

A Mixed Bag of Hermits

Review of

Hermits: The Insights of Solitude

by Peter France

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996

xvi + 240 pages / \$23.95 hardbound

Reviewed by **Richard W. Kropf**

Like the eunuchs described in the Gospel (Matthew 19:12), hermits come in three varieties: those who were born such, those who were made such, and those who make themselves such for the Kingdom of Heaven. But more often it may be a combination of all the above.

France, an Englishman who lives most of the time on the island of Patmos - the same of Apocalypse fame - gives us a sample of all of these types, beginning with the fabled Lao Tzu and the contrarian philosopher Diogenes ("Socrates gone mad") and going on from there to the Desert Fathers, the Russian *startzy*, Thoreau, Ramakrishna, Charles de Foucauld, Thomas Merton, and Merton's old college colleague, Robert Lax.

In other words, France's sampling is a very mixed bag, so much so that one might question just what he understands a 'hermit' to be to begin with. France's definition seems to be anyone who chooses to live apart or alone, for whatever reason. But even here there is some ambiguity, as many of the desert fathers whom he cites lived in small communities and so also many of their later Russian counterparts. Some of the latter, not unlike St. Anthony of Egypt in his later days, were so besieged by visitors that they had to employ a number of monastic servants just to manage the traffic of visitors seeking anything from bodily healing to spiritual direction or, too often, just something to go home and talk about.

Instead of their physical or social surroundings, what seems most to capture France's attention is the role played by such persons as critics of society. This would seem to explain his choice of examples, more than the author's stated policy, as a convert to Greek Orthodoxy, of concentrating on examples from the Eastern Church - which, with the exception of his chapter on the Desert Fathers and the Russians, he largely fails to do. So while in some ways this book resembles Peter F. Anson's book *The Call of the Desert* (London: SPCK, 1964) - including an amusing chapter on the hired "Ornamental Hermits" in vogue with aristocracy in the eighteenth century - France's treatment is more of an anthology of insightful quotations and less a comprehensive history of the movement than was Anson's book.

Although France's chapter on the Russians' attempt to renew this ancient Christian vocation fills a gap that is missing in many other books, his concentration on the few fa-

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mous *startzy* (literally, “elders”) largely neglects the much more widespread phenomenon of the many *poustiniks* who lived a much less publicized and more solitary existence.

So too, his otherwise excellent chapter on Thoreau leaves the reader wondering as to just what it is that really constitutes a vocation to this life. As it is, one gets the impression that Thoreau’s rather short-lived experiment was a more or less preparatory interlude to his lifetime as nature-writer and social critic. At the same time, Thoreau’s own transcendentalist attraction to Asiatic thought serves as a good backdrop for France’s chapter on the nineteenth-century Hindu holy man Ramakrishna, whose twelve years in solitude transformed him from a cultic priest of the Hindu goddess Kali into a mystic of deep interreligious insight.

All in all, some very valuable insights emerge from France’s approach. One is his emphasis on the *problem* presented by the rather extreme asceticism of the desert fathers and those who might be tempted to imitate them. Most anthologies of these early monastic pioneers fail to give this problem - which the more discerning among them fully recognized - the careful treatment it deserves. Likewise, we have the dilemmas presented to any would-be solitary by the intrusion of other interests or causes, be they missionary (as was the case of de Foucauld), political (again de Foucauld), or those choices confronting any talented person simply trying to follow the Spirit where it may lead.

All this brings us to the case of Thomas Merton, the most famous would-be hermit of our time. I say “would-be” because for all his writing on the subject, as Merton’s life turned out he really spent very little time in complete solitude. France quotes the Trappist abbot-psychologist John Eudes Bamberger, who was trained under Merton, as to whether or not Merton could be considered to have been a real solitary or hermit. This in turn raises the question, and rightly so, whether or not, had he had more years to live, Merton would have persevered in his attempt to live the eremitical life. Maybe he was just too famous ever to have been left alone for long, or too restless ever to remain content within himself in that life. Perhaps - but my own intuition is that he would have never have given up trying, no matter how impossible it proved in his case.

No doubt my conviction in this matter is based too much on my own experience of his personal guidance, brief but decisive, in this same direction. But however successful or unsuccessful he was in his own quest, his influence was so successful in the Church at large - as evidenced by Canon 603 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law - that even a diocesan priest like myself has been able to enjoy, with the Church’s official approval, for the past fifteen years, the kind of solitude he craved. This is no little matter in a Church as short of clergy as it is today. So too, largely as a result of Merton’s influence, there are numerous members of religious orders now living in solitude with the blessing and support of their own communities.

In contrast to such canonical complications, France presents a final chapter on Merton’s old friend, Bob Lax, who manages to survive as a poet living alone in a small cottage near Scala, Patmos’ only port. Here we find an example of a layman, a writer, who need seek no official justification or approval of his life-style other than its fitting his peculiar needs as a writer and as an individual. Although many may understand this well enough when it comes to writing, many others, in an age where we seem obsessed with “relationships,” may find it difficult to accept when it comes to life simply as a human being. So while solitude may be a very special and difficult vocation for some, for others it is a natural state of being - but who is to say that the world is not benefitted either way?