

Institution: Leeds Trinity University
Unit of Assessment: Theology and religious Studies
Title of case study: The spirituality of the Desert Fathers: modern applications of an Eastern Christian practice
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Hunt's research has had significant impact on the personal and professional development of practitioners and those interested in spirituality/meditation. She works with groups of lay Christians and others who meet to study and practice spirituality in the face of a predominantly secular world, where psychology has largely replaced spiritual insights. Hunt has a strong relationship with MONOS, a centre for the study of monastic culture and spirituality in Leicester, where, related to her research on the desert fathers, she acts as an educational advisor. Since the majority of scholars working in this area are male and ordained her status as a lay woman is distinctive. Whilst being respectful of the religious tradition she brings an objective and fresh approach to it.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Dr Hannah Hunt has been employed by Leeds Trinity University as a Senior Lecturer (2002 to date) and as Reader in Eastern Christianity from April 2011 to date. Her main field of research is the spirituality of the Early Eastern Christian church and issues of the interplay of bodily and spiritual aspects of the human person.</p> <p>Hunt's research has established a continuum between the practice of spiritual direction in the desert fathers, its reinterpretation by the eleventh century abbot Symeon the New Theologian (as a paradigm for divine inspiration and mystical indwelling taking precedence over ordination as the benchmark of authority in the church) and its controversial manifestation in the modern Orthodox church. She started working on this theme for her MA dissertation in 1992 and has returned to it for conference papers from 2007 onwards, resulting in the publication of 'The Reforming Abbot and his Tears: Penthos in Late Byzantium' in 2009 and 'Uses and Abuses of Spiritual Authority in the Church in St Symeon the New Theologian' in 2012, for which she was especially requested to research a contentious example of spiritual direction in the monastery of St Anthony in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, where Elder Ephraim was accused (as Symeon the New Theologian was a millennium ago) of fostering a cult rather than engaging in genuine spiritual fatherhood. The issue also forms a substantial part of the argument contained in her current monograph under contract with Brill, <i>An Unholy Trinity: Models of sacred and secular authority in Eleventh Century Byzantium</i> (forthcoming 2014).</p> <p>She is notably one of very few scholars working in this field who is not an ordained Eastern Christian cleric and as such brings a level of objectivity to the subject as being of interest to church historians as well as members of the parish and monastery. She asserts the importance of the Evagrian quality of discernment in determining whether a spiritual 'father' offers genuine spiritual guidance or an arrogantly assumed psychological hold over a needy spiritual 'child'. Symeon insists on the presence of spiritual and real tears as a marker of the spiritual enlightenment essential in order to offer guidance to a spiritual child. Hunt shows how this theme dominates the writings of Symeon which have influenced subsequent spiritual directors within the Orthodox church as well as providing the basis for a major upheaval in the Byzantine church of his day. The controversial nature of the practice and the insistence on the mystical insight of the spiritual father had been explored by scholars writing on the Desert Fathers and also modern spiritual direction, notably Deacon John Chryssavgis' <i>Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction</i> (Brookline, 2000) and Hieromont Alexander Golitzin's writings on the subject for <i>St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i></p>

and from a more secular viewpoint by Olga Louchakova, writing in *The Humanist Psychologist* in 2003. Hunt distinguishes between the psychological aspects of penitence and personal growth and biblically based experiences of spiritual parenting. She notes that contemporary forms of media such as YouTube, local radio and Facebook are used to air the issue as well as potentially to offer remote access forms of spiritual direction to modern Christians.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Hunt, H. 2009 'The Reforming Abbot and his Tears: Penthos in Late Byzantium' in *Spirituality in Late Byzantium*, ed. E. Russell, (Cambridge Scholars Press, Cambridge), pp. 13-20

This text was selected from among a number of conference papers offered at a conference on Spirituality in Late Byzantium at Royal Holloway College, University of London in 2007, and showcases Hunt's contribution to 'the discussion of womanhood in Byzantium'.

Hunt, H. 2012 'Uses and Abuses of Spiritual Authority in the Church in St Symeon the New Theologian' in *The Philokalia: Exploring the Classical Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, eds. Brock Bingamen and B. Nassif, (Oxford University Press, Oxford) ISBN 978-0-10-539026-1.

This major international collaboration provides a handbook to the most important written source of spiritual insight used by Orthodox Christians (among others) in the monastery, parish and at home. The majority of fellow contributors were Orthodox Christians, many of them ordained and therefore male.

Father Liviu Barbu, Priest of the Orthodox Church in Norwich and lecturer at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge describes Hunt's various papers and book chapters on Symeon as: 'enlightening and, in all fairness, much better than what was previously published on the subject of spiritual fatherhood' (personal email dated 21 September 2012).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Hunt's research has contributed towards the personal and professional development of practitioners and those interested in spirituality/meditation. This has been achieved through numerous activities reaching various organisations and communities.

Hunt has developed several partnerships with faith based organisations, through invitations to speak at events as well as through her proactive approach and passion for communicating her research to learners outside a conventional academic framework. She has led several workshops related to her research for local and national groups interested in spirituality. On 12 March 2011 she conducted a one day workshop 'Uses and abuses of spiritual direction: an orthodox perspective' for the Harrogate School of Theology, an occasional 'school' of approximately twenty lay persons who meet locally to study theology. The format was a formal lecture presentation followed by a discussion based on texts issued. On 10 March 2012 she led 'Spiritual Direction in the Eastern Church' – a one day retreat for the World Community for Christian Meditation (an organisation which has over 250 groups in the UK), a series of short lectures with directed study of and silent meditation about sources from the desert fathers integrated into the normal mediation practices of the Benedictine monk John Main. Also related to her research on the desert fathers, on 9 March 2013 she led a one day workshop for MONOS (a centre for the study of monastic culture and spirituality in Leicester) and was the keynote speaker at their 7th annual conference which explored 'Christian mysticism and contemplation in new/lay monasticism' (July 2013). On 16 March 2013 she steered a discussion session on the desert fathers and attitudes to the body for the Catholic People's Week conference. Verbal feedback from all of these groups Hunt has worked with was immensely positive.

Hunt has a strong involvement with MONOS, an inclusive and interdenominational Christian organisation that is primarily focused on fostering a Christian monastic spirit within the wider Christian community and society at large. MONOS is developing an educational wing to its community base which comprises around six adults and other family members. She gave the keynote speech, entitled *Spiritual Direction from the Desert to 11th Century Constantinople: advices and caveats for the spiritual pilgrim*, for the MONOS conference in July 2011, Douai Abbey, Reading, which focused on 'The Desert Fathers and their significance for lay monastic living and the wider Church as a whole'. Her paper formed the basis of a weekend study-retreat which included worship and spiritual direction and involved around 25 lay people. Her ability to explain academic ideas to non-conventional students within a pastoral setting engendered not only learning but spiritual nourishment according to informal feedback from the session; she was therefore invited to join the Board of MONOS and asked to address the annual retreat in 2012, and to deliver a day's teaching on acedia in the desert and desert attitudes to the body on 9 March 2013 for the certificate course, for which she acts as informal educational advisor. She has been in discussion with MONOS since July 2011 concerning their informal study programmes, leading towards the possibility of validation of their courses by Leeds Trinity University. In January 2013 she was formally co-opted onto the Board of MONOS as an education advisor. Anthony Grimley, Director of MONOS, has described Hunt's input as one which has offered 'sound and current academic reflection couple with practical and spiritual application'. According to Grimley this has 'complemented the ethos of MONOS but has also enhanced its educational structure'. MONOS have particularly appreciated having a female perspective involved in its educational programme. Monastic culture is male dominated and consequently female perspectives have been lacking since MONOS was established.

Hunt's research has raised her profile nationally to the extent that in convening (since 2009) the Eastern Christian Studies Seminar Series at Leeds Trinity University she is able to attract speakers of international standard. The ecumenical dialogue and opportunities for experiencing worship in Eastern Christian contexts which is associated with these gatherings is explored more fully in the Research Environment part of our submission.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Email communication from Anthony Grimley, MONOS (Jan 2013)

MONOS education programme <http://www.monos.org.uk/Monos-MonosEducation>