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Dakota and *All We Know of Heaven*: A Spiritual Desert

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Matthew Collins wrote this essay under the mentorship of Dr. Ben Carson.

The two works, *All We Know of Heaven* by Remy Rougeau and *Dakota* by Kathleen Norris deal with themes of how monasticism and rural society interact and differ from mainstream society. *All We Know of Heaven* is a fictional work that tells the story of Paul Seneschal, who joins a Cistercian monastery in hope of finding meaning in life. *Dakota* is a collection of essays about rural society and spirituality in the Dakota region of the United States. These works show how monasticism and rural society are characterized by rugged simplification of everyday material life, a distrust of the outside world that ignores and shuns them, and a way of life that is slowly becoming a thing of the past.

In *All We Know of Heaven* Paul Seneschal, who becomes Brother Antoine, enters a Cistercian monastery, in part because of the spiritual enlightenment offered from the rugged simplicity of everyday life. Dom Jacques, Abbot of the monastery, explains to Paul why the monks live so simply: “We monks, in order to appreciate our place in the world and the mystery of God’s love for us, leave aside the distractions of the secular world. We forget every other concern and live monastic life in all its simplicity, that we may be attentive” (24). The monks in the Abbey choose to deprive themselves of everyday comforts because they believe that those comforts, which are very popular in mainstream society, distract the soul from salvation. In addition to physical simplification of life, the monks also argue a mental simplification represented by refraining from speech as much as possible. The Abbot explains their embrace of silence to Brother Antoine. “We don’t know how to put the truth into sentences. It’s too difficult. That’s one reason why monks try to live life in silence” (55). Throughout the novel, Brother Antoine has doubts as to whether or not he made the right choice to join the monastery. While confessing to Brother Yves-Marie about his doubts, Brother Antoine is reassured that work is all part of the monastic life. “I’m still not attentive in prayer,” Antoine told his confessor, Yves-Marie. “My attention is always on my work.” “Never mind,” the priest answered. “It’s all of a piece. The chores, the prayer, the silence. Each flows into the next, and one without the other would be incomplete. Trust it. Monastic life transforms you as you live it” (151). Rougeau argues through Brother Antoine’s experience that living a simpler, more rugged life can lead to ultimate happiness. This argument is very different than the concept that material wealth leads to happiness that is prevalent throughout mainstream western society.

Because of the ideological differences between monasticism and mainstream society, there seems to be a mutual distrust in which mainstream society either rejects or shuns monasticism or forgets about it entirely. This idea is illustrated by Paul when he is talking about how his parents feel about his decision to join the Abbey: “My parents think life is unbalanced, too holy for normal people” (9). Paul’s parents are used by Rougeau to represent mainstream society. His mother is mayor of their town; his father runs a farm and works as a crop insurance man. The family attends church and recognizes Christian holidays. However when faced with the idea of monasticism, they react with fear and rejection. When Paul finally decides to join the Abbey for sure his mother chastises him for ruining Christmas with his announcement. “‘What?’ she yelled. ‘You want to spoil Christmas for everyone? I thought you had the monk business flushed out of you’” (18). After Paul joined the Abbey and became Brother Antoine, he had a first-hand realization of the unimportance of the Abbey to the outside world. Almost every year, in the spring, the river next to the Abbey grounds floods and the monks have to gather the washed up trash. In order to dispose of the trash, the monks burn it in a great bonfire. On observing this fire Antoine was filled with a sense of fear that the fire somehow gave away the Abbey’s location, or would arouse the suspicion of the authorities. However, Antoine realizes how silly his notions were when he thinks, “The drama of the big fire fed his imagination. In reality, what did the world want with monks anyway?” (188). From his experiences in the Abbey, and his meeting with Buddhist monks who visit the abbey on an ecumenical good-will tour, Antoine makes a dramatic realization about the nature of monks in mainstream society when he observes the actions of an old Buddhist monk nicknamed Cello:

Antoine was transfixed. He had never seen anything so peculiar: there she was, the Venerable Cello, abbes of Geden Choling Nunnery, foundress – he would later learn – of five other nunneries like it and spiritual mother to six thousand nuns, eating crab apples from the grass. As sunlight drew away from the orchard it came to him, the thread that bound their lives together. Cello *was* abandoned by society. She was marginal. The abbess was as defenseless and as irrelevant to the world as an orphan. And as a monk, so was he. (137)

Antoine realizes that people from the outside world do not value monks. Cello, who is responsible for founding five nunneries, and is the leader of six thousand nuns, is completely unknown to the outside world.

One of Rougeau’s themes is the end of monasticism as a way of life. Antoine was faced with the problem of the monastery literally running out of monks. “Brother Antoine had attended five funerals in five years. In the same length of time, no new monks had made solemn profession of vows” (162). Not only were

there no new people becoming initiates into the monastery, but most of the monks were becoming old men, “Overall, the balance tipped toward the elderly. Nine were retired. Six of these were in the infirmary. And because several years had gone by without a single inquiry or young person coming in, the community itself seemed to be dying” (162). The abbey is dying because of the lack of interest from the outside world. People of mainstream society are no longer interested in monastic life. Even the elderly, people who grew up in a society more accepting of monasticism, now shun it. When Paul told an old lady on the subway that he was thinking of becoming a monk she responded, “Excuse me?” and after Paul clarified, “The lady blinked. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Why would anyone do that?’ ‘To find meaning in life,’ Paul responded. ‘Oh dear,’ she said and became mute” (2). Rougeau uses these characters to show that the dominance of mainstream culture and society has become so encompassing, so enveloping, that subcultures are slowly being destroyed through attrition.

In *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris echoes many of the themes presented in *All We Know of Heaven*. Norris argues that the rough geography and limited connection to “city technologies” make the rural areas of the Dakotas spiritually rich. Much in the same way that the silence within the Abbey provides the peace required for spiritual inflection, Norris says that, “[...] the western Plains now seem bountiful in their emptiness, offering solitude and room to grow” (3). Norris actually credits the plains with inspiring her relationship with monasticism:

It was the Plains the first drew me to the monastery, which I suppose is ironic, for who would go seeking a desert within a desert? Both Plains and Monastery are places where distractions are at a minimum and you must rely on your own resources, only to find yourself utterly dependent on forces beyond your control; where time seems to stand still, as it does in the liturgy; where your life is defined by waiting. (17-18)

Norris argues that the deprivations of living in the Dakotas, as well as the deprivations of monastic life teach people to truly appreciate the things necessary for life: “The deprivations of Plains life and monastic life tend to turn small gifts into treasures, and gratitude is one of the first flowers to spring forth when hope is rewarded and the desert blooms” (18). Norris views the ruggedness and harshness of the Dakotan geography as holy, much in the same way that Antoine valued the ruggedness and harshness of monastic life as a path towards salvation.

Norris points out that both monks and people of the Dakotas are weary of the outside world that only seems to value a place if it can make money:

Monks are accustomed to taking the long view, another countercultural stance in our fast-paced, anything-for-a-

buck society which has corrupted even the culture of farming into “agribusiness.” Kardong and many other writers of the desert West, including myself, are really speaking of values when they find beauty in this land no one wants [...] The so-called emptiness of the Plains is full of such miraculous “little things.” (9-10)

The people of the Plains have distrust for outsiders who only seem to care for the people of the Dakotas when there is something to be financially gained from their interaction. Norris writes about how people in small Plains towns are not accepting of outsiders. She attributes this lack of acceptance to that fact that in order to survive in their harsh environment they have to band together and rely on one another for support. Because of this “cloistering” of small towns, the Plains people are in many ways adding to their separation from the outside world.

Similar to the decline in the population of the abbey in *All We Know of Heaven*, Norris writes about the decline in population in the Plains. Norris says that the plains are a place that people are from; not a place that people move to. There is little to be gained in terms of material wealth from the Dakotas and this lack of monetary value has been one of the contributing factors to the “Diaspora” as Norris describes it, from the Plains towns. Because of the unity and closeness of small towns, communities want to keep small businesses in business. The concern for small businesses keeps big industry away from the small Plains communities and as Norris describes it, “[...] such attitudes have hindered economic development so greatly as to be self-defeating. The young wage earners move away” (48). The Dakotas have the problem of not being able to hold on to their younger population. This is similar to the problems that the Abbey faced when trying to sustain their numbers: the young had no interest in becoming monks. This lack of interest in the plight of the Dakotan farmers is illustrated in one of Norris’ anecdotes:

I once heard a Lakota holy man say to college students at the University of North Dakota, “Farmers are the next Indians, going through the same thing we did.” The students had been rude to him, carrying on conversations while he spoke. He was just an old man, just an Indian who described himself as an unemployed plumber. But when he asked, “How many of us are going to stand beside the farmer and see justice done for these people?” there was silence in the room. At least a few of the students, the ones from farms, had wondered that themselves (37).

The Plains life, as well as the monastic life are endangered forms of existence. They are endangered because the mainstream life which is necessary to sustain them is either too distant, or not trusted enough to provide the manna required to revive and continue them.

Rémy Rougeau wrote *All We Know of Heaven*, as a fictional work intended to show to mainstream society the value of monastic life. Kathleen Norris wrote *Dakota* to show mainstream society the beauty and importance of the Plains. Norris frequently references monks in her writings, and Rougeau echoes many of the themes in *Dakota* in his writing. Both these writers mourn the looming doom in their respective subjects’ institution. They both see the beauty and value in the existence of their subjects of writing. Perhaps the best was to capitulate both of their feelings comes from a passage by Norris where she writes, “Coyotes will begin calling in the coulees to the north. Soon, the monks, too, will begin to sing, the gentle lullaby of vespers and compline, at one with the rhythm of evening, the failing light and the rise of the moon. Together, monks and coyotes will sing the world to sleep” (217).

Works Cited

Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.

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