious rules (e.g. the [Rule of St Basil](#), the [Rule of St Benedict](#)) and, in modern times, the Church law of the respective Christian denominations that have forms of [monastic](#) living.

The Christian monk embraces the monastic life as a vocation from God. His goal is to attain [eternal life](#) in his presence. The rules of monastic life are codified in the "[counsels of perfection](#)". In his exposition of the [Beatitudes](#) (the right way of living according to the law of God) during his [Sermon on the Mount](#), Jesus exhorted the large crowd listening to him to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" ([Matthew 5:48](#)). When speaking to his men, Jesus also extended an invitation to [celibacy](#) to those "to whom it has been given" ([Matthew 19:10–12](#)); and when asked by a wealthy man what else is required in addition to observing the [Commandments](#) to "enter into eternal life", he advised to [sell all earthly possessions](#) in favour of the poor and to follow him, "if you wish to be perfect" (cf. [Matthew 19:16–22](#) = [Mark 10:17–22](#) = [Luke 18:18–23](#)).



☐
Coptic monks between 1898 and 1914

Already in the [New Testament](#) there is evidence of Christian [monastic](#) living, namely the lives of service rendered by the Widows and the Virgins. In the beginning, in [Syria](#) and then in [Egypt](#), Christians felt called to a more reclusive or [eremitic](#) form of monastic living (in the spirit of the "Desert Theology" of the Old Testament for the purpose of spiritual renewal and return to God). Saint [Anthony the Great](#) is cited by [Athanasius](#) as one of these early "Hermit monks". Especially in the [Middle East](#), eremitic monasticism continued to be common until the decline of Syrian Christianity in the late Middle Ages.

The need for some form of organized spiritual guidance was obvious; and around [318](#) Saint [Pachomius](#) started to organize his many followers in what was to become the first Christian [cenobitic](#) or communal [monastery](#). Soon, similar institutions were established throughout the Egyptian desert as well as the rest of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Notable [monasteries](#) of the East include:

- [Monastery of Saint Anthony](#), the oldest Christian monastery in the world.
- [Mar Awgin](#) founded a monastery on [Mt. Izla](#) above [Nisibis](#) in [Mesopotamia](#) (~[350](#)), and from this monastery the

cenobitic tradition spread in Mesopotamia, Persia, Armenia, Georgia and even India and China.

- St. [Sabbas the Sanctified](#) organized the monks of the Judean Desert in a monastery close to [Bethlehem](#) (483), now known as [Mar Saba](#), which is considered the mother of all monasteries of the [Eastern Orthodox](#) churches.
- [Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai](#) was founded between 527 and 565 in the Sinai desert by order of Emperor [Justinian I](#).

In the West, the most significant development occurred when the rules for monastic communities were written, the [Rule of St Basil](#) being credited with having been the first. The precise dating of the [Rule of the Master](#) is problematic; but it has been argued on internal grounds that it antedates the so-called [Rule of Saint Benedict](#) created by [Benedict of Nursia](#) for his monastery in [Monte Cassino](#), Italy (c. [529](#)), and the other [Benedictine](#) monasteries he himself had founded (cf. [Order of St Benedict](#)). It would become the most common rule throughout the Middle Ages and is still in use today. The [Augustinian Rule](#), due to its brevity, has been adopted by various communities, chiefly the [Canons Regular](#). Around the 12th century, the [Franciscan](#), [Carmelite](#), [Dominican](#), [Servite Order](#) (see [Servants of Mary](#)) and [Augustinian mendicant orders](#) chose to live in city [convents](#) among the people instead of being secluded in monasteries.

Today new expressions of Christian monasticism, many of which [ecumenical](#), are developing in places such as the [Bose Monastic Community](#) in Italy, the [Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem](#) throughout Europe, and the [Taizé Community](#) in

France, and the mainly Evangelical Protestant [New Monasticism](#) movement of America.

See also: [Coptic monasticism](#) and [Eastern Christian monasticism](#)

Hindu monasticism

In their quest to attain the [spiritual](#) goal of life, some Hindus choose the path of monasticism ([Sannyasa](#)). Monastics commit themselves to a life of [simplicity](#), [celibacy](#), detachment from worldly pursuits, and the contemplation of God.^[3] A Hindu monk is called a *sanyāsī*, *sādhu*, or *swāmi*.^[4] A nun is called a *sanyāsini*, *sadhavi*, or *swāmini*. Such renunciates are accorded high respect in Hindu society, because their outward renunciation of selfishness and worldliness serves as an inspiration to householders who strive for *mental* renunciation. Some monastics live in monasteries, while others wander from place to place, trusting in God alone to provide for their physical needs.^[5] It is considered a highly meritorious act for a lay devotee to provide [sadhus](#) with food or other necessities. [Sādhus](#) are expected to treat all with respect and compassion, whether a person may be poor or rich, good or wicked. They are also expected to be indifferent to praise, blame, pleasure, and pain.^[6] A [sādhu](#) can typically be recognized by his ochre-colored clothing. Generally, [Vaisnava](#) monks shave their heads except for a small patch of hair on the back of the head, while [Saivite](#) monks let their hair and beard grow uncut.

A *Sadhu's* vow of renunciation typically forbids him from:

- owning personal property apart from a bowl, a cup, two sets of clothing and medical aids such as eyeglasses;

- having any contact with, looking at, thinking of or even being in the presence of women;
- eating for pleasure;
- possessing or even touching money or valuables in any way, shape or form;
- maintaining personal relationships. [\[citation needed\]](#)

See also: [Dashanami Sampradaya](#)

Islam and monasticism

Islam does not allow the practice of monasticism. The stand of Islam is, on the one hand, against sexual license; consequently it prohibits fornication and adultery, and blocks all ways leading to them. On the other hand, Islam is also against suppressing the sexual urge; accordingly, it calls people toward marriage, prohibiting renunciation and castration.

As long a [Muslim](#) possess the means to marry, he is not permitted to refrain from marriage on the grounds that he has dedicated himself to the service or the worship of [Allah](#) and to a life of monasticism and renunciation of the world.

It has been reported that Abu Qulabah narrated;

"Some of the Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him) decided to relinquish the world, forsake their wives, and become like monks. The Prophet (peace be on him) told them with asperity, People before you perished because of their asceticism; they made excessive demands on themselves until Allah brought hardships on them: you can still see a few of them remaining in monasteries and temples. Then worship Allah and do not

associate anything with Him, perform the Hajj and the 'Umrah, be righteous, and all affairs will be set right for you." (Reported by 'Abdur Razzaq, Ibn Jarir, and Ibn al-Mundhir)

Abu Qulabah said the following verse was revealed concerning them:

"O you who believe! Do not make [haram](#) (forbidden) the good of things which Allah has made [halal](#) (Lawful) for you, and do not transgress; indeed, Allah does not like transgressors." (Surah 5: Verse 87)

In another narration we read that one day the son of 'Uthman ibne Maz'un died which so aggrieved him that he declared his house to be a mosque and (abandoning all other work) engaged himself in worship. When the Noble Prophet (S.) came to know of this, he summoned him and said: يَا عُمَانَ بْنَ مَظْعُونٍ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمْ يَكْتُبْ عَلَيْنَا الرَّهْبَانِيَّةَ إِنَّمَا رَهْبَانِيَّةُ أُمَّتِي الْجِهَادُ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ

“O 'Uthman! Surely, Allah, the Blessed and the Exalted has not ordained monasticism for us; monasticism of my ummah is only jihad in the way of Allah.”^[71]

In at least one other place [The Quran](#) forbids Monasticism explicitly and states it is an invention and [Allah](#) did not prescribe it to the Muslims.

"Then We caused Our messengers to follow in their footsteps; and We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow, and gave him the Gospel, and placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him. But monasticism they invented - We ordained it not for them - only seeking Allah's pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance. So We give those of them

who believe their reward, but many of them are evil-doers" (Surah 57: Verse 27)

The famous expression "لَا رَهْبَانِيَّةَ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ" "There is no (room for) monasticism in Islam", is witnessed in numerous Islamic sources.^[8]

Jain monasticism

Main article: [Jain monasticism](#)

Jainism has two branches, each with differing views of monasticism. [Digambara](#) monks do not wear [clothing](#), symbolic of their refusal to give in to the body's demands for comfort and [private property](#). But only Digambara ascetics are required to forsake clothing. Digambara ascetics have just two possessions: a [peacock feather broom](#) and a [water gourd](#). They also believe that women are unable to obtain [moksha](#). As a result, of the total of approx. 6000 Jain monks, barely 100 are Digambaras. The [Shvetambaras](#) are the other main Jainist sect. Svetambaras, unlike Digambaras, neither believe that ascetics must practice nudity, nor do they believe that women are unable to obtain moksha. Shvetambaras are commonly seen wearing face masks so that they do not accidentally breathe in and kill small creatures.^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Monasticism in other religions

- [Ananda Marga](#) has both monks and nuns (i.e. [celibate](#) male and female [acharyas](#) or [missionaries](#)) as well as a smaller group of family acharyas. The monks and nuns are engaged in all kinds of direct services to society, so they have no

scope for permanent retreat. They do have to follow strict celibacy, poverty and many other rules of conduct during as well as after they have completed their training.

- [Bön](#) is believed to have a rich monastic history. Bön monasteries exist today, and the monks there practice Bön-Buddhism.
- [Judaism](#) does not support the monastic ideal of celibacy and poverty, but two thousand years ago taking [Nazirite](#) vows was a common feature of the religion. Nazirite Jews abstained from grape products, haircuts, and contact with the dead.^[9] However, they did not withdraw from general society, and they were permitted to marry and own property; moreover, in most cases a Nazirite vow was for a specified time period and not permanent.^[10] In Modern Hebrew, the term [Nazir](#) is most often used to refer to non-Jewish monastics. Unique among Jewish communities is the monasticism of the [Beta Israel](#) of Ethiopia, a practice believed to date to the 15th century.
- [Manichaeism](#) had two types of followers, the auditors, and the elect. The elect lived apart from the auditors to concentrate on reducing the material influences of the world. They did this through strict celibacy, poverty, teaching, and preaching. Therefore the elect were probably at least partially monastic.
- [Scientology](#) maintains a "fraternal order" called the [Sea Organization](#) or just [Sea Org](#). They work only for the [Church of Scientology](#) and have signed billion year contracts. Sea Org members live communally with lodging, food, clothing, and medical care provided by the Church.

- [Sikhism](#) and the [Bahá'í Faith](#) both specifically forbid the practice of monasticism. Hence there are no Sikh or Bahá'í monk conclaves or brotherhoods.
- The [Transcendental Meditation movement](#) sponsors two monastic groups: the Thousand-Headed Purusha for men and the Mother Divine for women.^[11] The US residences for the groups were in [Heavenly Mountain, North Carolina](#).^[11] There is also a Purusha program at an [ashram](#) in [Uttarkashi, India](#).^[12] The Global Mother Divine Organization is described as the women's wing of the [Global Country of World Peace](#).^[13]
- [Zoroastrianism](#) holds that active participation in life through good thoughts, good words and good deeds is necessary to ensure happiness and to keep chaotic influences at bay. This *active* participation is a central element in [Zoroaster](#)'s concept of [free will](#), and Zoroastrianism rejects all forms of [asceticism](#) and monasticism.

See also

- [Carmelite Rule of St. Albert](#)
- "[Into Great Silence](#)" The award winning documentary of life within the Carthusian monastery of La Grande Chartreuse by Philip Groning.
- [Matha](#)
- [Order \(religious\)](#)

Although monastic practices aren't encouraged by Judaism, (in fact, the Torah and various corresponding Judaic philosophies encourage the pursuit of physical pleasure as a means to "serve

God with joy") monastic practices as a form of Jewish observance did exist in many European Jewish communities. The term "Porish", formerly used in many Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe, referred to Jews who practiced monasticism as a form of worshiping God and practicing Judaism. As reaction to this trend of monasticism and a widespread rejection of spirituality and mysticism (kabbalah) within the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe , Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal shem tov ("master of the good name", the "good name" being the name of God), founded the Hassidic movement.

References

1. [^] [^a ^b ^c What is a bhikkhu?](#)
2. [^] [The Bhikkhuni question](#)
3. [^] [Swami Bhaskarananda, *Essentials of Hinduism* 112 \(Viveka Press 1994\) ISBN 1-884852-02-5](#)
4. [^] [R.S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* \(5th ed. 1999\) ISBN 0-19-563846-8](#)
5. [^] [Alex Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present* 316 \(Princeton 1998\) ISBN 0-691-08953-1](#)
6. [^] [Swami Bhaskarananda, *Essentials of Hinduism* 112 \(Viveka Press 1994\) ISBN 1-884852-02-5.](#)
7. [^] [Biharul Anwar, vol. 70, pg. 114 \(Chapter al-Nahi 'an al-Rahbaniyah\), no. 1](#)
8. [^] [This tradition has been reported in Majma'ul Bayan under رهب as also in al-Nihayah of Ibn Kathir.](#)
9. [^] [Maimonides *Mishne Torah Hilkhot Nazirut* 1:1](#)
10. [^] [Maimonides *Hilkhot Navirut* 3:1](#)

11. ^ [a b](#) Williamson, Lola (2010). *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*. NYU Press. p. 103. [ISBN 9780814794500](#).
12. ^ [Massing, Dana](#) (August 11, 2007). "[TM quiets mind, rests body says Erie man](#)". *Erie Times-News*: p. 1. <http://www.goerie.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070811/LIFESTYLES03/708110323/-1/RSS>.
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External links

- [The Hermits by Charles Kingsley \(Gutenberg\)](#)
 - [Links to Coptic Orthodox Monasteries of Egypt and the world](#)
 - [Historyfish.net: texts and articles regarding the Western Christian monastic tradition.](#)
 - [Abbot Gasquet's English Monastic Life. Full Text + Illustrations.](#)
 - [Public Domain Photochrom photographs, Abbeys, Cathedrals, Holy Sites and the Holy Land.](#)
 - [History of Monasticism](#)
 - [Monasticism](#) Immaculate Heart of Mary's Hermitage
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