

## Guidance for Contemporary Pilgrims

Review of

*Spiritual Guides: Pathfinders in the Desert*

By Fred Dallmayr

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Reviewed by **Hans Gustafson**

In *Spiritual Guides: Pathfinders in the Desert*, Fred Dallmayr looks to four “pathfinders,” Paul Tillich, Raimon Panikkar, Thomas Merton and Pope Francis, for paths through the “desert” of contemporary life. The desert here is the “spreading wasteland where everything creative, fruitful, and nourishing decays and withers” (1). Dallmayr chose these guides primarily for their insistence on the “need for radical *metanoia*, turn-around or *Kehre*” (6). Specifically, they are “bridge-builders” that strive for a “‘holistic’ recovery from modern fragmentation” by reconnecting the “transtemporal and the temporal, the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular,’ and also theoretical insight and social praxis” (6).

Dallmayr draws out the contemporary relevance of Tillich’s defense of “religious socialism,” which “had nothing in common with the materialistic collectivism that, under the label of ‘communism,’ had emerged in the Soviet Union” (15), but rather “brings together the love of God and the love of fellow beings in the world” (16). On the eve of the Second World War, Tillich preached, “The Salvation of European society from a return to barbarism lies in the hands of socialism” (22). Dallmayr calls us to heed these prophetic remarks in the present *kairos*. One of Tillich’s great legacies is his application of dialectics to theological method, which energetically engages the reality of the concrete world. Its political repercussions demand that “churches cannot simply abscond: they have to testify and give witness to the *promise* of the Kingdom here and now” (26). Dallmayr reminds us of Tillich’s urgent wake-up call: “In which of these groups do you belong – among those who respond to the prophetic spirit, or among those who close their ears and hearts to it?” (33). Recognizing the *en vogue* “‘splitting’ of the world into hostile classes, races, tribes, and religions,” and the reality of our current world today as “inundated with a massive avalanche of calamities and disasters,” Dallmayr echoes Tillich’s ultimatum: “In this situation, what will be our position? Will we close or open our hearts and minds? Are we still willing to listen to Tillich’s summons?” (34).

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Dallmayr then explores Panikkar’s “holism” in the relation between worship and the modern secular age, in cultural pluralism and in the tension between “world confidence” and propheticism. Panikkar’s understanding of the secular need for the sacred (and vice-versa) relies on the Indian/Hindu concept of *Advaita* (non-dualism, literally “not-two-ness”) to retain a healthy tension between religion (too often confined to sacred, supernatural, eternal) and politics (too often confined to earthly, natural, profane, temporal, secular). Panikkar writes, “God and the world are not two realities, nor are they one and the same. . . . There is no politics separate from religion. . . . The divine tabernacle is to be found among men; the earthly city is divine happening” (41). Dallmayr probes Panikkar’s assessment of modern culture as one of “sacred secularity.” How does Panikkar’s proposal of the secular infused with the sacred stand up to the rather obvious ills and malevolence in the world? Here Dallmayr turns to Panikkar’s musings on the monastic vocation of being human in the wilderness of the world. “The monastic vocation calls on all people everywhere to develop seriously . . . the ‘deepest core of our humanness’” (55). The vision of a secluded monk immersed headlong in the civic and spiritual tribulations of the world brings to mind few others more than Thomas Merton, the focus of the next chapter.

Merton exemplifies bridge-building through his public life as a reflective monk unceasingly engaged in the civic world beyond his hermitage. Dallmayr casts Merton as “the rebel” who pushed back against the “immense wasteland, the steadily growing desert of modern life, in the West.” Reflecting on Merton’s rebellion, Dallmayr focuses on the famous monk’s path through the desert, “honoring both his mindfulness and his social commitment” – what Dallmayr refers to as Merton’s “contemplative praxis” (58). Dallmayr carefully brings out Merton’s insistence that solitude is “not and can never be ‘a narcissistic dialogue of the ego with itself.’ . . . Solitude hence is not solipsism.” Rather, Merton teaches that humans “Go into the desert [of solitude] not to escape other humans but in order to find them in God” (62). Dallmayr rightly identifies Merton as a “pathfinder in the desert” in this respect, for many of the worldly concerns of Merton’s era remain alive. In particular, Dallmayr reviews Merton’s recognition of the general malaise present in Western cultures, which Merton casts as “technologically very strong, but spiritually superficial and weak. There is much good in the people who are simple and kind, but there is much potential evil in the irresponsibility of the society which leaves all to the interplay of human appetites, assuming that everything will adjust itself automatically for the good of all” (70). Finally, under the rubric of ecumenism (though technically understood as interfaith or interreligious), Dallmayr sketches Merton’s growing interest in non-Christian traditions in his later years. These include the Hindu and Indian traditions (especially in Mahatma Gandhi), Sufism and Islamic mysticism (especially in Abdul Aziz), Zen Buddhism and Daoism.

Finally, Pope Francis’ teachings illuminate a bridge through the “desert” in a manner that defends against the “global chaos and the growing wasteland or desert of our world” (10). In Dallmayr’s chapter on the “glad tidings” of the pope, the most instructive section lifts up the pontiff’s reclamation of the word “solidarity,” which is “a little worn and at times poorly understood” (89). Dallmayr, with Pope Francis’ help, sets solidarity on a concrete foundation that goes beyond “a few sporadic acts of generosity” towards a path leading to shared liberation and structural transformation. In other words, solidarity loses power when relegated to mere acts of social media activism (“slacktivism”) or vocal “lip service” to causes without significant demands on, or sacrifice from, those claiming it.

Dallmayr then impressively turns to traditions beyond Christianity. In particular, he examines Islamic spiritualities to bring out an emphasis on an *agapic*, laterally oriented spirituality that reaches out to other humans, over a vertically oriented spirituality aimed at union with God alone. As such, he offers a rather rigorous Christian-Muslim comparative theo-spirituality, and hints towards a “global spirituality” (116). Dallmayr also looks to the wisdom of the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* (emptiness), and argues for its “soteriological significance” (120) for the world. In so doing, he returns to the encounters Tillich, Merton and Panikkar had with the various Buddhist traditions. He is able to rescue Buddhism from Western misconceptions about its perceived indifference to the world. Further, Dallmayr, with help from the “pathfinders” of the book, leans on the Buddha’s teachings to chart “the way toward a released humanity no longer entrapped in aggressive individual or collective identities” (137). In a grand way, this is what Dallmayr’s book is all about. To be sure, this book is an impressive interdisciplinary work that weaves together wisdom from philosophy, political science, theology and spirituality. It is recommended for those yearning for a practical and deeply engaged application of theology and spirituality to our often-troubled concrete world.