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# Desert Encounters

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# Desert Encounters

Aaron Raverty

Saint Benedict had nothing against hermits. As the oft-proclaimed Father of Western Monasticism (480–547 CE), he reserved his highest praise for the *cenobites*—those monks who lived in community under a rule and an abbot. But he began his own ministry as a hermit monk, only later amassing a following of confreres. Listen to what Benedict says in his rule in chapter 1, "The Kinds of Monks":

> *[T]here are the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind* (RB 1980,[1] p. 169).

I entered the Benedictine Order at Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, in 1973. Ever since high school, I knew that I would someday become a member of a Catholic religious order. My vocational quest as a young man led me to check out several Catholic religious orders—the Passionists, the Jesuits, the Franciscans, and the Dominicans among them. They all had aspects of life that I considered honorable and worthwhile. Nevertheless, I was most impressed by the Benedictines not only for their educational commitments and aesthetic appreciation but for their stable life in community, with each abbey as a place for its monks to call home. I never thought of myself as a hermit during the early years of my monastic life. Nor was I particularly attracted to groups like the Carthusians who live most of their lives as hermits. I have always enjoyed living and working within the bosom of my Benedictine community. As I became more "seasoned" in my communal monastic life and work, however, I developed a yearning to give the hermit life a try. So, in planning for my sabbatical, I decided to travel to Crestone, Colorado, in the San Luis Valley, and stay in a hermitage espousing a Carmelite ideal—the Nada Hermitage at the Spiritual Life Institute just on the outskirts of Crestone. After all, the Carmelites have had a long tradition of hermits. They take their original inspiration from the Prophet Elijah, honed by the spiritual teachings of no less than Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, to name only two outstanding members of their religious family.

I was not exactly a stranger to Crestone. I had been there some thirty years ago, in the early 1980s, to collect data for my doctoral dissertation in sociocultural anthropology on the topic of the religious *Other*. During my first visit, I was enthralled by the diversity of religious groups and spiritual networks that were taking up residence in the area through the invitation of a couple whose intention—which I thought rather utopian at the time—was to create a "Refuge for World Truths." In these early years, the Carmelites were just beginning construction on their central community administrative building (called "Agape") and their hermitages that now dot the surrounding area. I envisioned my sabbatical return as a restudy of the region now that it had matured and sprouted several lineages of Tibetan Buddhist stupas, shrines, and retreat centers; two Zen Buddhist retreat centers; a Hindu ashram; a Neo-Shinto international organization, and many other organizations in addition to the Carmelite hermitage. Not only was I intent on restudying these religious Others now that they were more or less permanent features of the local landscape, but I also wanted to experience the Other quality that had been missing from my own monastic life—the anchoritic (aka hermit) ideal.

During the first month or so of my hermit experience, I had to make several adjustments.

One was just getting used to the high altitude of the valley. At 8,000 feet, it was a far cry from Minnesota, where the elevation measured only a few hundred feet above sea level. Shortness of breath, fatigue, insomnia, and vivid nightmares plagued my first few weeks. The "structure of life" that undergirded my monastic observance at Saint John's—Liturgy of the Hours three times a day, daily community Eucharist, table service at meals, and participation in liturgical music performances—had also been yanked out from under me. Self-reliance was the rule, and I quickly discovered that I could no longer count on "the help of many brothers"; I was now on my own. Not that I was entirely isolated. The cordial staff at Nada were almost always available to lend an ear, answer a question, or provide assistance in some other way. Times for meals, prayer, reading, shopping, writing, and research had to be organized through my own efforts. Fortunately, I've always been a well-organized person, and I got a system going that worked for me. During this anchoritic "infatuation" stage, I reveled in being able to arrange my own schedule. Loneliness did creep in at times, but the wonderful freedom I had took precedence over feelings of isolation. Even though I love my monastic family at Saint John's, I always feel the obligation to render assistance to my brother monks when they request it. Sometimes this makes it difficult to focus on a project you, yourself, would like to work on, because of the interruptions. It was a real luxury to have this time all to myself. The large picture windows in my hermitage connected me with the near-desert landscape before me, and I especially enjoyed the visits from the local wildlife inhabiting this Alpine valley: coyotes, mule deer, black bears (only from a distance!), many species of birds, bull snakes, lizards, the ever-present insects, and a plethora of colorful wildflowers. I've always enjoyed the natural world, but my hermit experience only confirmed the deep contribution that Mother Nature makes to my spirituality.

I've always enjoyed the natural world, but my hermit experience only confirmed the deep contribution that Mother Nature makes to my spirituality.

After this "first fervor" as a hermit, I gradually discovered that structure was something I didn't need to impose on myself. "Let go and let God" became my new mantra. In so doing, I gave the Spirit free rein to manage my life and help me forge ahead with the project I believed God wanted me to accomplish in this out-of-the-way, semi-desert place.

In early Christian tradition, the desert was perceived ambiguously, usually as an unfriendly, intimidating domain; but for those able to endure its purifying adversity, an image also of paradise. If desert terrors can be sustained as the self is laid bare under its harsh scrutiny, dry land becomes an avenue of hope.[2]

And how did I envision the project that the Spirit of God wanted me to accomplish in my new status as a hermit and as a researcher far away from my Benedictine monastic home? I knew that it involved an alternative encounter with the Other. Interreligious dialogue is one of my passions. For many years previously I had engaged non-Christians in dialogue. Graduate theological training at Saint John's School of Theology during my initial monastic formation had fixed my interests on the areas of theological anthropology and the theology of religions. And my professional anthropological training had put me in a perfect position for encountering the Other. I had traveled in mainland China, Tibet, Nepal, and northern India with other monastics to dialogue with Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus. I also served as a board member of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID), a group of North American monastics who follow the Rule of Benedict and who desire to engage non-Christian religions—especially those with monastic traditions—in dialogue. As my onsite research got underway, the project suddenly became very clear to me: Using Crestone as my fieldwork "laboratory," I was to pursue an interdisciplinary project demonstrating how the methods used by cultural anthropologists might enhance the process of doing interreligious dialogue.

Cooperating with the Spirit's inspiration, I'm now in the process of writing a book with the tentative title "Anthropological Method and Interreligious Dialogue: The Crestone Project." In the short run, I hope this book will be of interest to anthropologists specializing in religion and to those seriously pursuing interreligious dialogue. In the long run, I hope it will make a modest contribution to furthering interreligious dialogue in the interests of world peace and harmony. If the world's inhabitants could just learn to listen to each other a little more carefully ("Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" [Rev 2:29 NRSV]) and try to understand the Other with whom we share this planet a little more openly, maybe wars would become obsolete and the reign of the Kingdom of God become established at last. Wishful thinking at best; but then again, "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37 NRSV).

I was fortunate to have experienced the Other in two ways during my sixth-month sabbatical stay in Crestone at the Nada Hermitage. I encountered the "religious Other" in my research with the many diverse spiritual organizations in this unique San Luis Valley setting. And I loosed my "inner anchorite" in the process of heeding Benedict's invitation to engage my "hermit Other" by traveling "from the battle line in the ranks of [my Benedictine] brothers to the single combat of the desert."

Brother Aaron Raverty OSB, is an independent scholar at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. He holds MA and PhD (sociocultural anthropology) degrees from the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis), with an emphasis in the anthropology of religion, and an MA (systematic theology) from Saint John's School of Theology.

*(Endnotes)*

[1]Timothy Fry, OSB, ed. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981.

[2]Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 43.