

‘Remain in your cell - it will teach you everything!’♦
THE DESERT TRADITION AND CHRISTIAN
SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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ABSTRACT

An affinity towards desert is the common denominator for the Abrahamic religions. The arid land offered an inspiring symbol as well as a challenging environment for the seekers of God. Later on finding or creating a desert situation in every circumstance one find himself/herself became the genuine spirit of religious life. It is an open invitation to all people to move out of their comfort zones (of possessing and being possessed) to the freedom of the children of God. In modern terms it is a liberation from the place of the unconscious where we are no longer in control but are driven by basic instincts and primitive urges. It is ultimately a spirituality of paradox that God chooses to reveal His true self in most unlikely and uncomfortable places. Christianity is not a religion that devotes itself to pursuing spiritual highs but that all Christian spirituality is to be measured by the effects it has on the world and our being in that world. Spiritual guides must never get too full of themselves and feel they are morally superior. The weakness of the passions can strike anyone at anytime. The fathers and mothers of the desert offer a wise, gentle, considerate and Christian manner of tackling the seemingly inextirpable desires by the simple remedies and medication of discernment, prayer, balance and compassion.

♦ Saying of Abba Moses – *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

Introduction

The metaphor and reality of the desert burns itself into the consciousness of at least three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three arise from the desert and contain a *nostalgie* for former times when God first revealed God's self in the harsh burning environment of the wilderness. For the Jews it is the place where God revealed God's self to Moses at Horeb appearing in the burning bush (Exod. 3), that very essence of the dry, desiccated wasteland within which Moses found himself at that time. It was the inhospitable place within which the people of Israel were tested for forty years as God played cat and mouse with their hopes, expectations and theological understandings, culminating in the revelations of God's nature and covenant on the inhospitable peak of Sinai (Exod. 19). After the deportation and exile to Babylon the prophets looked back nostalgically to their people's time in the desert and longed once again for God to lure and 'seduce them' (Hos. 2:14) back to the wilderness where the Valley of Suffering would once again become the 'door of hope'. There, they sang, Israel 'shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt' (Hos. 2).

Likewise, Christianity 'appears in the wilderness' in the shape of the quasi-shamanic figure, St. John the Baptist. He emerges from the desert, writes St Mark, 'clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist' eating 'locusts and wild honey' (Mk. 1). This child of the desert, a true prophetic soul, wild and unkempt, pulled no punches in his dealings with the powers and authorities of the city - the classic antithesis to the desert dwellers. In his delight in infuriating, challenging and generally rubbing those in power up the wrong way, he set a precedent that his disciple, Jesus, seems to have enjoyed emulating.

John arises from the desert and Jesus, we are told in Matthew 4, begins his ministry there. His first act after his baptism at the hands of John. Thus, at the start of his ministry Jesus withdraws immediately to the desert to begin battle with the devil - that traditional inhabitant of the wastelands. We shall have more to say about him and his little demon helpers later.

Thus from its earliest beginnings Christianity recognises the importance of entry into the desert as a *necessary stage* in the

spiritual journey. Its importance in the earliest stages of Christianity (for example, St Paul after his conversion spends time in the deserts of Arabia described in Galatians 1) means that it becomes 'archetypal' for all Christian spirituality that will follow. Of course, as Christianity unfolds this will not necessarily be about actually entering the physical desert of the Middle East. For the early Celtic Christians at the Western fringes of Europe their desert was to be found in the wild and untameable ocean besides which they would often live or upon which they would set out on voyages of spiritual self discovery. As the late middle ages collapsed into the modern age and the growth of the cities reduced the terrain of the desert the new orders such as the Carmelites stressed the importance of finding the desert in the city. St Teresa of Avila, in her reform of the order in the sixteenth century insisted that her 'carmels', her 'little deserts', should be placed at the centre and heart of the cities of sixteenth century Spain, where, by and large, they remain to this day. In the twentieth century the Italian Little Brother of Jesus, Carlo Carretto, felt that the desert was to be found in the city and made sure that the little brothers and sisters of Jesus would live in the most rundown, socially deprived inner city estates. Today the sisters and brothers in the UK live in the hardest hit neighbourhoods of the great cities such as Birmingham and London.

So, as Christianity emerged 'desert spirituality', as it is often called, emerged too. Not just a physical dwelling in the desiccated or abandoned places but also a dwelling in the inhospitable places within. An invitation to all people to move out of their comfort zones and move to the places of loss, driven-ness, pain and grief that our ordinary lives so deftly and easily mask through addictions, consumerisms, promiscuities, greed and violence. For us 21st century children of Freud and Jung it is the place of the unconscious where we are no longer in control and more primitive and basic urges and desires take over. It is ultimately a spirituality of paradox for, we are told, it is in the uncomfortable places that we do most to avoid that God chooses to reveal God's self to us. Here we will find the 'living water' that ultimately we are seeking - but not in forests, cities and verdant places but in the neglected, dry and dead places on our earth and in our selves.

Who were the Desert Fathers and Mothers?

In the Christian tradition our eternal guides to this strange half world of suppressed desire and refashioned self are the group of Christians who went to live in the deserts of the Middle East around the time that Christianity became a 'state sponsored religion' after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312CE. Around this time we first read reports of large numbers of Christians, perhaps disaffected with the newfound alliance between crown and Church, making their way towards the deserts of Egypt, Gaza and Syria. By 324 CE we find references to a *monachos* (literally, 'a solitary one' from whence we derive our English word 'monk') as a witness in a lawsuit (See Dunn 2003:1).

Traditionally, the movement begins on a Sunday morning around 270/271 CE when a young Egyptian Christian, known as Anthony, goes to church and hears the gospel reading from Matthew 19:21:

If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.

Unlike many Christians, before and since, who hear these words and do nothing about them Anthony, so we are told in his biography later written by St Athanasius, took these words to heart, sold all his possessions (and that of his sister) and went out into the desert to pursue the life of a wandering ascetic. From Anthony onwards it seems that an oral tradition develops in the wastelands of Egypt, Syria and Palestine which finally begins to be written down in the Semitic languages of the Middle East before being recorded and written down in Greek as the *Apophthegmata* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. These have recently received excellent translations into English by Sr Benedicta Ward of Oxford and it is on her translations that I rely.

What do the monks do?

After many years in the desert Anthony was approached by a group of people asking 'what do the monks do?' His reply: the monk is the one who fights demons. This is such a fundamental statement regarding the nature of desert spirituality that it is worth reflecting upon a little more. If we think of demons or devils

at all today we are probably going to visualise pantomime or Hallowe'en creatures with painted red horns and a pointed tail. When the desert fathers and mothers use the term it is far more subtle and perhaps nearer to what we would today call a 'psychological' understanding of the self.

A good example of this is found in the writing of Evagrius Ponticus in, for example, the *Praktikos* and the *Chapters on Prayer* where he uses the Greek term *logismoi* interchangeably for what we would call 'demons' and 'thoughts of the mind' (see Harmless 327). Following in the tradition of Anthony and identifying the influences of the evil one with our own passions and movements of the soul, Evagrius is able to produce an anthropology which is both provocative and authentic.

Following Gregory Nazianzen (See *Praktikos* 89) Evagrius divides the person into three elements. A 'concupiscible element' (*epithymia*) that is attracted to facets of the world primarily through the bodily desires of food, sex and wealth. It is the element of the soul that seeks comfort and pleasure. Not so far away from Freud's 'pleasure principle', in the Middle Ages it would transmogrify into the three 'deadly sins' of lust, greed and jealousy. The second element is the so-called 'irascible element' (*thymos*) that is the part of the soul that separates us from the world around us through violence and anger. In Freudian terms it is close to his notion of the 'death instinct' or *thanatos* and would become the three deadly sins of anger, sloth and envy. Over and above these two elements is the 'rational' part of the soul, the *logistikon*, which like Plato's charioteer in the *Phaedrus* (246 - 254) directs the other two parts of the soul. However, as the other passions can be directed against God, so too this aspect of the soul can be directed against God through the overarching sin of Pride.

When we think of these passions in a Christian context we often see them as negative aspects of the self. Within the desert tradition these passions are essentially *neutral* in themselves. This cannot be overemphasised. So many Christians are weighed down with the dualist assumption that the passions are bad in themselves. Nothing could be further from the message of the fathers and mothers. As Isaiah of Scetis states in his *Ascetical Discourses* all the passions are sacred in themselves, it is just that we have redirected

them by our wills so that they become turned against God (See Chryssavgis 61). Anger, as used by Christ in the temple, can be directed to good and holy things – in psychological terms it creates our space in the world and upholds personal dignity and worth. Regarding sexual desire I doubt if most of us would be here now without it: sexual desire is part of the mechanics of the universe that allows affectivity and warmth into our relations with others. It is when anger and sexual desire, for example, become twisted or perverted towards gratifying individual egotistical needs at the expense of others that problems emerge. So within the desert tradition we have continued emphasis on the need to redirect and transform these passions rather than destroy them. In Freudian terms there is the danger of control through repression and suppression which is ultimately fruitless for the suppressed desire will control us even more than when it was unsuppressed!

Even more remarkable are the passages in the fathers and mothers where we hear that ‘everything that goes to excess comes from the demons’ (Abba Poemen 31). That is, not just the passions but even Christian pieties and practices such as fasting, prayer and vigils may be in themselves loveless and egotistical acts. St Anthony recalls ‘demons singing the psalms while remaining invisible, shocking as it is to tell. In addition they recite the sacred words of Scripture with a foul mouth... they also awaken to prayer those who are asleep, so as to deprive them of sleep for the whole night’ (*Life of St Anthony* 25). One of the key elements of *diakresis* or ‘the discernment of spirits’ so central to the Christian spiritual tradition and to which we will return, is that an apparently good action, deed or thought may have a harmful purpose of end. Time and again the desert fathers and mothers exhort their followers to follow the advice of St Paul and to ‘examine yourselves and test yourselves’ (2 Corinthians 13:5 see *The Life of St Anthony* 55), this ‘self knowledge’ will be a recurring theme in the Christian tradition of spiritual direction.

Thus, we find in the desert fathers and mothers a moral anthropology that exhorts us to redirect the passions away from the destructive and towards the constructive. Always remembering the advice of the elders that this must not take place in too hard or harsh an environment that breaks the individual

through excessive penances. As St Anthony explains in a famous passage:

13. A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, 'Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it'. So he did. The old man then said, 'Shoot another', and he did so. Then the old man said, 'Shoot yet again', and the hunter replied 'If I bend my bow so much I will break it'. Then the old man said to him, 'It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break'.

Cassian in his *Conferences* (2.16.1) quotes with approval an old Greek saying: 'extremes meet' and continues 'for the extreme of fasting comes to the same end as overeating does, and excessive prolongation of a vigil is as detrimental to a monk as the torpor of heavy sleep is.' The fathers and mothers wisely counsel that we must always examine our *motives* for everything we do, not least our pious and penitential acts. These, as we have seen, are not above the action of the destructive and harmful forces within ourselves. The aim of the desert fathers and mothers is not to seek penance for penance's sake but to engage in *ascesis* or 'training' to enable us to come closer to God. For them, there is a clear distinction between this 'training' of desire and suppression or repression of desire.

As the desert teachings later found their way into Western monasticism through the writings of John Cassian this spirit of moderation and balance would be preserved and enshrined in Benedict's famous *Rule for Beginners*, the foundation of Western monasticism.

Fighting the Demons

We have then identified the key trope of 'desert' as holding the central Christian message that God is to be found in the wastelands and dead spaces of the heart. In this poisonous wilderness, as Carl Jung would later say in the twentieth century, we can find gold. The aim of the process, as we have seen, is the redirection of the essentially neutral passions back towards God.

How then can this be done? What counsel do the fathers and mothers give us to attempt this? Apart from the importance of balance which we have already mentioned we can highlight two key concerns: stability and silence.

Stability, 'staying with' lies at the heart of the desert approach to dealing with the *logismoi*. This will later be enshrined in the *Rule of St Benedict* as the vow of stability that all Western monks must make. What is meant by this?

The essential notion is that when confronted with a passion in our spiritual search, whether that is anger, lust, fear or greed, we should 'stay with' the passion in prayer. With time, the elders advise us, we shall see it transform into another passion, or, in many cases, disappear altogether. As Abba Poemen puts it:

21. If someone shuts a snake and a scorpion up in a bottle, in time they will be completely destroyed. So it is with evil thoughts: they are suggested by the demons; they disappear through patience.

Benedict and his disciples were suspicious of the spiritual tourist, a phenomenon sadly all too common in our own times. The seeker who moves from place to place, seeking perhaps a spiritual high but not staying long enough to get to the roots of their restlessness. As one of the mother, Syncletica, wrote:

6. If you find yourself in a monastery do not go to another place, for that will harm you a great deal. Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or the nun grows cold and their faith dies when they go from one place to another.

This counsel of patience goes to the heart of the work of the desert and with it an indifference to charismata, gifts of the spirit and extraordinary spiritual highs and experiences that sometimes accompany prolonged spiritual reflection. The elders remind us that Christianity is not a religion that devotes itself to pursuing spiritual highs but that all Christian spirituality is to be measured by the effects it has on the world and our being in that world (See *Life of St Anthony* 38). In this vein it is worth noting that as well as the seven passions we outlined above the fathers and mothers had

an eighth vice they had to struggle with – what they called *accidie* and which does not really translate into English, ‘listlessness or restlessness’ might do. Evagrius’s description of it is so finely drawn and wise it is worth quoting in full:

The demon of *acedia* - also called the noonday demon- is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour (around 10am) and besieges the soul until the eighth hour (around 2 pm). First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour (lunchtime), to look now this way and now that to see if one of the brothers might... might...

Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor...

Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord, God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life.

He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind’s eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. (Praktikos 12)

The passage is classic Evagrius, psychologically subtle and with not a little humour as he holds up the mirror to the wannabee student of spiritual struggle showing how easily one is swerved from ‘staying with’ the difficulties and hardships of the spiritual life, often in the name of ‘making a real success of himself’. Yet, as

Evagrius makes clear 'no other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle'. Rather than being a curse, *accidie* can be the gateway to a deep peace for the individual. If the seeker can 'stay with' all the distractions and boredoms of the cell then great peace will be found.

The second key tool in the seeker's fight with the passions is silence or *hesychia*. This is not so much a physical silence as a silence of the heart. As Abba Poemen puts it:

A man may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others he is babbling ceaselessly. But there may be another who talks from morning till night and yet he is truly silent; that is, he says nothing that is not profitable. 27

This silence or *contemplatio* lies at the heart of the Christian contemplative tradition and is most difficult to describe. Writing in the twentieth century the American trappist monk Thomas Merton called it a 'subtle nothingness' and the English Dominican Herbert McCabe 'a waste of time with God'. John Chryssavgis in his *Heart of the Desert* describes it as:

A way of waiting, a way of watching and a way of listening... it is a way of interiority, of stopping and then of exploring the cellars of the heart and the centre of life... Silence is never merely a cessation of words... rather it is the pause that holds together all the words both spoken and unspoken. Silence is the glue that connects our attitudes and actions. It is fullness not emptiness, it is not an absence but the awareness of a presence. (Chryssavgis 2003:45/6)

John Cassian in his *Conferences* refers to this quality of the seeker as *purity of heart* and sees it as one of the key elements in the spiritual search revealed in the perpetual practice of prayer. This is not just about specific bounded 'prayer periods' but it pertains rather to a whole *attitude* and disposition of the person, a distinction perhaps between 'prayer' and 'prayerfulness'. As Cassian states in Conference Nine:

Whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray as a result of the operation of the memory. Hence what we would like to be during the time of prayer we should strive to be outside of prayer. For the mind in prayer is shaped by the state that it was previously in, and, when we sink into prayer, the image of the same deeds, words and thoughts plays itself out before our eyes. This makes us angry or sad, depending upon our previous condition, or it recalls past lusts or business. (Conferences 9.3.3)

In modern computer jargon - 'Garbage In, Garbage Out!' The disposition of the person before prayer affects the nature of their prayer and the aim of the pray-er is to purify thoughts and actions so that, in Cassian's rather poetic description, the 'light feather or plume' of the soul can have its impurities, mud and dampness removed so that it may be 'naturally borne to the heavenly heights by the slightest breath' (Conferences 9.4.1).

Spiritual Direction and the Desert Tradition

Despite the importance of solitude we have seen how the desert elders realised the importance of having a guide or at least someone to whom we can open up our consciences and thoughts. Indeed, Cassian in the *Conferences* sees this disclosure of thoughts as the most important element of the monk's life. 'Not only all our actions', he writes 'but even all our thoughts should be offered to the inspection of the elders' (Conferences 2.10.1). Traditionally this process happened through two means, the disclosure of temptations and desires, our ever present *logismoi*, to another more experienced seeker, and the process of 'seeking a word' from a spiritual elder. Cassian is at pains to stress, however, that this discernment of spirits is not necessarily a gift of grey hairs and many years. The elderly are as much prone to deception as the young (Conferences 2.8.1). He gives numerous examples of this. The elder Heron who was revered by many disciples yet finally took his own life jumping down a well for a devil 'disguised as an angel of light' had tricked him into thinking God's angels would protect him as he jumped in the well and the miracle would bring many more to the faith. As Cassian states:

Just as all young men are not similarly fervent in spirit

and instructed in discipline and the best habits, so neither in fact can all the elders be found to be similarly perfect and upright. For the riches of elders are not to be measured by their grey hairs but by the hard work of their youth and the deserts of their past labours. (Conferences 2.13.1)

Once having carefully selected a guide Cassian, like Freud, counsels suspicion of motives. True discernment of spirits requires a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the very nature of ourselves. The old are as susceptible as the young, if not more so. Within this tradition, then, *everything* we experience must be explored with another, nothing should be left out of our account of ourselves to our fellow Christians:

Everything that is thought of is offered to the inspection of the elders, so that, not trusting one's own judgement, one may submit in every respect to their understanding and may know how to judge what is good and bad according to what they have handed down (Abba Moses in Cassian's *Conferences* 2.10.1)

This suspicion of motives goes alongside a deep humility in following the advice of the one to whom the seeker discloses their story. Just as a client seeking therapy today must trust the skill of the therapist and open themselves up to their judgement so we find the same relationship in the desert tradition. For 'as soon as a wicked thought is revealed it loses its power' (Conferences 2.10.1). As Freud and the early psychologists were to rediscover at the beginning of the twentieth century, the act of telling a secret or desire can often kill its power over us. Spiritual direction in the desert tradition realised that the *act of speaking* holds its own power over the passions of the soul. In this way spiritual direction becomes a choreography between what is said and what is unsaid.

Part of the practice of this humility in our disclosure to the elder is to free ourselves from the tyranny of desire. Or, the subtle twists of the ego that identify ourselves with our own 'projects'. Again, as we have seen already, these 'projects' may be good and important: relieving thirst and famine in the world, fighting for social justice for the oppressed or standing up for downtrodden freedoms. But, the elders counsel us, we must be constantly vigilant that even in

these and other worthy causes we are not using them to 'big up' our own ego at the expense of others. Having worked for many years with young people involved in faith and justice issues such as feeding the homeless or caring for the most vulnerable I have witnessed endless cases of 'burnout' where the person has become so identified with the project that they have lost their own spiritual anchorage. This attachment Cassian calls a 'dragon's gall' and far worse than the drunkenness of wine or the gluttony of food (Conferences 9.5.1). We must be careful then to 'reject with unwavering strictness of mind those things which cater to our power and which have the appearance of a kind of goodness' (9.6.4). Again, we are in the world of subtle self delusion, made stronger by the apparent cloak of respectability that all those involved in altruistic or religious works wrap themselves, the more to bring delusion upon themselves and others. Evagrius calls it the 'spirit of vainglory' and just as with his depiction of *accidie* his pen portrait of its poison is psychologically subtle and still relevant today:

The spirit of vainglory is most subtle and it readily grows up in the souls of those who practice virtue. It leads them to desire to make their struggles known publicly, to hunt after the praise of men. This in turn leads to their illusory healing of women, or to their hearing fancied sounds as the cries of demons... It has men knocking at the door, seeking audiences with them. If the monk does not willingly yield to their request, he is bound and led away. When in this way he is carried aloft by vain hope, the demon vanishes and the monk is left to be tempted by the demon of pride or of sadness. (Praktikos 13)

The guide, then, must be an astute counsellor and psychologist. However over and above it all the fathers counsel compassion towards those who struggle. Spiritual guides must never get too full of themselves and feel they are morally superior. The weakness of the passions can strike anyone at anytime. Cassian gives the telling story of the young man troubled with lust who goes to see the elder who scorns him and tells him he is not worthy of the life of a monk. As he leaves, dejected, to return to the fleshpots of a local town he meets another wiser elder, Abba Apollos. Unlike the first father, Apollos shows compassion and

discloses that he himself has to struggle with this demon on a regular basis. As he prays for the young man the demons assail the first old man with the temptations. This old man now 'runs around hither and thither as if he were crazed and drunk' (Conferences 2.13.7) finally setting off on the same route to the local fleshpots. In his 'obscene excitement' Abba Apollos confronts him, asking innocently where the former upright father is now heading. Realising that he has been deceiving himself and others the old man falls abash at Apollos' feet. Apollos' final words to the would-be spiritual director are magnificent:

The Lord let you be wounded by this so that at least in your old age you might learn to be compassionate toward others' infirmities and might be taught by your own example and experience to be considerate with respect to the frailty of the young... Learn to be compassionate to those who struggle and never frighten with bleak despair those who are in trouble or unsettle them with harsh words. Instead encourage them mildly and gently. (Conferences 2.8.9)

A tradition of compassion and gentleness that remains within the Christian tradition of spiritual direction to today.

Lessons for Today

Each year I introduce my students to the marvellous literature of the desert tradition and each year they are impressed by the deep Christian wisdom of these loveable coves. However, as we harvest the wisdom of the desert for today's world we have to realize that the luxury of leaving all and setting off alone into the desert is not one that most of us can afford. If we were to do it, it is doubtful that even there, in Sinai and Gaza, we would be able to avoid satellite TV or the mobile phone. Rather, contemporary spiritual commentators have tried to distill the essence of the desert wisdom, much as I have done here, and see how we can turn to the 'desert within'. For, as has been stressed throughout this article, the physical desert with its thorns, cacti and venomous reptiles, can be seen a cipher or symbol for the desiccated deserts within. The deserts so familiar to the alcoholic, the workaholic, the overindulgent, the proud and the cantankerous. As we have seen, the fathers and mothers we have been discussing offer a wise,

gentle, considerate and Christian manner of tackling these seemingly inextirpable desires by the simple remedies and medication of discernment, prayer, balance and compassion.

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