

Leading us through the desert

Melissa Jones | Feb. 5, 2014



THE BLUE SAPPHIRE OF THE MIND: NOTES FOR A CONTEMPLATIVE ECOLOGY

By Douglas E. Christie

Published by Oxford University Press, \$29.95

Teachers of meditation sometimes counsel beginners to empty their minds by letting their thoughts rise up and float by like clouds in the sky. In the beginning of such a meditation, the many and disparate clouds seem unrelated. However, as the mind unwinds, the clouds of thoughts and the emptiness in which they float all become part of a great whole. This is what it is like to read Douglas E. Christie's *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*.

Christie is an academic with a background in theology and early Christian monasticism, and this book is a meandering travelogue that describes his geographic and intellectual wanderings. The work has few boundaries of time, space or topic. Like a guided meditation, this collection of memories, quotes from artists and writers, and anecdotes about historical personages moves us fluidly toward a vision of cosmic wholeness.

He argues for the establishment of a "contemplative ecology," what he describes as "an understanding of spiritual practice that places the well-being of the natural world at the center of its concerns, and an approach to ecology that understands the work of cultivating contemplative awareness as critical and necessary to its full meaning." Christie promotes an ecology that goes beyond biology, economics and politics. He envisions an ecology that includes spirituality and aesthetics, one that overcomes what he calls "the corrosive dichotomies that have prevented us from seeing the world as whole." This is ecology in the grandest sense of the word, a discipline that encompasses the intricate web of physical and spiritual life on Earth in all its myriad forms and intersections.

He asserts that contemplative spirituality is important in our efforts to find meaning and importance in the natural order and to formulate a coherent response to its degradation. Perhaps this is best described in a quote he offers from noted writer and environmental activist Wendell Berry: "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places."

Who better to lead us to an attention to those sacred and desecrated places than those poets, artists, writers and ascetics endowed with a passion for seeing the beauty and brokenness of the material world? Thus, there is a

particular focus on the work of those who fled into the wilderness to seek God. The author offers personal insights gained from his years of work with contemporary monks. He also offers many examples of wisdom from the desert ascetics and suggests that the formation of these men and women could serve us well in the formulation of a contemplative ecology. Their attachment to the harsh environment in which they chose to live, the tears, the silence, and the attentiveness of the desert ascetics show us that an intimate interplay between humanity and place can lead us to a way of living in reciprocity with the natural world.

The author floats easily through Eastern and Western Christian thought as well as sacred and secular writings. He wanders far and wide, from the Judean desert to Northern California, from the early Christian mothers and fathers of the desert to Darwin, but always brings the focus back to Christian theological inquiry. At the heart of the entire study is an excellent discourse on Christ the Word, *Logos*. Along these lines, Christie offers a tidbit from Irenaeus of Lyons: "[Christ] is Himself the Word of God ... who in His invisible form pervades us universally in the whole world, and encompasses its length and breadth and height and depth." Christie notes that all of existence has come into being and is sustained by the creative power of the *Logos*, and he asserts that the physical condition of silence or solitude and an interior stillness are important in order to hear the divine utterance.

This is not a book to be read in a hurry. It would, however, serve as an excellent guide for those wishing to carry forward their Advent and Christmas reflections on the relationship between the *Logos* and our material world. It presents a helpful collection of ancient and modern contemplative thought that can help bring us to an integrated view of nature and ourselves. It is also an exhortation to experience the natural world with the crystalline insights of the desert ascetic or the intensity of the artist and, ultimately, to hear the Word in the pure silence of ecological contemplation.

[Melissa Jones is an adjunct professor of religious studies at Brandman University in Irvine, Calif.]

Source URL (retrieved on 05/25/2017 - 20:46): <https://www.ncronline.org/books/2014/02/leading-us-through-desert>