

# Limitless Beauty

Peter Reason discovers that our deep feelings for Nature form part of our spiritual longing

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## The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology

Douglas E. Christie

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I am a lapsed Nonconformist, the grandson of a Christian Socialist minister, brought up to approach religion and ethics from a rational Enlightenment perspective. I am embarrassed to confess that I was taught to be suspicious of Roman Catholics.

During my adult life I have explored atheistic humanism, the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, Chán Buddhism, Taoist philosophy and deep ecology. While I struggle with the notion of a transcendent God, I accept that whatever we take as sacred and divine is immanent in the universe and the Earth in which we live. Given this personal background, I find it curious that I have been deeply engaged in study of a book about the Desert Fathers, written by a professor of theology at a Jesuit academy.

Douglas Christie offers us a long and scholarly book that I have found both inspiring and challenging. He draws on the experience and practice of the ascetics, hermits and monks known as the Desert Fathers (although there were women among them too) in the 3rd and 4th centuries after Christ, showing how their contemplative disciplines took them between inner and outer landscapes in search of a consciousness of the whole of creation.

While they are often referred to as “living in the presence of God”, which can sound strange to modern and non-theist ears, Christie shows how they were also expressing a sense of the limitless beauty and vitality of the natural world and of the deepened, even transcendent, awareness of the self that accompanies this. He shows too how this “contemplative ecology” finds echoes in modern environmental writers and has relevance for our work and lives today. “Contemplative ecology”, he writes, “can

best be understood as an expression of the diverse and wide-ranging desire emerging within contemporary culture to identify our deepest feeling for the natural world as part of a spiritual longing.”

Christie’s argument is that the quality of awareness that enables us to engage with the beauty, significance and fragility of the natural world is essentially mysterious. It requires an inner attention to that which the contemplatives experienced as their “demons” but that we moderns understand as our ego attachments, our sense of self-importance, our fragmented selves. And it requires an outer attention, a willingness to notice everything as part of a sacred whole. All this requires disciplined practice and is profoundly challenging.

There was, it seems, a powerful sense of wholeness in the ancient contemplative traditions. This wholeness included the ancient contemplatives’ feeling for the living world, a simple awareness of the beauty of the desert, an appreciation of deep silence, and wonder at their emerging intimate reciprocity with other beings. It grew out of the monks’ intense commitment to pay attention, out of which arose a sense of compassion and responsibility for their world, broken as it was by the dominance of the Roman Empire.

This suggests that in contemporary culture we would benefit from a contemplative practice that would allow us to comprehend our increasingly degraded and compromised world as sacred; to live in a deeper and more encompassing moral or ethical relationship with the living world; to live “so that we do not continue to visit our most destructive impulses upon the natural world”.

This, Christie argues, demands “self-conscious spiritual practices rooted in the





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desire to kindle a greater feeling and responsibility for other living organisms and the world as a whole”. We do not need to use the language of God for this: we can seek a transcendent spiritual meaning while remaining agnostic as to its origins. But this is demanding and challenging, potentially costly and self-implicating: there are no safe positions when it comes to reimagining our place in the world and enlivening our care for it.

The first chapter is essentially a self-contained essay that sets out this understanding of what these ancient traditions may offer for a contemplative ecology. The chapters that follow it explore the practices in detail, continuing the comparison of ancient teachings with modern environmental writings.

I found myself particularly engaged in Christie’s discussion in chapter six, *Logos: The Song of the World*,

in which he asks “whether a thoughtful retrieval of the Christian contemplative sense of the Word – in all its cosmological and sacramental fullness – can contribute to a richer and stronger sense of what it is to inhabit a world that is ... an expression, a voice, a song”.

I greatly appreciated Christie’s scholarship and ability to express subtle theology clearly. In comparison, my Nonconformist spiritual background seems threadbare. But there are also things I missed. Christie draws parallels in many places between contemplative Christianity and environmental writers, attending mainly to the stalwarts of the American tradition such as Snyder, Lopez, Leopold, and especially Thoreau. I would have appreciated a much stronger link with those aspects of modern scientific ecology, Gaia theory, holistic and systemic thinking which envisage our world as a whole; and links with ecological practices such as Joanna Macy’s *Work that Reconnects*, ecopsychology, and wilderness experiences. I would also like to have learned more about the actual practices of the Desert Fathers, and some comparison of these with other traditions. (I often found myself making links with Buddhist meditation, and wondered if I would have got as much from the book if I did not have my own contemplative practice.)

I come to the end of my reading of the book with my prejudices completely disconfirmed. Early Christian mystics were not on a hopeless quest of mortifying the flesh in search of God: rather, they approached their world with a subtlety and discipline from which much can be learned. In particular, I was often taken beyond the either/or dualism that so often characterises debate about the place of religion and spirituality in our lives.

I am more than ever convinced that we will not learn to live in harmony with the ecology of our planet while holding onto a worldview that owes much to the European Enlightenment. New forms of politics, economics, industry and social relationships are all essential. But they will need to rest on a deeper sense of belonging in the world, a capacity to link the immediate and the local to the whole, an ability to see the sacred in our damaged and degraded planet. This is not an easy option, but one that requires intense discipline and self-examination. Maybe Christie’s “notes toward a contemplative ecology” will help us find a way forward. R

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Peter Reason has been exploring contemplative ecology through a sailing voyage around the west coasts of Ireland and Scotland ([onthewesternedge.wordpress.com](http://onthewesternedge.wordpress.com)). An extended version of this review can be found at [www.peterreason.net](http://www.peterreason.net)