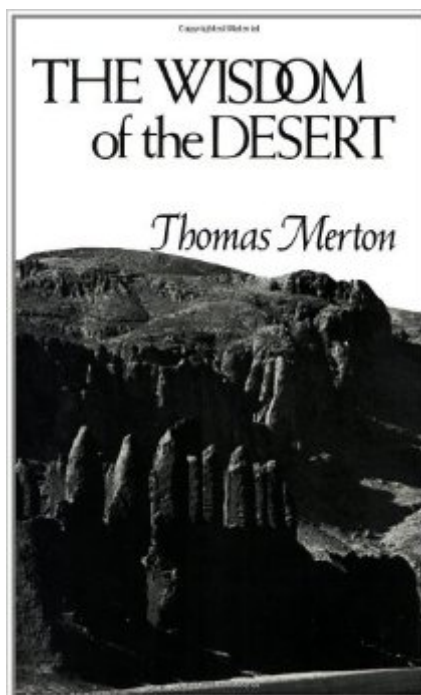


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The Wisdom Of The Desert (New Directions)



Synopsis

The *Wisdom of the Desert* was one of Thomas Merton's favorites among his own books—surely because he had hoped to spend his last years as a hermit. The personal tones of the translations, the blend of reverence and humor so characteristic of him, show how deeply Merton identified with the legendary authors of these sayings and parables, the fourth-century Christian Fathers who sought solitude and contemplation in the deserts of the Near East. The hermits of Scete who turned their backs on a corrupt society remarkably like our own had much in common with the Zen masters of China and Japan, and Father Merton made his selection from them with an eye to the kind of impact produced by the Zen mondo.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Thomas Merton was perhaps the best known monastic of the last century. That he was a Trappist perhaps puts him in the best contemporary context from which to understand the Desert Fathers - the kind of hermit/distance existence that they had does not really exist in the world today (true, there are a few who carry on the tradition in the deserts of Egypt and a few other places, but often even they advise against this becoming a trend in Christian practice again). The Trappists are among those for whom silence and solitude are intentional practices, much like the Desert Fathers. Merton, a talented writer on matters spiritual, states in the Author's note that his intention was not to produce a new 'edition' by academic standards, or to do any piece of new research.

Rather, Merton set out to produce an accessible collection of wisdom sayings that had been contained in the collection 'Verba Seniorum', a Latin text of stories and proverbs handed down from the Desert Fathers and those who knew and wrote about them. In the fourth century, while Christianity was still struggling as a minority (sometimes a violently oppressed minority) in the Empire, there were those who saw that the greater threat to the new faith was not the imperial officials and their forces, but rather the attractions and lure of the cities. It was very easy to put forth the claim that the world was not a Christian one, and that one would have to renounce the world to live an authentically Christian life - the Desert Fathers tended to do this renunciation in rather dramatic fashion (and, to varying extent, this is what monastics continue to do to this day). This renunciation was true even with official tolerance and imperial imprimatur, for Christianity was still the decided minority.

As adorable as it is, it's hard to report on it. Merton here captures nearly 150 snippets of life in the desert, stories from the early church hermits. It is entirely narrative, ranging from sentence-long to page-long vignettes about the lives of those who sought to know on the Lord. At first I thought I would list the numbers of all the stories that I found significant or inspirational, but soon the list became so long that it was just a senseless string. My copy is now very dog-eared. Given that, like the narratives of the Bible, there is a clear intention of teaching you something without a clear summary of what was taught, perhaps the best summary is a highlight of the themes that stand out. Humility seems to be the key virtue of the desert. Removing one's self from the world and society is a way of preventing one's self from being distracted from vanity. All of the promises of earthly life draw one into considerations of personal gain rather than into an honest assessment of one's place before God. Even within the monastery, monks should avoid bragging about themselves or their sacrifices. Secondarily, but not independently, is a flight from money. The monk is to give away his last two pence so as to be free from worry, savings, and distraction. They live on little food, mostly bread. Lack of judgment of others is a key value. Repeatedly the stories that Merton has collected warn us that we have no basis on which to evaluate others. Beautifully, the stories lead us to evaluate ourselves without pointing fingers our way. Instead, the monk must excel in forgiveness. It's not without humorous moments, though subtle.

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