

## INTRODUCING DESERT SPIRITUALITY TO CHRISTIANS

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A few generations after the New Testament books were completed Christianity became an empire-favoured, more nominal religion. A growing number of Christians who wanted to live all-out for God, migrated from the superficial life of the urban centres to the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine to live the radical simplicity of the Gospel.

There were three kinds of desert Christian: 1) Solitary hermits; 2) Monks who lived in community, for example in monasteries founded by Pachomius in Southern Egypt; 3) Those who lived in Sketes (named after Scetis where many lived). These were responsible for their own dwelling and livelihood, but they typically met together with others in the area at week-ends for fellowship, Holy Communion, and to share their thoughts transparently with an elder. They were mostly celibate or widowed men, but a few women lived nearer to the sanctuary of inhabited areas.

Antony (c 251-356) is thought of as the Father of desert Christians. Bishop Athanasius wrote his *Life* which circulated widely. Pilgrims may still visit Anthony's cell.

Their aim, in modern terms, was to prioritise work on their inner life so that they moved from the false ego to the true God-centred self. Evagrius was a brilliant theologian and writer who went into the desert. In three of his books he analysed the Eight Destructive Passions (c.f. the church's Seven Deadly Sins plus one) and methods of stillness, meditation and practice which enable us to replace these vices with their opposite virtues [http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/01\\_Prak/00a\\_start.htm](http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/01_Prak/00a_start.htm) For a recent treatment of this see *Tantalus and the Pelican: exploring monastic spirituality today* by Nicholas Buxton (Continuum 2009).

Stories of their holy lives attracted many Christians and seekers to search them out, ask their guidance, or do placements with them. The desert Christians were taught to receive each visitor as if they were Christ and to give them hospitality. Typically a disciple might ask for 'a word' and take weeks or even months to live that word until they asked for another one.

Sayings of desert fathers and mothers were recited, collected, added to, and this process continued in written form from the fourth and fifth centuries. There were two series. In *The Alphabetical Collection* sayings were grouped according to the desert elder in A B C order. In *The Anonymous Collection* sayings were grouped by subject. Famous sayings are 'Go to your cell and your cell will teach you all things'; 'You will find God in your neighbour'; 'Place your head in your heart and stand before God all day' and 'The one who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles - those of hearing, speech, and sight. Then that person will have but one battle to fight - the battle of the heart.'

They typically observed silence and the hours of prayer, and many did manual work such as making baskets out of palm leaves which they sold in markets in oasis settlements a few times a year. However their personalities were delightfully contrasting, such as those of the extravert talkative Ethiopian bandit Moses, and the introvert, silent, ex imperial tutor Arsenius. This contrast is the theme of Rowan Williams' little book *Silence and Honeycakes*.

Critics point out that some were emaciated, idiosyncratic, or gave up the experiment and that they did not understand human developmental processes. However, if we think of these desert cells as laboratories, unique God-things happened in them which speak to people still at a profound level, even though we apply their insights in a different context.

In Celtic lands their insights were adapted in the Penitentials, which Columbanus described as 'medicines for the soul'. In my book *Soulfriendship: Celtic insights into spiritual mentoring* I use this as a basis for spiritual fitness exercises.

There is a biblical basis for a desert spirituality. Ian Robinson describes in his book *If Anyone Thirst: Biblical Spirituality from the Desert* (Morning Star 2015) that in the Old Testament a major desert image for God is one who walks the road with his people and guides them so that they will not lose their way. For people in the desert, to lose the way is to go without life-saving water. From the experience of Moses' people in the desert 'the way' became a metaphor for all of life.

In the Book of Deuteronomy God walks the difficult desert road with them, not as in the Pillar of Fire (Exodus) but in 'leading' them. 'Remember how the Lord your God led you in the desert these forty years ... He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land' (Deuteronomy 8: 2, 15). In Deuteronomy the way is defined by the revealed Torah, or Teaching spoken directly by God: 'So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you, do not turn aside to the right or the left. Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you.' (Deuteronomy 5: 32-33). This is not an image of general progress to anywhere but a matter of life and death. Life depends upon following the right paths to the water holes. One must know accurately. It is the way of purity and not a desire for any kind of religion, nor of imposed institutional conformity. It is a response to God's grace.

Although invasions brought the fifth century desert experiments to an end, collections of the Sayings and of desert Fathers and Mothers *Lives* circulated widely.

### **Some Resources**

#### ***Early Christian Lives (Penguin)***

This includes *Lives* of the first two recorded Christian hermits of the 3rd and 4th centuries: Jerome's *Life* of Paul of Thebes and Bishop Athanasius' *Life* of Antony of Egypt.

#### ***The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford and Kalamazoo 1981).**

Travellers wrote down their stories of monks. The best known was recorded in Greek by a group travelling in 394.

Good, accessible selections of the *Anonymous Collection* are contained in two booklets published by SGL Press, Fairacres, Oxford OX4 1TB: *The World of the Desert Fathers* ed by Columba Steward OSB (with a useful map of the desert communities) and *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* ed by Benedicta Ward SLG.

***Cassian (360-430)***

Cassian joined a Bethlehem monastery, and visited monasteries in the Egyptian desert several times with his friend Germanus. He desired to learn from the best desert fathers and to apply what he learned to himself and others. He became the leader of the church in Marseilles, Gaul, where he wrote two books of his desert experiences, which circulated among the monastic churches in Celtic lands.

*Conferences* by John Cassian (Paulist Press), is an account by Cassian of conversations (conferences) with desert fathers. Unfortunately this edition in *The Classics of World Spirituality* series omits some chapters, including those on soul friendship. Cassian wrote that thought brothers were separated by distances of silence the whole desert was pervaded by a spirit of soul friendship.

*The Institutes* by John Cassian (Newman Press). The first part deals with the regulations, customs and forms of prayer of Egyptian monasteries. The second part deals with the eight destructive passions and strategies for over coming and replacing these with virtues.

<http://www.holybooks.com/fathers-of-the-desert-vol-iii/>

Pax

Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan and Coalville, Leics publish an excellent range of sources including:

*Abba Isaiah of Scetis*

*Dorotheus of Gaza*

*Evagrius Porticus*

*Harlots of the Desert*

*Lives of Simeon Styletes*

*Paphnutius: Histories/Monks of Upper Egypt.*

*The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

See also *Fathers of the desert – primary Source edition* Nabu public domain reprints.

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## **Turning Negatives into Positives**

### **The Desert Fathers and Mothers on the passions and the virtues.**

‘The one who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles - those of hearing, speech, and sight. Then that person will have but one battle to fight - the battle of the heart.’

*Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*

To the desert mothers and fathers the heart is the most important battleground. The opposing forces in the heart are the positive qualities, sometimes called the virtues, and the destructive or negative qualities, sometimes called the passions. They did not mean by the passions what we sometimes mean. They would agree with us that to be passionate can be a good thing. But their concept of the passions offers us a most useful tool with which to learn to love better.

The passions, the negative forces in us, afflict all human beings as a result of our fallenness.

To be made in the image of God means we can't see anyone or anything as they truly are without seeing them as God sees them, through the lens of love. It follows that really loving depends upon our ability to see and know another person, God and ourselves as more than an extension of our own needs, desires or fantasies.

The passions obscure this way of seeing in love. They also rob us of the freedom to make real choices and act on them. The fear of abandonment and the compulsive need for approval that many of us have carried over from childhood also rob us of our freedom to choose the way of love.

Are the passions the same as sin? No and yes. No, because they were our instinctive, or maybe unconscious response to negative things done to us. Yes, because no one forces us to react in a negative way to negative treatment. Too wrongs don't make a right. As soon as we become even dimly aware that we can choose to react to negative treatment in a way that is not negative, we become responsible. To react negatively then is a wrong.

A person who is battered as a child often becomes a battering parent. Yet some do not. It is possible to choose not to become a battering parent, though it is more difficult to overcome the things that motivate you to batter.

It is like that with anger, which is something many of us suffer from and harbour. Evagrius speaks of anger as ‘the most fierce passion’. He describes it as ‘a boiling and stirring up of wrath against one who has given injury - or is thought to have done so. It constantly irritates the soul and above all at the time of prayer it seizes the kind and flashes the picture of the offensive person before one's eyes’. The angry person is not responsible for the origins of their anger, but can nevertheless choose to nurse that anger to the point where it controls them - ‘for both anger and hatred increase’ - or can fight against it and refuse to let it reach the point of becoming destructive.

The desert Christian was not ultimately interested in whether we are responsible for the origins of the passions. They were interested in healing. The passions were the wounds within us that destroy our lives and the, lives of others around us.

They replaced the negative with the positive. The vices with the virtues. So did the Celtic Christians.

Abba Ammonas: I have spent fourteen years in Scetis asking God night and day to give me the victory over anger.

There is an account of Antony walking through the desert to the place of the hermit Paul of Thebes. He met legendary creatures who show him the way. One of them is a satyr who offers him dates to eat and strikes up a conversation. He tells Antony: 'I am one of the inhabitants of the desert, the pagans, who let themselves be carried away in so many different errors, worship under the names of fauns. 'He asked for prayers and fled.

The account, full of imagery, tells us that the domain of evil spirits is Christianised by the presence of the monks.

### **Questions.**

Each person writes one question on a piece of paper which is shuffled. I then speak to these.

These were some of the questions:

How may I lose my rage and gain peace of heart?

What need I now leave behind to be uncluttered?

How can I make my life more simple and be more open to Christ's love?

How can I work through anger with God?

How can I learn how to love?

Why do I fear old age and yet don't fear death?

Why can't my heart be full of God?

How can I overcome a tendency to be irritated by sill little things out of all proportion to the things themselves?

I seem to need other people to motivate me to clean the house, answer letters etc.

When on my own I drift, switch off and let things pile up. I feel it's something to do with purpose and meaning. Can you help me understand what's behind this?

I want to be a contemplative but the activist, achieving side keeps up an inner drive and conflict. Is it purely the conflict of youth and age in me?

## LESSON A CLOSE-UP OF ONE DESERT FATHER

These notes introduce Macarius as a specimen. Students are free to choose another desert father and write an essay based entirely on their own research.

Macarius the Great, also called Macarius of Egypt to distinguish him from Macarius of Alexandria, was born about 300 in a village in the Nile Delta. He became a camel driver, and then a village ascetic. About 330 he went to the Wadi-al Natrun, then known as Scetis. Soon disciples gathered around him, it seems he was made a priest, and a large but loose monastic settlement emerged over which he came to preside. This is the origin of the word 'Skete', which is used today to describe monastics who live alone in scattered cells but who have a common rule and elder. He was deported during the persecution associated with Bishop Arius, in 374 but later returned to Scetis and died about 390.

He exercised great spiritual influence. Sayings and stories associated with him circulated widely and soon became the stuff of legend.

### **Key sayings of Macarius:**

Do no evil to anyone and do not judge anyone ... and you will be saved.

A brother confided to Macarius that he had fallen into sin. 'Repent, my son', he said to him. 'You will see him who is gentle, our Lord Jesus Christ, his face full of joy towards you, like a nursing mother whose face is full of joy for her child when he raises his hands and his face up to her....'

### **SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

The Sayings of Saint Macarius (originally in Greek and Coptic)

The Life of Macarius of Scetis (originally in Coptic only)

The Virtues of Saint Macarius (a collection of 82 Sayings in Coptic attributed to Macarius. This material is edited from perhaps the 5<sup>th</sup> century through the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries but seems to include some elements from the time of Macarius himself).