

A Refreshing Desert

Review of
*A Course in Desert Spirituality:
 Fifteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*
 By Thomas Merton
 Edited by Jon Sweeney
 Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO
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What better time to read Thomas Merton's newly available book on desert spirituality than during the ongoing global pandemic that has socially distanced a whole planet? COVID-19 has drawn humans into a kind of social and existential desert as billions of us find ourselves living in unchosen ascetical circumstances that have enclosed us in varying degrees of solitude, silence, self-reflection and suffering. Since the mysterious coronavirus will likely be with us for months or perhaps years to come, it is not too late to let Thomas Merton accompany us into the grace that may await us in the inner terrain of our shared desert. Thankfully we have such a resource.

A companion volume to his 2017 edition of Merton's monastic conferences entitled *A Course in Christian Mysticism*, Jon Sweeney's *A Course in Desert Spirituality* excerpts and rearranges conference materials originally published in the critical editions of *Cassian and the Fathers* (2005) and *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (2006) into fifteen "lectures" on the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers, allowing Merton's innumerable students world-wide the chance to study with the master. Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO, a member of the original audience of novices for these conferences, provides a lively and insightful Foreword to the volume (ix-x), giving it a stamp of historical authenticity, while its wider relevance is suggested by Merton's own words from *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, quoted by Sweeney in his Prologue: "a monastic outlook . . . is common to all those who have elected to question the value of a life submitted entirely to arbitrary secular presuppositions, dictated by social convention, and dedicated to the pursuit of temporal satisfactions which are perhaps only a mirage. Whatever may be the value of 'life in the world' there have been . . . men [and women] who have claimed to find something they vastly prefer in solitude" (ix).

This keynote sounds throughout the course as Merton brings his readers through the origins and evolution of what we know as "desert spirituality." A glance at the lecture titles reveals

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the provisionality and pluralism of experiments for living on the margins of the world. Like its proverbial shifting sands, the desert provided an unstructured world, a natural world, an anti-imperium wherein to deconstruct the socially constructed self that in these proto-monks craved its own annihilation. In such arid barrenness, hunger and solitude, the renouncers' chosen terrain became a matrix for a spirituality as extreme as itself and far from "the world" which was their woe.

During our historical desert tour we encounter many spiritual creatives who undertook myriad experiments with new and transformative life-ways: empire deserters and aspiring martyrs; virgins and ascetics; hermits and heretics; free-range gyrovagues and stay-at-home sarabaites; cenobites and scholars; intellectuals and philosophers; encratists and Montanists; fundamentalists and fanatics; polemicists and hesychasts; nuns who slept in boxes and monks who lived atop pillars; ascetical feminists and spiritual warriors – all ardently seeking a way to restore the image of God in their nature and come home to paradise.

While some of these Christian ancestors of ours may seem to our contemporary sensibilities strange and perhaps even mad, Merton invites a more generous assessment. The reader begins to understand that these holy men and women are no mere historical figures to him, but contemporary friends with whom he lives and consults, who guide him and foster his own direct intuition of divinity. For Merton, their folly actually made a fool of a world gladly abandoned for the hard life of authenticity in interior deserts of sanity and sanctity, obeying this daily prescription: "fly, be silent, rest in prayer" (74).

In time there arose among them teachers and organizers, some who would inspire by their instruction and practice, others who would lay down the forms and formulas for the many modes of monastic life the desert awakened. Among the significant teachers who merit a Merton lecture are contributors to the emergence of Christian monasticism particularly in its Eastern form: Anthony the great patriarch and icon of the desert fathers' eremitical wing; Pachomius and Basil of its communitarian wing; the contentious Jerome and the two Melanias of the Palestinian wing; Pseudo-Macarius and the dramatic hermits of the Syrian wing; and finally the hermit and bishop Philoxenos, with whom Sweeney concludes the course.

Ambitious as this survey is, Merton demonstrates his skillfulness in synthesizing and presenting his well-researched material with lucidity and style. He labors to instill in his novices a vibrant monastic spirit deeply rooted in tradition but addressed to the contemporary lives of his students – and ourselves as well. To it all he brings his customary enthusiasm and brilliant articulation so that we begin to see through his eyes the blessing that was available in the ancient desert, a place of extraordinary psychic fertility and creativity – and also spiritual danger – nurturing numerous monastic masters and countless Christian ascetics.

The most significant of these in Merton's view elicit greater attention and affection. In Alexandria's catechetical academy, we meet Clement and Origen, who even amid controversy and criticism demonstrated that great contributions to the contemplative and mystical life of Christianity were not simply generated in the desert by monks, but also in the city among intellectuals. Merton gives us an ample serving of their most significant and enduring texts. Controversial as Origen may have been, Merton does not disguise his love for him: "In summary, whatever may be said for or against Origen, he is the most powerful influence on all subsequent

mysticism, East and West, particularly West. We find Origen in Cassian, in St. Bernard, St. John of the Cross, the Rhenish mystics [and Merton besides]. He is practically the source (after the New Testament itself) of Christian mystical thought” (22).

Turning to Gregory of Nyssa, honorific attention is given to the Greek Father who so influenced Merton’s own contemplative path. He sets Gregory’s many works in the context of his life and the several controversies that challenged his exceptional theological and philosophical creativity. What the Greek Father leaves us is a treasure trove of mystical writings that becomes the link between his intellectual mentor, Origen, and later masters like Pseudo-Denys, and indeed Merton himself, to aid our further study of the dark apophatic path of “unknowing” that Gregory uncovered for Christian contemplatives. In Merton’s estimation Gregory is the greatest contemplative of the Cappadocian Fathers, the deepest, most mystical and most spiritual, and stands alongside the great desert father Evagrius Ponticus who will likewise have Merton’s full and admiring attention.

Generally considered the greatest theologian of the desert, Evagrius of Pontus lived at Kellia in the time of Cassian. His importance derives from his systematic presentation of the theology of the first Fathers, especially Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, in a form that became definitive in the East. His chief work, *On Prayer*, had tremendous influence as it presented a way of pure ceaseless prayer. Such “naked” prayer was, in Evagrius’ teaching, assisted by the work of psalmody that prepared the soul by silencing the passions and afflictions. Then like an eagle with two wings the soul could soar to God, aided by the charisms of chant and contemplation.

Turning to Cassian, *the* master of the spiritual life for monks in Merton’s assessment, we meet the one who rendered an original synthesis of all the monastic teachers who went before him. To him Sweeney devotes two complete lectures, detailing the wisdom of his great works: the *Conferences*, for hermits, and *Institutes*, for cenobites. “He propagated in the West the doctrine of active and contemplative lives. He is interesting, human, a good observer and psychologist, a prudent Master of the spiritual life; every monk should know him thoroughly” (90). The genius of Cassian was his psychological insight and the directness of his teaching concerning love. As one moves from a palpable sense of the sovereignty of God, to profound compunction, to the renunciations, to humility that allows afflictions or vices to be transmuted into virtues, one is led to that purity of heart which is the goal of monastic life lived in the perfection of charity. These lectures, the most generous in the volume, salute the genius of the monastic synthesis that brought Eastern and Western desert streams of wisdom into a life-giving torrent still flowing through the currents of contemporary Christianity and treasured by all the churches of Christ.

The course, therefore, is at once a map, an itinerary and a survey. It is a series of encounters not with dead monks of an arcane past but with living masters of a still unfolding future. Indeed, it’s a fascinating road show, permitting us encounters with the fervent and the fanatic, the wise and the aberrant outliers who experimented with taking off the ways of the world and putting on the ways of the living Christ. We are reminded that the monk is a pilgrim to the Promised Land, an exile, following Christ who – like us – belongs in paradise. “Your homeland is paradise. Retain your birthright” (60). What we are heir to, in this generous compendium of desert spirituality, is sacred wisdom; what we encounter in this desert is the emergence of our once and future selves: the *pneumatikos* – the spiritual person.