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# Learning from Monks

BY J. WARREN SMITH

**Scholars have reexamined old caricatures of early Christian ascetics and the significance of monasticism in our common past. In the ancient wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers, they have discovered a resource for contemporary Christians.**

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**R**eflecting the anti-Catholic character of much Protestant scholarship in the early twentieth century (and anti-Protestant polemic of Catholic scholars), historian Hans Lietzmann in his analysis of early Christian monasticism quipped that the *only* thing Christian about the monastic tradition was its focus on sin. Over the last twenty to thirty years, in a new ecumenical spirit, Catholic and Protestant scholars have reexamined old caricatures of early Christian ascetics and the significance of monasticism in the history of our common past. The fruit of this scholarship has begun to flow beyond the academy to pastors and lay people through books that present the writings of the desert mothers and fathers as ancient wisdom that is a resource for contemporary Christians.



One of the first scholars to popularize the desert mothers and fathers was Roberta C. Bondi, who taught church history in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. In *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987, 112 pp., \$15.00), Bondi introduces the wisdom of the desert to an audience suspicious of asceticism. As one highly educated friend confessed, “Before I read *To Love as God Loves*, I thought monks were just a bunch of body haters.” Bondi’s pedagogical brilliance lies in her anticipation of modern prejudices against ascetics – misperceptions she dispels – and in her use of the mothers and fathers’ sayings to illustrate how these fourth-century Christians experienced

essentially the same struggles that modern Christians face. Imitating the spiritual mentors of the desert whom she studies, Bondi writes in complete sympathy with her readers, speaking not from the lofty position of the professor's podium, but as a fellow struggling Christian who simply relates the insights she has learned from these monks over the years. She describes the

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challenge that we contemporary American Christians face: Christ's example of self-emptying love is in conflict with our culture's focus on "individual self-development" – what Ayn Rand famously called "the virtue of selfishness."

The insight of the monks, says Bondi, is that Christ-like love and humility "provide human beings with a realistic and powerful way of

disarming such a violent society as theirs and ours. For without love and humility life dissipates and the self fails to achieve true self-development" (p. 10). There is no human flourishing in the fullest sense except where we love and submit to the God for whose companionship we were made. Once we understand that the ascetic life is nothing other than learning to love as God loves then we can understand the disciplines of the monk – e.g., fasting, selling off possessions, foregoing sleep, living in the desert – not as the heroic pursuit of virtue for its own sake and for one's own glorification, but as the means for learning how to love God and neighbor rightly. The disciplines of the desert teach us to love because they open us to moments of grace in which God gives us knowledge of ourselves, of others, and of his own divinity – knowledge that arouses longing for God, humility in the face of our own sins, and compassion for fellow sinners whom we find difficult to love.

Bondi astutely recognizes that one of the challenges for modern readers of the desert mothers and fathers is their idiosyncratic language. Words like "perfection" and "humility," common in the parlance of monks, are frequently stumbling stones for contemporary readers because we misunderstand their meaning. For example, we have equated "humility" with "selfless love" in which an individual feels compelled to sacrifice her desires, aspirations, and sense of self-worth for the sake of serving parents, spouse, and children. This perverted sense of humility renders the family an idol supplanting God as the sole object of unconditional devotion. Rather, humility is the fruit of grace that grows out of the recognition of our sin and the need for repentance and healing.



In *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007, 117 pp., \$16.00), Jason Byassee, a contributing editor of *The Christian Century* and the executive director of *Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School* (LE@DD), provides a guide for laity and clergy who have just begun to study monastic literature. He explains the modern interest in asceticism as a longing among many American Christians for a form of church that has not been co-opted by a consumerist culture, for a form of Christian community whose simplicity of life provides a space to encounter the transcendent God in the midst of one's daily routine. Byassee relates how he found this sort of community in a Trappist monastery in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. There the worship was "as exquisite as any I could imagine." The effect was transformative; "It made me love the psalms anew, and to want to memorize and chant Scripture and ancient prayers. It made me, in short, a better Protestant (!), if by that we mean someone committed to a love of Scripture and personal piety" (p. 5). Byassee's description of the monks of Moncks Corner orients readers to these ancient texts by reminding us that monks are not artifacts of the exotic and arcane world of late antiquity, but a living tradition practiced today on the banks of the Ashley and Cooper Rivers just outside of Charleston.

An ideal text for readers of Bondi who want to explore further the wisdom of the desert, Byassee's *Introduction* examines topics such as quiet, non-judgment, unceasing prayer, and charity. With probing questions at the end of each chapter, the book is designed for church discussion groups. Byassee writes with the grace of a journalist who is ever mindful of his reader. He is upfront about elements of monastic life that are strange; yet writing in a familiar idiom, he allows modern readers to make connections between their own spiritual questions and those of ancient monastics.



*Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston, MA: New Seeds, 2005, 192 pp., \$14.00) by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, is a true gift for the building up of the body of Christ. In the logic of monastic community, Williams finds a compelling refutation of modern individualistic spirituality that suffers from the delusion that we can grow in holiness and love "in abstraction from the actual business of living the body of Christ, living in concrete community" (p. 11). He opposes the caricature of monasticism as a form of escapism that flees temptation by fleeing the world. Monks who went to the desert were not escaping the temptations of the real world but seeking to be more attentive to the disordered and uncharitable impulses of the soul by removing the distractions that divert our attention from stirrings of our own soul. They did this by entering into the messy situation of living in the close quarters of a monastery so that they might come to know and

imitate God's forbearing love. For life in the desert monastery is not mere co-existence achieved through learning to grit one's teeth and bite one's tongue. Rather, it is discovering how intertwined our lives are with fellow sinners in Christ's body. Williams' thesis is that the wisdom of the desert the Church needs to recover is that there is no salvation for me as an individual apart from the salvation of my sister or brother. As Antony, the fourth-century pioneer of desert monasticism, taught, "Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ" (p. 13).

The greatest challenge facing monks was self-righteousness. After all, they gave up all the goods of home to seek perfection and holiness. Having made this sacrifice, they had to live with other monks who brought their emotional and spiritual baggage from the world into the monastery. Their temptation was to respond to the sins of their brother with indignation and judgment. Yet in our judgment and sense of moral superiority, the monks recognized, we lose both our own life and that of our brother. Williams finds the alternative in the insight of Moses the Black, "The monk must die to his neighbor," meaning the monk renounces the power to judge his brother (p. 14). For, when we judge others, Williams explains, we try to manage our brother's life rather than our own and so fall into the sin of "inattentiveness," that is, a failure to be conscious of our own sins. Inattentiveness born of judging others was antithetical to their reason for going to the desert in the first place. By contrast, when we are open and honest about our sins, we become a place where God happens. The disclosure of our sin reveals to our sister God's mercy toward us, thereby offering her the same hope of God's gracious forgiveness.



No scholarly account of the desert mothers and fathers is as engaging as reading the sayings for oneself. Fortunately, today there are a number of excellent translations that make the primary texts of the desert eminently accessible to modern readers. Benedicta Ward's translation in the *Penguin Classics* series, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, revised edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2003, 240 pp., \$14.00), is an anthology of the sayings divided thematically into chapters on topics such as progress in perfection, lust, nothing done for show, charity, and visions. Every fall I assign my first year Church History students a sampling of the sayings from Ward's translation. When I later ask students which readings they liked best that semester, they almost universally point to Ward's as the text they found most accessible and that spoke most clearly to issues that challenge them in their journey.

Laura Swan's *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001, 224 pp., \$13.95) provides a collection of sayings by the ammas, or mothers, who led communities for female ascetics. After providing an overview of the setting of female monasticism, Swan gives translations and commentary on sayings of ammas such

as the obscure Matrona and the well-educated and beautiful Syncletica, who after her parents' deaths took her blind sister to the family tomb where together they embarked upon the ascetic life. (Beauty and intelligence are commonly attributed to female ascetics to make the point that these women could have married and entered into a comfortable life as the mistress of a socially prominent family, but freely chose to give up such illusory, worldly goods in order to seek heavenly treasure in the desert.) In later chapters, Swan provides a veritable encyclopedia of female ascetics, well-known and obscure, making this volume indispensable for scholars as well as interested laity.



For readers who are stimulated spiritually and intellectually by the sayings of early Christian ascetics and want to study further, William Harmless' *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 512 pp., \$39.95) provides a survey of Egyptian asceticism from the pioneering figures, Paul and Antony, to the later theologians, Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian, who explained the theological rationale foundational to the movement.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part recounts the social, political, and ecclesial background of Egyptian monasticism, giving the reader a picture of life in Alexandria, the center of urban Egyptian culture that the monks rejected. It also offers an overview of the theological and ecclesial disputes that dominated the fourth and fifth centuries and influenced ascetic theology that developed around monasteries. Part two focuses on the classic texts about famous monks, such as Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, or by the monks themselves, such as the sayings preserved in the *Apophthegmata* (the Sayings) or the monastic rule Pachomius wrote to order the corporate life in his monasteries. The final part turns to the ascetic theology of Evagrius and Cassian. How was the character of monastic life influenced by monks' beliefs about sin, human nature, the work of Christ, and salvation? How did asceticism enable monks to enter more fully into the life of holiness made possible by Christ's triumph over death and sin? Harmless saves for the end his discussion of contemporary scholarly opinion about Egyptian monasticism. This volume is as assessable to the novice as it is insightful for the professional.



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