

# Desert Spirituality\*

Ernest E. Larkin

Both Christian Meditation and centering prayer come out of early monasticism, which itself is a development of desert spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Christian Meditation is the prayer of the heart described by John Cassian, the historian of desert spirituality who brought the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers of Egypt and the Middle East to the West. Centering prayer comes out of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th century English text that enshrines the contemplative traditions of the desert. It is no accident that both these contemplative prayer forms came to us by way of Benedictine and Trappist monasteries.

Desert spirituality was the beginning of Christian monasticism and the matrix out of which Western monks developed their lifestyle. Contemplative prayer was at the heart of their life, and desert spirituality was the context. This article proposes to examine those ancient traditions and adapt them to our times.

Desert spirituality is a technical term that has biblical and early Christian roots. The desert experience is a staple of both the Old and the New Testaments, for example, in the Exodus story, in the life of Elijah and the prophecy of Hosea, in John the Baptist, the forty-day fast of Jesus, and the three-year novitiate of Paul in Arabia (Ga 1:17). This desert experience was developed into a coherent spirituality by the desert fathers and mothers in the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Christian era. These fervent Christians fled to Egypt and the Middle East to escape the decadence of an effete Roman empire. The wastelands offered a stark and untrammled setting for a life of penance and prayer. Its rugged emptiness and its silence and solitude invited the flight from the world (*fuga mundi*). A special appeal to heroic souls was the belief that the demons infested the wastelands and could be met there in open combat. It did not take long for the desert dweller to discover that the demons were within and to be engaged on the battleground of the soul.

Life in the desert was simple. Manual labor broke the monotony of the silence and solitude of the cell and provided its own asceticism as well as sustenance and something for almsgiving. Desert dwellers spent their days in soul searching and the pursuit of the living God. Community life, especially when the solitary life prevailed, and outreach in ministry were clearly secondary and not really part of the interior struggle. Continuous prayer was the focus, and the *abbas* and the *ammās* spent their time in *lectio divina*, reading the psalms and the breviary, celebrating liturgy, and cultivating the prayer of the heart. These are the main features of desert spirituality.

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\* From *The Published Articles of Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm.*, with thanks to [Carmelnet](#).

<sup>1</sup> Christian Meditation and centering prayer are two popular forms of contemplative prayer, designed by John Main OSB and the Trappists at Spencer, Massachusetts, respectively, the former promoted by the World Community of Christian Meditation under Laurence Freeman OSB and the latter by Contemplative Outreach, whose leader is Thomas Keating OCSO.

In this setting Christian holiness was a kind of white martyrdom, a total giving over of one's life to God, the shedding of all self-indulgence in favor of a single-minded search for God. The desert was a graphic symbol of the emptiness of life and the otherness of God. The emptiness translated into purity of heart, a heart freed from sinful affections and centered on God. Thus the beatitude that best sums up desert spirituality is "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God." Contemplation is the goal, and letting go of all lesser aims and surrender to the living God the condition. This general principle is abstract and can be lived out in an imaginary as well as a real desert. The desert as symbol universalizes desert spirituality as a possibility for everyone. There is, however, still place for the physical desert in ordinary Christian life. We examine this role in the next two sections of this paper, and we will return to the symbolic desert in the third section. Our first question is this: What can the desert do for me? In other words, why should I go out into the desert? The second question is a prophetic one: What can I do for a desert that is now under attack by the forces of neglect or consumerism? How do my efforts to protect the environment or my failure to participate affect my personal life? After these two reflections we will return to the overall principle of desert spirituality, the call to emptiness and encounter with God.

### *What Can the Desert Do for Me?*

In Scripture the desert is primarily the wasteland, and it leads to the garden of the promised land, the desert come to life, as in Isaiah 35:1-2: "The desert shall rejoice and blossom... The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon." Both the bleak image and the flowering one apply to the physical desert as we use the term today. The desert means the wilderness, the great outdoors. This includes barren wastelands like sand dunes or the scrubby flatlands of Texas or Arizona, but also verdant gardens, scenic forests, majestic mountains, and rolling plains. The desert is all the places on this beautiful earth that are still largely untouched by city sprawl and offer themselves as a refuge for weary people. These lands can be gift for our spirits. They refresh us and challenge us. They beckon us to "come aside and rest awhile," away from the noise and congestion of the city with its polluted air and harried traffic. The desert is the place to hike a trail, fish a stream, picnic with friends, or just smell the sage and be with one's long thoughts.

Except for some few families that have declared their independence and homesteaded in the wild and some rare hermits who have also settled there, people today only visit this desert; they do not dwell there. They go out for physical exercise and emotional refreshment, for meditation and for fun. They enter desert places hostile to human habitation very gingerly, armed with water jugs, proper sun gear, and ideally with companions. Some visit these "fierce landscapes" (Belden Lane) for excitement, others to deal with a crisis, a limit experience, a sorrow that overwhelms them. Perhaps unconsciously they are looking for an environment that mirrors their troubled soul. A good example of this kind of match between soul and terrain is a

retreat for middle-aged men described in a recent publication.<sup>2</sup> It was conducted by Richard Rohr and designed to help men from many walks of life through their midlife crisis. The retreat took place at Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico in the summer of AD 2000. The men were challenged to let down their defenses and face themselves squarely. The retreat turned out to be a harrowing rite of passage. The torrid summer heat and the bleak lonely emptiness of the desert combined with soul-searching introspection and dramatic rituals to test the most stouthearted.

More often retreats or “a day in the desert” are spent in more friendly spaces. An attractive pastoral setting calms the soul and provides the quiet that people need for facing the real issues of their life. God seems closer in pristine settings. One popular formula for such outings is the *poustinia*, a concept popularized by Catherine de Hueck Doherty. *Poustinia* means hermitage, and folks become *poustiniaks* for a day, bringing along only a Bible and a bit of bread and cheese. The *poustinia* can actually be a back room or the attic of one’s home, but there are advantages in going out to the woods or the seashore.

Getting out in the country, breathing in the fresh air and fragrances of the meadows, walking around the lake or trudging along paths in hilly terrain, can be healthy physical exercise and spiritual refreshment. These are ways of slowing down, of refusing to be a couch potato and insuring the balance of *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body). Grace builds on nature, so a healthy body and soul are a good basis for the life of God in us. A good health regime works directly against anxious, workaholic tendencies or the equally bad habit of inertia and laziness. Recreational activities also develop the playful side of our lives. This is our contemplative side.

Visitors to the desert know that God is everywhere and that they do not have to go up to the heavens or across the sea to find the word of God. “No,” Deuteronomy says, “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Dt 30:11–14). But the desert facilitates the search. The wide open spaces, the silence and solitude, reveal God. Silence is the best contact point with God, since God is always present, though beyond speech, images, and concepts. The desert fosters this silence, this emptiness, the letting go of everything that is not of God. The desert is built for *kenosis*, the self-emptying of Jesus, who was perfectly open to God and was therefore exalted with the *pleroma*, the fullness of the resurrection (Ph 2:5–11). The desert way is the way of emptiness and fullness.

These reflections belong to the first step on the spiritual journey, the appreciation of creation. Original blessing preceded original sin, and immersion in creation and appreciation and love for this gift ought to precede the work of redemption. This is the thinking of Teilhard de Chardin, Matthew Fox, Francis Kelly Nemeck, and Marie Theresa Coombs. More recently Dorothee Soelle sees “being amazed” as the first of the three ways or stages of the spiritual life.<sup>3</sup> Instead of the classical ways of purification, illumination, and union, she proposes “being amazed, letting go, and

<sup>2</sup> Donal O’Leary, “High Noon at Ghost Ranch,” *Furrow* 52 (January 2001): 27–35.

<sup>3</sup> *Silent City: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 88–93.

resisting” as the three steps. Amazement and appreciation help us take an objective stance before the earth, and this makes it easier to let go, the second of the three ways for Soelle. This leads us to involvement, to compassion and commitment, regarding the world. She calls this resistance, because it involves working against the threats to the environment and society. That is to say, we resist and work for justice in all areas of life, such as the economic and the ecological orders. The unitive way calls to action as well as divine union.

### *What Can I Do for the Desert?*

The work of saving the earth is a challenge and responsibility for people everywhere today. The call resonates among informed spiritual persons. They have listened to the new cosmology presented by scientists like Brian Swimme and the “geologist” Thomas Berry, and they have heard the plaintive warnings of the environmentalists that the earth is wounded and in danger of collapsing. The universe has become part of today’s spiritual journey. The whole universe and its crown, *homo sapiens*, are seen as one vast living organism in which they depend on each other and rise and fall together. In the past the earth was looked upon as an appendage of humanity. Humanity alone counted, and the rest of creation was expendable. Human beings pursued their own desires recklessly, without thought about the effects in the environment. They could trash the earth, abuse it or destroy it, without worry because there were always other virgin territories to exploit in the same way. This was an affront to creation; we see it now as an affront to human life as well, because, in the words of Edward Abbey, the wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit just as vital to our lives as water and good bread.”<sup>4</sup> The universe is an integral part of our human life. We are partners, and we participate in growth or decline together. In the abuse or destruction of the universe, we are diminished and dehumanized.

The commission in Genesis 1:26 to have “dominion” over the earth did not give humans the right to abuse it. We are only caretakers, not absolute owners; we cannot take the myopic view of looking for an immediate return in pleasure or profit with no thought about the long-term loss to creation and the shortchanging of future human beings. One reviewer of Thomas Berry’s latest book, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, quotes Berry and then adds some strong words of his own: “‘What happens to the outer world happens to the inner world,’ Berry avers. ‘If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur, then the emotional, imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished.’ Our inner being will die if we continue to transform natural beauty into the soul-deadening, concrete-laden, box-store landscapes of a consumer society.”<sup>5</sup>

The obligation to safeguard the environment has three aspects: personal, societal, and spiritual. Each person needs to treat the desert with love and respect. Some of that

<sup>4</sup> Cited from his *Desert Solitaire* by Thomas J. McCarthy, “The Ultimate Sanctum,” *America* (9 April 2001): 6.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Bede Sharper, “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 8 (Fall–Winter 2000): 15.

concern is cosmetic, like cleaning up after using the land and properly disposing of the debris, especially non-biodegradable material. Respect and moderation mean that we do not harm the plant life by careless trampling, that we obey rules about camp fires and camping, that we leave the natural beauty intact without pilfering plants or otherwise harming the vegetation, that we carefully control toxic substances like pesticides or poisonous chemicals. These are common sense suggestions.

The societal obligation may take the form of joining groups like the Sierra Club that are dedicated to the environment, or of lending one's name to, say, Robert Redford's campaign to save the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge. Systemic problems can be addressed only by group action that can effect structural changes. We need to support these causes. There is no other way to stop the pollution of our waterways and atmosphere, to keep industrial wastes out of our rivers and lakes, to find adequate ways of dealing with nuclear waste, to stop the destruction of the ozone layer, to save the rain forests and wetlands, and to halt the woefully unbalanced over-consumption by the few. Elizabeth Johnson writes: "Every year, the twenty percent of Earth's people in the rich nations use seventy-five percent of the world's resources and produce eighty percent of the world's waste."<sup>6</sup>

There is a special spiritual component today because of the crisis in saving the earth. Time is running out, and experts say that there are only twenty-five or thirty years left to turn the destructive spiral around. The problems are overwhelming, and the laborers are few. We can organize and we can work, but the odds are against us. At such times we need overt divine help. Specifically the challenge is to pray contemplatively, to face the societal impasse which Constance FitzGerald, in a famous article several years ago, connected with the dark night of St. John of the Cross.<sup>7</sup> The dark night occurs as impasse in all sectors of human life, whether prayer, human relationships, or societal renewal. One response to impasse is trusting acceptance, silence before God, and loving surrender, which bring wisdom and strength and which are qualities of contemplative prayer. We take our insoluble problems to God. We wait with faith and trust, ready to spring into action in changing what we can deal with and accepting what we cannot change. Contemplative prayer is an admission that our problems may be beyond human resources. But our prayer is full of hope, because contemplation may stretch our imagination and inspire new creative ways of dealing with the problem. Solid prayer will certainly strengthen our resolve to continue the struggle. The popularity of contemplative prayer in our time may well be connected with the magnitude of the problems of this age.

### *Desert Spirituality in Its Purest Form*

We return now to the traditional meaning of desert in the spiritual life, namely, desert as physical place and as symbol. The desert of the first *abbas* and *ammans* was the real wasteland. Anthony and Pachomius spurned the fleshpots of the Roman cities and

<sup>6</sup> "God's Beloved Creation," *America* (16 April 2001): 9.

<sup>7</sup> "Dark Night as Impasse," in *Living with Apocalypse*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

went to the bleak deserts of Egypt to be alone with God and to keep careful watch over the movements of their hearts. The purity of heart they sought meant that they tried to choose only the good, to do everything right, in perfect measure, for the right reasons. They prayed and fasted to put to death the old man within themselves, so that the new man could come alive. They underwent this discipline for one reason: They wanted to see God. This goal was not face-to-face vision, as heaven will be (1 Jn 3:1–3); nor was it seeing God as an object, the way I see a person in front of me. Neither was it simply a new understanding, a new image of God, or a new perception. It was a seeing that meant presence, companionship, walking with God. It was contemplative union with God. Contemplation follows purity of heart as night follows day.

We have a window into the thinking of the desert fathers and mothers in the first conference of John Cassian.<sup>8</sup> The immediate objective of life in the desert was purity of heart; this he called the *skopos* (English “scope”). The *skopos* is oriented to a further good, which he calls the *telos*, the end or final purpose. An example of these two aspects of human endeavor is the life of the farmer. The farmer prepares the soil, plants the seed, hoes and manures the field. All this is his immediate task, his *skopos*. But he does it all with a view to the harvest, which is the *telos*, the real purpose of his work. If the *skopos* of life in the desert is purity of heart, the *telos* is the fullness of the kingdom of God, the resurrected life.

This program of seeking perfect purity of heart in order to find God can be applied to every Christian life. Purity of heart—as freedom from every actual sin and as right relationships with self, others, the world, and God—is the immediate task of the daily struggle. Purity of heart is more than chastity; it is all the virtues in perfect integration. This marvelous condition is often set in negative terminology. It is called detachment, or indifference, or freedom from sinful habits. But it is a very positive condition identified with biblical faith. This faith is the response to the word of God wherever it is recognized. It is the faith of the Virgin Mary in St. Luke’s Gospel. At the annunciation, for example, she is perturbed at the angel Gabriel’s message. How can she, a committed virgin, be the mother of the Messiah? When the angel assures her that God will provide, she gives her full assent to that word. She lets go of her own project in favor of God’s word.

A high degree of purity of heart means a heart full of faith. It means a heart full of love. The pure of heart are loving persons. They will see God, that is, they will know and love God, as described in the First Letter of John: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 Jn 4:7–8, 12). For the desert fathers and mothers and especially for theologians like Evagrius and Gregory of Nyssa, seeing God meant contemplation. This gift was the reward for the purification, and it consisted in experiencing union with God. This contemplation was not one particular experience, nor an altered state of consciousness. It came out of transformation. By allowing one’s life to be brought under the movement of the Holy

<sup>8</sup> *Conferences of John Cassian*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 37–43.

Spirit, one was born a new person, a “new creation” (2 Co 5:17). This new creature lived in the world of God and experienced God in the whole gamut of his or her worldly occupations. Contemplation was thus a way of life, not a particular experience.

### *The Carmelite Application*

The evolution of desert spirituality suggested in this paper has special reference to Carmelite history. Carmel came out of the desert, born on Mount Carmel, home to the Old Testament prophet Elijah and to hundreds of hermits at the time of the Crusades. The Carmelites were one group of such hermits; they sought a rule of life from the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Albert of Avogadro, who held the office between 1206 and 1214. The result was the *Rule of St. Albert*,<sup>9</sup> a contemplative and eremitical document that was simple, practical, and eminently scriptural.

The tides of politics and war, however, forced the Carmelites to leave their sacred mountain and go back to Europe as early as 1238. The eremitic style of life underwent change in the direction of community and ministry, eventually making the order a mendicant one like the Dominicans and Franciscans. One of the early general superiors, Nicholas the Frenchman, tried to stem the move to the city. In 1270 he wrote a strong letter, called “The Fiery Arrow,” calling the men to return to the desert. But the mendicant form of life had struck a chord in their hearts. They continued to foster their contemplative longing, but now they carried the desert in their hearts. The desert was a symbol now rather than the physical reality. A second charter of the order, called the Institution of the First Monks, dated 1370 and written by a Catalonian Carmelite, Philip Ribot, presented a symbolic life of Elijah and the example of the Blessed Mother as both a description and a defense of the new lifestyle. The book incorporated the thinking of John Cassian, especially on the structure of the religious life as the search for purity of heart and contemplation. The desert spirituality of Mount Carmel was adapted now to an active apostolic life. Henceforth Carmelite spirituality was at home in communities of active religious and lay people as well as cloistered contemplatives. The reform of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross two centuries later built on this document and renewed and perfected the eremitical–contemplative ideal of Carmel. They did so, not only by promoting desert houses of total contemplative life, but by organizing a way in which every Carmelite house could be, in the words of a great Carmelite of the next century, John of St. Samson, another Mount Carmel. The desert spirituality of Carmel’s beginnings had become democratized and available to all who espouse the ideals of the Carmelite tradition.



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<sup>9</sup> The Latin original and an English translation of the *Rule* can be accessed through the [Matheson Trust Library](#).