

5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Annika, "Brother Roger and the Formation of Taizé" Whitworth University (2017). *History of Christianity II: TH 314*. Paper 16.
<https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h/16>



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Annika Barrett

The Story of Brother Roger and the Formation of Taizé

What is it about the monastic community in Taizé, France that has inspired international admiration, especially among young people? Don't most people today think of monasteries as archaic and dull, a place for religious extremists who were unable to marry? Yet, since its birth in the mid 1900s, Taizé has drawn hundreds of thousands of young



*Brother Roger at a prayer in Taizé.
Photo credit: João Pedro Gonçalves*

adult pilgrims from all around the world, influenced worship practices on an international scale, and welcomed spiritual giants from Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox backgrounds. Unlike traditional monastic orders, Taizé is made up of an ecumenical brotherhood that lives in dynamic adaptability, practicing hospitality for culturally diverse believers while remaining rooted in the gospel. The community is characterized by a remarkable heart of peace, reconciliation, and worship, mirroring the passion of its founder, Roger Schütz, commonly known as Brother Roger. A friend of the community noted that, “knowing itself to be poor, Taizé does not profess to hold answers to this world’s problems. It seeks only to be a listening companion to those who seek the one reality, to search with other searchers for the sources of faith, and in this respect as in all others the community and its founder are one.”¹ Although Brother Roger preferred to be known as an anonymous member of the global church, recognizing that it is God who founds the ministry of reconciliation, the formation of the Taizé community is intimately tied up in the story of his

¹ Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart: the life and vision of Brother Roger of Taizé* (London: SPCK, 2015), xii.

life. His story, as one of many stories in the kingdom of God, is worth sharing for the edification and unity of the church today.

Born in Provence, Switzerland in 1915 to Charles Schutz and Amélie Marsauche, Brother Roger was the youngest of nine children.² His mother was a French Protestant with a background in music and his father was a Swiss Protestant pastor. Together they shared a deep love for the poor and chose to raise their family in a poverty stricken community. Being a large hospitable family, their home was often filled with relatives, people in need, and music. Looking back, Brother Roger remembered his childhood with rich joy, recalling that much of his time was spent in the solitude of the family garden.³ It was in this environment that he began to cultivate a practice of meditative solitude, care for the poor, and reconciliation, even as a child. Despite his parents' Protestant affiliation, Brother Roger remembered attending Catholic Mass with his grandmother, witnessing his father pray in Catholic churches, and boarding in the home of a Catholic widow during secondary school.⁴ As he moved through school, Brother Roger experienced the strain between Protestant and Catholic traditions and struggled with his own faith. He came down with a serious case of tuberculosis when he was sixteen, which perpetuated his struggle of faith and left him without distraction from his thoughts. During his recovery, he spent long periods of solitude in the Swiss mountains, laying the foundation for his later emphasis on the importance of silence and contemplation in prayer.⁵

² Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé: a story of prayer, worship and reconciliation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2008), 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

It was throughout his college years that Brother Roger's faith became central to his life and his vision for the Taizé community began to form. He enrolled in the Universities of Lausanne and Strasbourg in 1936, reluctantly agreeing to his father's wish for him to study theology.⁶ Although he made it through the first year, his heart was not in his studies. It was not until that summer when his sister, Lily, became terribly ill that Brother Roger began to earnestly seek God. Because Lily's death seemed imminent, Brother Roger felt that divine intervention would be her only hope. He held onto a phrase from the Psalms, "It is your face that I seek, O Lord," praying desperately for God to save his sister's life.⁷ When Lily survived, Brother Roger resumed his theological studies with a new conviction about God. Further deepening his faith, he also spent some time on a retreat with Carthusian monks, a monastic order profoundly dedicated to silence. His experience was transformative, reinforcing the theme of meditative silence in his spiritual practice and awakening a passion within him for monastic life.⁸

At the beginning of his final year of college, Brother Roger was asked by some fellow students to become the president of the Student Christian Association. Despite his initial disinterest in the group, he eventually agreed. The association grew exponentially under his leadership and produced a subgroup of students who called themselves La Grande Communauté. This smaller community dedicated itself to "authentic search for God through prayer, silence, meditation, and confession".⁹ During their retreats together, the group began dreaming about the development of a community house for reconciliation and prayed earnestly about the conflict brought

⁶ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

on by the recent outbreak of the Second World War. The conflicts in France were especially difficult for Brother Roger because much of his extended family still resided there. He later wrote that “The defeat of France awoke a powerful sympathy. If a house could be found there, of a kind we had dreamed of, it would offer a possible way of assisting some of those most discouraged, those deprived of a livelihood and it could become a place of silence and work.”¹⁰ In this way, as a response to the disunity of war, the vision for the Taizé community was born.

Brother Roger was so caught up by the idea of a peaceful house for those in need that he did not complete his academic thesis. Instead, he decided to leave for France right away. Deeply troubled by the conflict and upheaval going on in the world between fellow humans, especially between fellow Christians, he felt compelled to take action. He biked into France in search of a suitable location to build a community where people could come together in reconciliation, where its residents could seek “to understand everything about the other rather than to be understood.”¹¹ While stopping to visit the historic site of Cluny Abby, he happened across a local lawyer who pointed him in the direction of the nearby village, Taizé, to look at a property for sale. Although the land owners were not there, an elderly woman from the village was present to show Brother Roger the property. Together they toured the bleak estate and then went back to the woman’s home for dinner. When Brother Roger shared his hope for a house of reconciliation, she pleaded with him, saying, “Buy the house and stay here . . . we are all alone.”¹² Deeply moved, Brother Roger purchased the property that very month and immediately began working

¹⁰ José Luis, González-Balado, *The story of Taizé* (London: Continuum, 2003), 28.

¹¹ Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart*, 29.

¹² Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 59.

toward an environment of peace, aiding people in need through the tribulation of the Second World War just as his grandmother had done in the First World War before him.¹³

Because the village of Taizé was only a few miles away from the demarcation line dividing free French territory from the Vichy regime, Brother Roger used his house as a safe haven for war refugees. He said, “I found myself as if impelled to do everything I could to build a community life in which reconciliation would be realized, made concrete day by day. To begin with I must start a life of prayer alone...in the morning, midday, and evening and I would take in those who were fleeing, those in hiding.”¹⁴ Although Brother Roger maintained his custom of praying three times a day, he did so privately, out of respect for his guests because many of them were Jewish or agnostic. He was soon joined by his sister, Genevieve, who came to support his efforts of hospitality. Even though resources were scarce, no one was ever turned away.

Brother Roger and Genevieve took in war refugees for two years until autumn of 1942 when they were discovered by the Gestapo. With no choice but to return to Switzerland, Brother Roger finished his theology degree and wrote his thesis on “The Ideal of the Monastic Life Before Saint Benedict and Its Conformity to the Gospels”.¹⁵ He also published a pamphlet on monastic communal life that he had written when he was still in Taizé. Not too long after its publication, Brother Roger began receiving feedback on his writing. Three men who especially resonated with his pamphlet decided to join him in Geneva with the aim of forming a community characterized by the provisional vows of “shared property, daily work and prayer, a common

¹³ “A Bit of History: The Beginnings,” *taize.fr/en*, last modified March 8, 2008, http://www.taize.fr/en_article6526.html.

¹⁴ Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart*, 28.

¹⁵ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 60.

purse, and a life of celibacy.”¹⁶ When France was freed from Nazi control in 1944, the community of four brothers was able to relocate to Taizé.

At that time, the French village of Taizé was devastated by the war and it harbored a bitter prejudice against its former enemies. Despite the divisive atmosphere, the brothers entered Taizé with the hope of bringing peace to the marginalized, regardless of their nationality. They cared without partiality for the German prisoners-of-war, the local orphans, and the remnant of the native community. They also developed a self-sustainable farm, which enabled them to welcome the downtrodden and to care for those in need of sanctuary. As their ministry grew, the brothers’ chapel could no longer contain the crowds. Masses were coming to the brothers’ home to pray while the local church stood empty. In response, Brother Roger underwent a lengthy ecclesiastical process to obtain permission to use the village church. Around the same time, a few believers expressed interest in joining the brothers’ vows. Carefully considering the implications, the brothers decided to make their provisional vows permanent and Brother Roger took some time away to write the Rule of Taizé, establishing “the essential that makes the common life possible.”¹⁷ Taizé had officially become a Protestant-founded monastic community.

As the ministry of Taizé continued to grow, the tension between ecclesiastical authority and the village’s emphasis on ecumenicism increased. Protestant leaders wanted Brother Roger to reinforce his ties to the Churches of the Reformation, while the Roman Catholic Church wanted no association with the brothers at all. In their dealings with Church leaders, the brothers of Taizé preferred to err on the side of silence, refusing to speak ill of one group to the other.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷ “A Bit of History: The Beginnings,” *taize.fr/en*.

Brother Roger said, “One must not seek to unite by dividing, nor must one try to gather sympathies about one by opposing others... We are here because of Christ and the gospel... to recapture the image of a reconciled Church.”¹⁸ It was not until 1958, when a friend of Taizé came into office as Pope John XXIII, that the community realized its hope for ecumenical reconciliation between itself and the Roman Catholic Church. Just three days after his inauguration, the new Pope granted the brothers a private audience and proclaimed “Ah, Taizé, that little springtime!”¹⁹ During that first meeting, the brothers and Pope John XXIII found themselves to be of the same spirit and decided to call together an ecumenical council between Protestants and Catholics. They also established an annual meeting between the Pope and the brothers of Taizé.

Over the next few decades, Taizé continued to develop its identity as an ecumenical community, welcoming believers from every church tradition. Initially, Protestant and Catholic pilgrims made up the majority of the believers in the community. The flood of pilgrims became so numerous that the brothers decided to build a new Church of Reconciliation so that they could welcome them all into one place of prayer. Brother Roger had serious reservations about building a large new church, not wanting to attract young people for the sake of beautiful architecture or to run the risk of inviting believers to pray together in a mostly vacant building. However, pilgrims kept coming and building plans fell into place. A brother with a degree in architecture volunteered to design the new Church of Reconciliation, while a German organization with a name that translates, “sign of atonement/reconciliation” supplied the labor and funding.²⁰ One day, as he was walking out of the the completed building, Brother Roger noticed a rainbow outside of

¹⁸ Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart*, 28.

¹⁹ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

the church and conceded, “There is God’s answer. This church will not immobilize us. It’s an ark. It will be filled.”²¹ Not even a year later, the new church reached capacity as more Protestant and Catholic pilgrims continued to come. It was not until after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that the number of Orthodox pilgrims from Eastern Europe and Russia increased dramatically as well. Around 100,000 Eastern Orthodox Christians joined the Protestant and Catholic Christians in Taizé during that year alone. To welcome the Orthodox believers, the brothers undertook an expansion of the Church of Reconciliation, adding onion-shaped domes to the roof in Orthodox fashion.²²

While the brothers of Taizé were welcoming believers into their community to bring unity between all members of the church, they were also sending believers out from the community to live as the unified body of Christ throughout the world. When tragedy, war, and disaster struck in different areas, the brothers set out to live and work among those in poverty and affliction. Locally as well, a few brothers went to work with those in the nearby mines and farmlands. Soon, the brothers began to receive awards and recognition for the success of their contributions. Many of them began to feel uncomfortable with the awards, wealth, and land being entrusted to them; Brother Roger commented, “When you establish the centre of your universe within yourself, you are plunged into egocentricity and your creative energies, your love, is dislocated.”²³ Because of their unease, the brothers decided to equip the local community to take over the farmland and cattle that they had accumulated. In doing so, the Taizé community was freed up to focus its energies on the reconciliation of believers and on the cultivation of peace between people throughout the world.

²¹ Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart*, 79.

²² Jason Brian Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 74.

²³ Kathryn Spink, *A universal heart*, 82.

As more pilgrims experienced the unity of Christ together in Taizé, a strong desire began to form among them to bring transformative unity also to their own communities. At this point, the pilgrims were representative of more than 42 nations and were mostly young, between the ages of sixteen and thirty.²⁴ In response to their growing desire, Brother Roger announced the formation of the Council of Youth on Easter in 1970. Four years later, when the Council of Youth officially began, young pilgrims met together to send one another back out to work for reconciliation in their native communities. This youth movement later inspired the idea for the Pilgrimage of Trust, in which the brothers and the young people go out into the world to minister to the poor and to bring reconciliation between fellow humans. Brother Alois, the successor of Brother Roger, said, “As we continue the pilgrimage of trust on earth that brings together young people from many countries, we understand more and more deeply this reality: all humanity forms a single family and God lives within every human being without exception.”²⁵ Now, the hundred or so brothers of Taizé, representing more than thirty nations, have continued to welcome people into their village and the Pilgrimage of Trust continues to grow.²⁶

Brother Roger went on to serve as the prior of Taizé until his death in 2005. At the age of 90, he was attacked during community prayer by a mentally ill person. Before he died, Brother Roger appointed Brother Alois to be his successor. The vision that began as a dream for the reconciliation between those in a French war-torn community had expanded into a movement for reconciliation and solidarity between all of humanity.

²⁴ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 69.

²⁵ “All Around the World,” *taize.fr/en*.

²⁶ “The Community Today” *taize.fr/en*. Last modified March 8, 2008.
http://www.taize.fr/en_article6525.html

To date, the Taizé community has partnered with spiritual leaders from around the world including the Pope, Desmond Tutu, and Mother Theresa. Desmond Tutu said of Taizé, “In my language, I would call [Taizé] a place of *Ubuntu*, a place of community, where every single person matters and where no one is diminished since that would lead to the diminishment of all.”²⁷ Also an advocate for human solidarity, Mother Theresa wrote a poem with Brother Roger while he was in India saying that God opens “this way [of reconciliation] to us, so that the wounded body of Jesus Christ, your Church, may be the leaven of Communion for the poor of the earth and in the whole human family.”²⁸ Both Mother Theresa and Brother Roger were awarded the Templeton Prize for their spiritual contributions; it is possible that Brother Roger’s friendship with Mother Theresa influenced his decision to accept the prize. Although he was not looking for recognition, he was also awarded the German Peace Prize, along with several others, over his lifetime.²⁹



*The old church in the village of Taizé with the grave of Brother Roger on the right.
Photo credit: Johannes Hahn*

When Taizé began to receive global attention, many church leaders came to visit the community in order to understand the attraction that it held for the youth. One aspect of Taizé that has certainly contributed to its vitality and growth has been its willingness to embrace change. The community’s mission of reconcilia-

tion has remained at the forefront of its focus. At the same time, Taizé has retained a dynamic

²⁷ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, Foreword.

²⁸ Kathryn Spink, *Mother Teresa: a complete authorized biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 153.

²⁹ Jason Brian, Santos, *A community called Taizé*, 72.

identity, adapting to diverse cultures and frequent challenges. This paradox of focus and flexibility can be observed especially well in one of Taizé's hallmarks, its community worship. Originally, the brothers modeled their worship practice after the tradition of French monastic liturgy. It followed a basic pattern: "introductory hymns of praise, scripture, response to scripture, silence, intercession, Eucharist, closing hymns of praise."³⁰ However, when large crowds of pilgrims began to attend the brothers' common worship, the community was faced with the challenge of including everyone despite the diversity of languages, cultures, and Christian traditions. At first, the brothers began to draw music from various faith traditions and to conduct worship in several languages. Noticing that larger groups of pilgrims still had difficulty following along, the brothers decided to undertake a project of simplifying and diversifying their common worship practice so that everyone could be united as one church. Over the next several years, the community developed its own repertoire of chants from various nations. Throughout its metamorphosis, Taizé has maintained the pattern of the original French liturgical tradition while adapting to the needs of its community.

Today, the worship of Taizé is becoming popular all over the world. It is well known by its simple musical chants, its periods of prayerful silence, and its practice of meditation on short passages of scripture, similar to the tradition of *Lectio Divina*. Taizé has been willing to undergo dynamic change in order to meet the needs of people throughout the world. Now, people throughout the world are also expressing a desire to change their communities to reflect the spirit of peace and reconciliation found in Taizé. It is through this sort of loving solidarity with humanity that the Taizé community hopes to reflect Christ on earth.

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³⁰ Ibid., 105.

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