A prolific author, Horan teaches and directs the Spirituality Institute at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. He was the site coordinator for the ITMS Eighteenth General Meeting held there in 2023. I commend this book for general readers, as a reminder of a powerful emotion we all experience and of the Biblical injunction not to be afraid during troubling times. Witnesses cited include Hildegard of Bingen, Etty Hillesum, Oscar Romero, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dorothee Soelle, Dallas Willard and others, as well as Merton, who encourage readers to live faithfully and vulnerably, confident that God is strengthening hope.

Paul R. Dekar

BROWN, Jason M. *Dwelling in the Wilderness: Modern Monks in the American West* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2024), pp. 169. ISBN 978-1-59534-979-8 (paper) $18.95.

The cover of this engaging book is a picture of a strong tree whose healthy branches extend like antennae, feeling the foggy darkness that surrounds the trunk and roots. It is an image that represents the last chapter's epigraph, a poetic insight from Thomas Merton: "In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air" (123). This last chapter, "Monastic Wisdom for the Anthropocene" (123-46), considers contemporary moral and political responses to global warming and evaluates them in light of monastic practices like stability, conversion, liturgy, place-making and silence. In this way, the author's conclusion invites readers to become more intentional about wedding their spiritual practices to their ecological responsibilities. The writing is an invitation to detach from problem-solving, advocacy and public policy work, work which very often reflects or even mimics "technological barbarism," to become more fully rooted in the places, habitats and regions that sustain us. The author provides us with a model of such reflection in the epilogue (147-51), as he describes where he lives in Vancouver, and wrestles with the "settler" mentality born of colonialism that endures even in those of us practicing what he calls "contemplative Christianity" (6).

Merton is cited initially in the introduction, where the author gives us the context for his research, the result of a visit to a Carthusian monastery in Slovenia where he wandered from the tour group. Entering a grove of trees, he faced his existential anxiety and was given comfort by being present in that monastic space. In helping the reader to understand a bit of monastic history, he cites Merton's description of the first monastics

as "spiritual anarchists"[1] (3).

Jason Brown was raised a Mormon, a Latter Day Saint who became disenchanted with the faith of his youth. He started feeling alienated from his more "chipper" peers and longed for "a richer spiritual life" (4). He enrolled in Yale Divinity School and earned a master's degree in the creative integration of theology and forestry, which would subsequently lead to completing a Ph.D. in ecological humanities at the University of British Columbia. This publication is a revised version of his 2017 dissertation. In his degree work and ethnographic research, he wants to "connect religious studies, philosophy, forestry, anthropology and theology" (158). The existential questions evoked at the monastery in Slovenia, and this coursework, led to his conversion to Catholicism (7).

Brown calls himself a contemplative ethnographer (7). Between the introduction and the epilogue, one finds ethnographic studies of monastic life in the American West: two in California (New Camaldoli in Big Sur and New Clairvaux in Vina), Our Lady of Guadalupe, Oregon and Christ in the Desert, New Mexico. It is ethnographic in the sense that he understands the language, idioms and history of the monks. Also, since the author is conversant in religious studies and theology, he brings some of those methodologies to bear on his more didactic writing in each chapter.

His analyses of these monastic places are imbued with explanations from phenomenology, cultural geography and environmental ethics. Thankfully, descriptions of these methods and authors are not amplified, as in a dissertation, but complement well his appreciation of each monastic practice in place as well as the landscapes that envelop, inform and are informed by the monks. An example is the work of Yi Fu Tuan and his notion of *Topophilia*. To dwell in a place is to love a place and to love a place is to co-create a home in and with a landscape (8). Brown's qualitative research is driven by conversations which reveal each monk's understanding of why they committed to these places and how they understand their work, both liturgy and labor. It is contemplative in the sense that, as ethnographers are wont to do, he participates in that work, "the field work," to embody, clarify and articulate its cultural significance. These four field-work experiences are given themes, reflected in the titles of each of the chapters: "Living on the Edge" (23-50); "To Blossom as the Rose" (51-73), "Seeing the Forest and the Trees" (74-96) and "Alone with the Alone" (97-122). These themes accentuate a key symbol or essential experience of monastic life: entering the wilderness, away from the world, putting down roots/

1. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 4.

stability, working with and in the land/habitat and the silence of God.

Brown shows that monasteries in the American West have had to contend with both climate change and the economic conditions which drive it. For example, the monks in Oregon live with the tension of getting income from forestry and ecological coherence and conservation. The new economic paradigm of subsidy farming in the nineteen sixties meant that forestry would become a more lucrative venture for the monastery. However, producing trees for harvesting meant that the forest and its surrounding habitat were no longer ecologically sound. The monks eventually enlisted a forest management consultant to ensure the ecological health of the forest. They procured an easement, a way for them to maintain the land and conserve the health of the forest. That easement means, however, that they can no longer use the property for production. It is there to thrive as a habitat, a healthy forest, a forest that is their habitat as well.

Throughout, Brown elaborates on the fact that monastic practice informs perception of place. The immersive practice of the Eucharist and liturgy of the hours restores the perception of nature as God's work, God's creative liturgy. Monks are starkly aware, therefore, of the responsibility for the habitats that are sustained, and sustain them, in a reciprocal dynamic of love. As Thomas Merton and his friend and collaborator Jean Leclercq foretold, the vocation of the monk is one of prophecy. In an essay published four years after Merton's death, Leclercq wrote that new forms of contemplative life ought to be judged on evangelical principles.[2] What I think he meant is that we place an encounter with Jesus Christ at the very center of our experience as "contemplative Christians" (315). It seems clear to me that through the often tense and urgent writing of Merton, Leclercq and others, their evangelical impulse toward the world involved the experiential joy of a life with God. Were it not for their courageous engagement with the world from their liturgical places and habitats, this contemporary research project may not have gotten very much leverage. In this sense the book is evidence of Merton's historical and theological import. Furthermore, Brown's research, both existential and theoretical, represents a turn, a movement away from technocratic and academic premises toward a culture of encounter, the risk necessary for an adventure beyond conventional academic aims.

Merton's work has been analyzed in depth for the past fifty years or so. In this study, Brown has absorbed and applied the dialogical humanism Merton commenced. This book is evidence that Merton is not just a dead monk to be autopsied again and again by those merely curious and inter-

2. See Jean Leclercq, OSB, "New Forms of Contemplative Life," *Theological Studies* 33.2 (1972) 307-19.

ested. This book affirms, rather, that Merton is alive and active through his insistent and courageous dialogue with a world that needs God. This is why Brown's work can be read alongside the newly published anthology *Thomas Merton: Insights and Interviews*.[3] A fruitful and evangelical experience might be to listen to Merton's fellow religious discussing monastic life while reflecting on Brown's testimonies of monastic life in the twenty-first century.

Though Brown's book does not convey explicitly the "inscape" of his own conversion, he does work out through the writing a way for laity to live authentically amid "technological barbarism." What we must appreciate is that we don't have to go to a monastery to love the places we inhabit. In fact, Brown reports a conversation with one monk who complained of "people who have disposable income . . . come out and stay and they want to *participate*" (110-11). While monks harvest hops, back-breaking work that must be done efficiently, they must attend to those 50-60-year-olds who want to get a taste of monastic agriculture. One of the dangers of "contemplative Christianity" for laity is to make it into monastic tourism; and one of the dangers of religious studies and anthropology is to objectify and characterize culture according to some premeditated theory or thesis. I see very little of these tendencies in Brown's book.

Liturgy is an environment. Preparation for liturgy, conserving liturgical elements, protecting chalice and host and ensuring their proper place, is work God has given to his people called the church. Throughout the book, monks attest to the fact that liturgical work and nature as God's liturgy co-create places, and both the Word in Eucharistic practice and the Word written in the book of nature can surprise, challenge and delight. This is the overarching theme of this book, and for me, it affirms a basic truth. Our work of liturgy gives to us the most accurate perception of ourselves and nature. And, after the gold rush, the thoughtless embrace of manifest destiny, the culture of contemplative Christianity, including monastic culture and all its adjacent movements, is called to work with the Creator, to restore the land and heal the human soul.

Aaron K. Kerr

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3. *Thomas Merton: Insights and Interviews* – vol. II: *Interviews: A Thomas Merton Oral History* edited by Glenn Amorosia, Introduction by David Odorisio (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2025).