

Mystics and the Margins

Margins Create Liminal Space

Sunday, September 27, 2020

When we are content and satisfied on the inside of any group, we seem to suffer from a structural indifference. We do not realize that it is largely a belonging system that we have created for ourselves. It is not until we are excluded from a system that we are able to recognize its idolatries, lies, or shadow side. It is the privileged “knowledge of the outsider” that opens up the playing field. *People can be personally well-intentioned and sincere, but structurally they cannot comprehend certain things.* In his ministry, Jesus quotes the call of Isaiah to describe this collective social disregard: “You will hear and hear again, and not understand, see and see again and not perceive . . .” (Isaiah 6:9; Mark 8:18). Insiders are by nature dualistic because they divide themselves from the so-called outsiders.

I believe it is for that reason that so many saints and mystics and even everyday people have chosen to live their entire lives at the edges of most systems. They take their small and sufficient place in the great and grand scheme of God by “living on the edge of the inside.” They build on the solid tradition (“from the inside”) but from a new and dynamic stance (“on the edge”) where they cannot be co-opted by a need for security, possessions, or the illusions of power.

People such as Francis and Clare of Assisi try to live on the margins so they will not become enamored by the illusions and payoffs of prevailing systems. They know this is the only position that ensures continued wisdom, ever-broadening perspective, and even deeper compassion. Such choices may be seen in the lives of monks, nuns, hermits, or Amish communities. There are softer forms, too, like people who do not watch TV, people who live under the level of a taxable income, people who make prayer a major part of their day, people who deliberately place themselves in risky situations for the greater good. It is ironic that we must go to the edge to find the center, but that is what prophets, hermits, and mystics invariably do.

I want to acknowledge that there is a difference between *being marginalized*—forced (usually by prejudice and systemic discrimination) out of the common benefits and goods that come from living in mainstream society—and *choosing* to live on the margins. Both can be privileged places for spiritual growth and transformation. This week we will offer examples from the broad tradition of Christian mystics and communities who sought or accepted their location on the margins as a place of creativity and interior freedom. Through their insights, writings, rituals, and art, these men, women, and movements inspire us to cease protecting the surfaces of things and fall into the core of our own souls and experiences.

References:

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (The Crossroad Publishing Company: 2004), 136;

Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi (Franciscan Media: 2014), xxi, xxii, 34; and

Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality (St. Anthony Messenger Press: 2008), 92.

Mystics and the Margins

A Church on the Margins

Monday, September 28, 2020

We've tended to soften Jesus' conflict with the system, or the established powers, but Jesus' ministry took place on the margins! In the year 313 A.D., with the Edict of Milan, the Church dramatically changed sides and Christians officially became the Church of the establishment. Before that decree, the Church was by and large of the underclass. It identified with the poor and the oppressed, and the Church itself was still being oppressed and persecuted. The early Church read and understood its history from the catacombs—literally from underground. Such a position will always give us a different perspective than that “found in palaces” (see Matthew 11:8).

I'm sure the Emperor Constantine thought he was doing Christians a favor when he ended official persecution and made Christianity the established religion of the empire. Yet it might be the single most unfortunate thing that happened to Christianity. Once we moved from the margins of society to the center, we developed a new film over our eyes. After that, we couldn't read anything that showed Jesus in confrontation with the establishment, because we *were* the establishment, and usually egregiously so. Clear teaching on issues of greed, powerlessness, nonviolence, non-control, and simplicity were moved to the sidelines, if not actually countermanded. These issues were still taken seriously by those who fled to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Cappadocia. Their practices grew into what we now call “religious life” as observed by monks, nuns, hermits, and anchorites who held onto the radical Gospel in so many ways.

As long as the Church bore witness from the margins in some sense, and as long as we operated from a minority position, we had greater access to the truth, to the Gospel, to Jesus. In our time we have to find a way to disestablish ourselves, to identify with our powerlessness instead of our power, our dependence instead of our independence, our communion instead of our individualism. Unless we understand that, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) isn't going to make any sense.

We see in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus intended for us to take the low road. He intended us to operate from the position of “immoral” minority much more than the moral majority. When we're protecting our self-image as moral, superior, or “saved” persons, we always lose the truth. The daring search for God—the common character of all religion—is replaced with the search for personal certitude and control.

As soon as people are comfortably enjoying the fruits of the established system, they don't normally want any truth beyond their comfort zone. Yet those who are not enjoying those benefits, those who have been marginalized or oppressed in any way, are always longing and thirsting for the coming of the Kingdom, for something more. The Gospel always keeps us in a state of longing and thirsting for God. Grace seems to create a void inside of us that only God can fill.

Reference:

Adapted from Richard Rohr with John Bookser Feister, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* (Franciscan Media: 1996), 53–54.

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Freedom in the Desert

Tuesday, September 29, 2020

When Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire, something remarkable and strange took place. A whole set of people began to flock to the margins of the Empire to pursue God. They went to the deserts of Palestine, Cappadocia, Syria, and Egypt. This is the emergence of the ones we now call in a collective way the Desert Fathers and Mothers. These individuals in the desert sought to reflect more deeply on the Mystery of God and God's will through work, prayer, and study of the Scriptures.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) describes their movement this way:

Society—which meant pagan society, limited by the horizons and prospects of life “in this world”—was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single individual had to swim for their life. . . . These were people who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster. The fact that the Emperor was now Christian and that the “world” was coming to know the Cross as a sign of temporal power only strengthened them in their resolve. [1]

Benedictine Sister Laura Swan has written about the spirituality of the Desert Mothers, and describes the quest for wholeness and salvation for which these seekers thirsted and could find only outside the mainstream society:

Desert spirituality is characterized by the pursuit of abundant simplicity—simplicity grounded in the possession of little—and the abundance of God's presence. Yearning for complete union with God, desert ascetics sought to remove all obstacles to the deepening of this relationship. Obstacles included unhelpful attitudes and motives, thoughts that stalled their pursuit of God, and emotional ties that complicated their inner journeys.

The desert ascetics' relationships were nonpossessive: They cared for others while leaving them free. Concern for reputation was discarded. Feelings were acknowledged and listened to for their wisdom but were subjected to the discipline of the heart's goal to seek God. The desert ascetics sought to mortify disordered passions that distracted them from their deepening relationship with God and actively to cultivate a burning love for God.

Although the journey began with giving away possessions, desert ascetics understood that what possessed them was greater than the sum of goods owned. All that owned them, all that possessed their minds and hearts, their attachments and compulsions, must be healed and reconciled. Desert ascetics called this process of

moving toward inner freedom *detachment*. Detachment allows for greater direct experience of the Divine Presence as the seeker is attached to fewer distractions.

Desert ascetics understood that the cultivation of inner freedom was vital to the deepening of their experience of God. As they deepened their interior freedom, all aspects of their *false self* were removed and a clearer understanding of their *truest self* emerged. It is this true self that dwells deeply with God. In the abundant simplicity of our true self, we experience deepest joy. [2]

References:

[1] Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New Directions: 1970, ©1960) 3. Note: Minor edits made to incorporate gender-inclusive language.

[2] Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (Paulist Press: 2001), 21–22. Italics in original.

Mystics and the Margins

The Fruitful Margins of the Empire

Wednesday, September 30, 2020

On the margins of the Roman Empire, Ireland and Scotland helped hand down the Christian contemplative lineage. The Romans had conquered much of Europe by the time of Jesus' birth; though they ruled Britain, the Romans never occupied Ireland or parts of Scotland. This allowed the Celtic culture and Christian monks the freedom to thrive independently. They weren't controlled by Roman practicality or Greek thinking. When Christian missionaries arrived by the third century, the Celts blended their pagan or creation-based spirituality with Christian liturgy, practice, and structure. As a result, Celtic Christianity was still grounded in the natural world, and they had much easier access to a cosmic notion of the Christ.

Perhaps we can think of Celtic Christians as an alternative community on the edge of the inside of organized Christianity. Lacking the structure and support of the organized church, radical forms of Christianity never thrive for very long. Without the Irish monks, much of Celtic practice and thought would not have been passed on to us at all.

*Like the Desert Fathers and Mothers who influenced them, Celtic mystics focused on rather different things than the mainstream church. The Celts drew on their own cultural symbols and experience to emphasize other values than the symbols of "Roman" Catholicism. For example, Celtic Christianity encouraged the practice of confession to an *anam cara* (soul friend) more than to an ordained priest.*

They also saw God as a deep kind of listening and speaking presence, as in "The Deer's Cry." I invite you to read this excerpt of St. Patrick's traditional prayer slowly, and to allow yourself, like the ancient Celts, to become aware of the presence of Christ surrounding you through all things.

The Lorica of St. Patrick (The Deer's Cry)

I arise to-day:

vast might, invocation of the Trinity,—
belief in a Threeness
confession of Oneness
meeting in the Creator. . . .

I arise to-day:

might of Heaven
brightness of Sun
whiteness of Snow
splendour of Fire
speed of Light
swiftness of Wind
depth of Sea
stability of Earth
firmness of Rock.

I arise to-day:

Might of God for my piloting
Wisdom of God for my guidance
Eye of God for my foresight
Ear of God for my hearing
Word of God for my utterance
Hand of God for my guardianship
Path of God for my precedence
Shield of God for my protection
Host of God for my salvation . . .

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ under me, Christ over me,
Christ to right of me, Christ to left of me,
Christ in lying down, Christ in sitting, Christ in rising up
Christ in the heart of every person, who may think of me!
Christ in the mouth of every one, who may speak to me!
Christ in every eye, which may look on me!
Christ in every ear, which may hear me!

I arise to-day:

vast might, invocation of the Trinity
belief in a Threeness
confession of Oneness
meeting in the Creator. [1]

References:

[1] Attributed to Saint Patrick (373?–463?). See *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, vol. 2:

Translations and Notes, ed. J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson (Henry Bradshaw Society: 1898), 49, 50, 51.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Following the Mystics Through the Narrow Gate: Seeing God in All Things*, disc 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2010), [CD](#), [DVD](#), [MP3 download](#); and

Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi (Franciscan Media: 2014), 85-86.

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Faithful and Free Women

Thursday, October 1, 2020

We have a lot to learn from communities like the beguines, or later, the Quakers and Mennonites. These movements are made up of little groups, often on the margins of society, sharing the Word of God and their lives together. We might recognize this spirit at work today in the “base communities” of Latin America, in small Bible study groups, or new monastic “intentional communities.” They reveal to us the freedom of the Gospel. Author Laura Swan, a Benedictine nun, has studied Christian women’s spirituality movements and writes about the alternative lifestyle of the medieval beguines:

The beguines began to form in various parts of Europe over eight hundred years ago—around the year 1200. Beguines were laywomen, not nuns, and thus did not take solemn vows and did not live in monasteries. The beguines were a phenomenal way of life that swept across Europe, yet they were never a religious order or a formalized movement. And they did not have one specific founder or rule to live by. But there were common elements that rendered these women distinctive and familiar, including their common way of life, chastity and simplicity, their unusual business acumen, and their commitment to God and to the poor and marginalized. These women were essentially self-defined, in opposition to the many attempts to control and define them. They lived by themselves or together in so-called beguinages, which could be single houses for as few as a handful of beguines or, as in Brugge, walled-in rows of houses enclosing a central court with a chapel where over a thousand beguines might live . . .

The inner spiritual world of the beguines was rich in imagination. These women, and some of their monastic contemporaries, instigated a seismic shift in the province of the imagination, bringing their embodied experience of God and their spiritual journey into a broadened and deepened inner realm. Beguine mystics experienced a fiercely intimate encounter with the Divine—whom they called both “God” and “the One” . . .

For these women, prayer was being in the presence of God, seeking to unite their minds and hearts with the One they loved (and whom they frequently referred to as their “Beloved”). A central goal in life for beguines was unity of will—that their personal will would become so united with the will of God that they essentially functioned as a unified whole. God’s heart would be the seeker’s heart; the seeker’s

heart would find a home in God and God alone. This unity of will would be evidenced by joy, mercy and compassion, and love. . . .

Beguines exhorted their followers to recognize that there existed no impediment to a deep and meaningful prayer life. No matter what a person's station in life, be they educated or uneducated, poor or wealthy, it did not impede or deny them awareness of God in their lives. God yearned to draw close to all.

References:

Laura Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement* (BlueBridge: 2016), 1–2, 88, 92, 94.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent* (Franciscan Media: 2008), 53.

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The Light Within

Friday, October 2, 2020

First gathering in 17th-century England as the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers have always existed on the margins of Christianity, but that doesn't mean their impact has been small. In many ways, they were ahead of their time (and even our times) when it came to women's legitimate place in spiritual leadership, abolitionism, pacifism, and even the necessity of silence to hear the voice of God. From the beginning, they insisted that every individual had access to the "Light Within" and must follow their own conscience. It took the Catholic Church until Vatican II to state that clearly! In this passage by Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly (1893–1941), I hear echoes of the writings of Thomas Merton, as Kelly encourages his readers to recognize, trust, and live authentically from the "Light Within."

Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continually return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life. It is a dynamic center, a creative Life that presses to birth within us. It is a Light Within that illumines the face of God and casts new shadows and new glories upon the human face. It is a seed stirring to life if we do not choke it. It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst. Here is the Slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And [Christ] is within us all.

You who read these words already know this inner Life and Light. For by this very Light within you is your recognition given. In this humanistic age we suppose we are the initiators and God is the responder. But the Living Christ within us is the initiator, and we are the responders. . . .

The basic response of the soul to the Light is internal adoration and joy, thanksgiving and worship, self-surrender and listening. The secret places of the heart cease to be

our noisy workshop. They become a holy sanctuary of adoration and of self-oblation, where we are kept in perfect peace, if our minds be stayed on [God] who has found us in the inward springs of our life. . . . Powerfully are the springs of our will moved to an abandon of singing love toward God; powerfully are we moved to a new and overcoming love toward time-blinded human beings and all creation. In this Center of Creation all things are ours, and we are Christ's and Christ is God's.

Reference:

Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1992, ©1941), 9–10, 11.

Practice: The Folly of Fear

Not all mystical traditions have practices that are “serious.” Some of the teaching stories of Sufism, the mystical arm of Islam, feature the wise fool Mulla Nasrudin. The Sufis use the humorous stories of Nasrudin's adventures as an opportunity for contemplative practice. Like one of Jesus' parables, a Nasrudin story can work on many levels, from presenting a simple premise to initiating profound understanding. We hope you enjoy the following Nasrudin tale about a Sufi dervish (practitioner) who encounters Mulla Nasrudin.

Nasrudin was walking along a lonely road one moonlit night when he heard a snore, somewhere, it seemed, underfoot. Suddenly he was afraid, and was about to run when he tripped over a dervish lying in a cell which he had dug for himself, partly underground.

“Who are you?” stammered the Mulla.

“I am a dervish, and this is my contemplation place.”

“You will have to let me share it. Your snore frightened me out of my wits, and I cannot go any further tonight.”

“Take the other end of this blanket, then,” said the dervish without enthusiasm, “and lie down here. Please be quiet, because I am keeping a vigil.” . . .

Nasrudin fell asleep for a time. Then he woke up, very thirsty.

“I am thirsty,” he told the dervish.

“Then go back down the road, where there is a stream.”

“No, I am still afraid.”

“I shall go for you, then,” said the dervish. After all, to provide water is a sacred obligation in the East.

“No—don’t go. I shall be afraid all by myself.”

“Take this knife to defend yourself with,” said the dervish.

While he was away, Nasrudin frightened himself still more, working himself up into a lather of anxiety, which he tried to counter by imagining how he would attack any fiend who threatened him.

Presently the dervish returned.

“Keep your distance, or I’ll kill you!” said Nasrudin.

“But I am the dervish,” said the dervish.

“I don’t care who you are—you may be a fiend in disguise. Besides, you have your head and eyebrows shaved!” The dervishes of that Order shave the head and eyebrows.

“But I have come to bring you water! Don’t you remember—you are thirsty!”

“Don’t try to ingratiate yourself with me, fiend!”

“But that is my cell you are occupying!”

“That’s hard luck for you, isn’t it? You’ll just have to find another one.”

“I suppose so,” said the dervish, “but I am sure I don’t know what to make of all this.”

“I can tell you one thing,” said Nasrudin, “and that is that fear is multidirectional.”

“It certainly seems to be stronger than thirst, or sanity, or other people’s property,” said the dervish.

“*And* you don’t have to have it yourself in order to suffer from it!” said Nasrudin.