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In love with the desert

ABSTRACT

The Christian desert tradition is undeniably male-centred. How the absent feminine paradoxically “appears” in stories and sayings of the tradition can, however, provide an antidote to the otherwise male-centred character of this literature. This article explores how the author, a female researcher of this tradition, has grappled with the tradition’s male-centred character. It demonstrates a hermeneutic of charity requiring creativity to retrieve value from the literature associated with this tradition. It also acknowledges an inspirational encounter with Carmelite spirituality scholar Kees Waaijman that initiated a deepening of the researcher’s commitments to work that matters personally and to others. This article further shows that reading the literature of the Christian desert tradition, alongside contemporary naturalists, reveals ways in which the desert and women’s lives, in particular, have been used, then and now, to reflect on experiences of vulnerability, loss, and discernment of vocation.

In 2015, Kees Waaijman and I happened to be waiting together at the O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg after a conference on holiness hosted by our mutual colleagues, the spirituality scholars in South Africa. At the conference, I had shared a piece of what would later become my dissertation on what I called “holy feigning” in the Christian desert tradition. The Christian desert tradition names the movement of Christians, in the third through fifth centuries, living in the Egyptian, Palestinian, and Syrian deserts. In these deserts, the earliest forms of what became monastic life took shape in experimental and often idiosyncratic ways. Habits of ascetic and contemplative practice were formed among these desert Christians, known also as desert fathers and mothers, that became foundations for later Christian spiritual



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traditions (Harmless 2004). Holy feigning among the desert Christians was one form of experimental practice, which involved the willingness to misrepresent oneself or even to tolerate being misrepresented by another for another's sake (Wheeler 2016). It also involved the practice of experimentation with unrealities, in order to discern God's movement in one's life – the kind of thing that might be captured by the colloquial statement “fake it until you make it”. As Waaijman and I sat waiting for our flights and sharing thoughts about the conference and our work, he asked me an important question in such a way that I was not taken aback by its blunt character. I was, however, never sure that my response contained all I meant it to. I appreciate the opportunity now to reflect again on what that question prompted for me, as I continued to work on my dissertation and then my first book. Waaijman asked simply: “What is the point?”. I remember he made some kind of gesture with his hand, and he smiled.

I also remember trying to articulate an answer at the time in reference to Waaijman's Carmelite identity and to the prayerful life I knew he lived. I explained how, for example, one of the desert Christians had lamented that he was expected to voice the prayers of the psalms faithfully when, in reality, he rarely felt the emotions they expressed (Wortley 2012:15.120). Was he then making himself out to be a liar? How might he have been reassured by a companion that what he did was a kind of holy feigning, quite appropriate to the spiritual life? I meant to indicate to Waaijman and to future readers of my dissertation that, like this troubled desert Christian, we all at times undertake some kind of pretence or play in our spiritual lives as we grow increasingly conscious of the mismatch between our ideals (however authentic or not) and our realities. Further, I suspected (and believe) that recognition and acceptance of this mismatch might be occasioned and enhanced by our not being so put off by the levels of pretence or play that our lives, in my view, necessarily involve. This seemed, for me, to be the point – not only to cultivate tolerance in our lives for not being and perhaps never becoming the perfect individuals we might imagine ourselves, but also to become more conscious of the dynamism and pleasure involved in play as a fundamental quality of human life, one that celebrates and works within the very reasonable fallibility that we all share.

Over time, Waaijman's question has grown more important for me to answer with clarity and conviction, even as it joins force for me with another question voiced more recently by Greta Thunberg before the United Nations: “How dare you?”. Asked in the context of failure of those who govern to adequately respond to climate change, Thunberg's accusing rhetorical question resonates with me in terms of shaping my

understanding of the value of my teaching and scholarship. Am I daring to spend my time with and for others in a way that fosters their ability to prepare for and weather the challenges of our century, spiritual and otherwise? With Waaijman, can I ask the question, “What is the point?” and derive a satisfying answer from the ancient texts I engage and how I engage them? These questions require accountability and break through the otherwise restrained respectability we may have grown used to expect of one another, in academic settings especially. Like the one who named the fabled emperor’s new clothes for what they were (or were not), these courageous voices and their questions nudge me into an area that might feel at first to be uncomfortable but that is also necessary. Indeed, both questions nudge me toward a quality of desert Christian life that has been characterised as “radical self-honesty” (cf. Stewart 1991:8). As I began reading the desert sayings over two decades ago as a university student, I began reckoning with my consciousness that I lived in a society that would not necessarily value the way I was in the world and in which I would likely have to learn to “pass”, in order to be accepted and affirmed. Part of the radical self-honesty I felt invited to explore was to question whether the costs associated with that passing would be worth it. I also felt invited to consider in what ways I might use play to preserve a part of myself I might not want to share with others. The hidden quality of the desert Christians’ lives then assumed greater importance for me, as the example of their privacy empowered me to keep parts of myself undisclosed, even if I did not have the same kind of refuge in the desert cell as these Christians had.

In this article, offered in gratitude to Waaijman for his perspicacious scholarship and conversation, I account for and share insights from my ongoing engagement with and love for the Christian desert tradition. These insights derive from my grappling with the tradition’s gender imbalance and my celebrating the tradition’s valuing of countercultural practice, aspects of which speak, though sometimes indirectly, to our contemporary ecological crises. Waaijman’s prompting me to accountability for my work may have had a mischievous, even playful, challenge in it – at the time I read it as such – but it also continues to evoke occasions for me to consider what is important about the work that he, I, and other spirituality scholars engage, for our own good and that of the whole earth community. In this way, his question and our conversation, which opened up years ago, has functioned as an important “text” in my life, even as I continue to question and understand further my love for the Christian desert tradition. My research problem, if I can call it that, that emerged from this encounter with Waaijman in the airport was how to reconcile my love of the Christian desert tradition with its uncomfortable attempts of erasure of women.

Indeed, one of the first things I had to acknowledge as I deepened my work with the Christian desert tradition is that the attitude of many men of the desert was not only dismissive of women but also so often hostile toward them. Most of the literature of late antique hagiographical lives, histories, sayings, treatises, conferences, and travelogues of the Christian desert tradition merely (though tragically) contains a noticeable gap when it comes to representing women, but some of the literature also represents women in the negative: in men's careful obliteration of their notice and careful withholding of their own persons from women's proximity. Famously in the *apophthegmata* or sayings of the Christian desert tradition, a so-called desert father asked to be taken where no women were and, when told that the desert was that place, he asked to be taken there (Wortley 2012:2.26). Of course, this story misrepresents what was true about the desert, namely that women were among those denizens of the desert who found the desert a place of freedom from the responsibilities imposed on them by their cultural milieu and a place, in some way, "closer" to the possibility of realising God's presence. Women were present in the desert in perhaps reduced numbers when compared with men, but through the slight traces that remain in the tradition's literature, it can be noted that they were likely present among a wider spectrum of desert community members than men: as desert elders themselves, as family members visiting and supporting the so-called desert fathers, as pilgrims and supplicants requesting spiritual insight and material help from the desert Christians, and as women pursuing their own work and livelihoods in ways that took them near where desert Christians lived.

Another saying draws attention to this pervasive presence.

They said of an elder that, when he came across a woman's footprint on the road as he walked along, he covered it up, saying: 'In case a brother sees it and has an attack [of temptation]!' (Wortley 2013:430).

This compact saying speaks in multiple dimensions: the physical, in which what reads as an allusion to the habitual quality of this action reveals that there must have been many sets of women's footprints in the sand; the ethical, in which the action seems meant to spotlight obligatory concern for the situation of an absent though susceptible male neighbour, and the archival, in which the story symbolically represents a wiping away of traces of women's lives in the desert through the stages of oral storytelling and collecting these sayings in various forms. As I have further mulled over this saying, in particular, I began to hear more, perhaps because of my surprise that so blatant a record of erasure was ironically kept in the tradition, and to account for my love of this tradition. Could I also hear

this elder's actions as indicating compassion for his female neighbours or visitors and a desire to protect *them* – that is, preserve their privacy by obliterating their tracks so that no susceptible male might follow them and/or attack the women, the consequence of his suffering an attack of tempting thoughts? We know of at least one macabre story where a woman was “ripped” open by a man in the desert who wanted to see the unborn child in her (Wortley 2013: Apollo 2). Women's fate in the desert was often risky, a situation that caused some women to respond by passing as men and living incognita on their own – a play with their own gendered identities and how they chose to represent themselves to others, in order to safeguard their vulnerable solitude and freedom. The countercultural witness that these women provide in some isolated stories and sayings in the Christian desert tradition registers for me a way to break through categories created to justify exclusions and erasure. Although this literal cross-dressing may represent how women, who more conceptually adopted ascetic and contemplative practice models designed by men, were more readily included in the tradition's literature than women who did not; their stories also suggest those other women by way of omission. I wonder about them and feel grateful for the expansiveness evoked even by the tradition's contraction of what could express relationship with God, self, and others.

Another story involves a desert Christian uncertain about being able to support a family (Wortley 2012:5.50). He thus formed a wife and (significantly, a female) child out of the very desert floor, in order to practise or play at being husband and father. Finding himself incapable of maintaining the responsibilities involved in caring for them, he ostensibly destroyed them. The saying reports that the man experienced repose, having come to a firm self-understanding about his inability to be a family member. Certainly, this play of moulding one's family from the desert floor, although unsuccessful as a rehearsal for community life with other human beings, indicates a world view that could integrate play with purpose and the natural world with family. The act was successful insofar as it revealed this man's vocation to himself. His practising with a family made of actual desert sand enabled this man to transpose his troubling desire for company to a wider community, the whole desert. For many of the desert Christians, we can suppose that, at times, the silent solitudes of the desert could be frightening but, at other times, consoling. This particular desert Christian was able to dispense with familial roles he seemed to think he ought to adopt, but not without testing them first. The desert opened enough space for the self to become fluid and mobile in the formation of relationships with others, absent urban societal structures.

While there was often collateral damage in families and relationships as a result of the kind of understanding this desert Christian came to – the dissolution of relationships with actual women in these men’s lives – and there was a new monastic culture emerging among the solitaries to take the place of what the desert Christians left behind, for a while some of these sayings demonstrate a sense of freedom, for which those who collected the sayings must have felt nostalgia – as they could feel their own monastic formalities grow more rigid, leaving less room for the kind of experimentation this saying and others demonstrate. Within the larger space of the desert and utilising its materiality, this man could discern and affirm his authentic nature. That the desert participated in this realisation and even its constitution through the desert’s shaping an unreal family astonishes and intrigues me, as I lean more into what might be considered the ecofeminist and trans-ecological dimensions of the Christian desert tradition. These dimensions help us query what is natural, on the one hand, and how gender plays across our self-understandings and understandings of land and other aspects of a natural world, in which our bodies comprise a significant part, on the other.

Nevertheless, such attitudes and strategies of avoidance and erasure were among the first obstacles I had to reckon with as I puzzled over my love as a female scholar for this androcentric tradition. Did a subconscious wish for my own annihilation keep me attached to a tradition that minimised representatives of my gender and even reconfigured their physicality instrumentally to represent intangible aspects of human experience such as the soul or the soul’s *hesychia*, or peaceful quiet (Wheeler 2020:101-125)? Or could it be because I knew that, despite this attempt at erasure, women had not, in fact, been erased and their continued (albeit often marginal) presence in the tradition spoke to me of a courage and fortitude that I also longed to embody or awaken in myself? Though unreconciled with the persistent gynophobia and misogyny in the Christian desert tradition, I have come to respect that distractions to the spiritual life are real and that the way in which we respond to them is often a good indicator of our changing spiritual maturity. I can respect the wisdom that emerges from parts of the desert tradition, while wondering what other wisdom might have emerged, had these mostly male desert elders representing the tradition been more appreciative of the actual women in their lives and not so concerned with the shadows cast as their absences.

One image of women’s lives that has recently caught my attention and curiosity is a phrase used by Eucherius of Lyons in his fifth-century work, *In praise of the desert*. In this text, Eucherius exhorts his readers to indulge

their love for the desert, principally because so many biblical exemplars such as Moses, Elijah, David, John the Baptist, and Jesus before them had found the desert to be transformative. The desert functions, Eucherius (1999:3) claims, as a temple of God without walls. In other words, the site of liturgical celebration was being *rewilded* by desert Christians in being localised outdoors and human experience was also being *rewilded*, as these desert Christians retrieved a fundamental aspect of their human identity in engaging the desert as a sacred site of transformation. As much as contemporary Christian worship may be revived by its movement outdoors, as communities of faith alter practices to care for members most vulnerable to the current pandemic and as people express a desire to reconnect with the natural world (Loorz 2021), I am drawn to another phrase associated with the sacralising of the desert that correlates with the maternal and the feminine. Eucherius (1999:34) writes:

The desert holds them [the desert Christians] as in their *mothers' lap*, while they long for eternity, despising this brief life; indifferent to the present life, they are confident of the life to come. In this way, by hastening toward the world's end, they manage to attain the world without end.

These sentences contain paradoxes consistent with the whole of Eucherius' work. He seems to love to play with language and the contrarities involved in drawing two complementary things together, emphasising their simultaneous separation and connection. As was commonplace practice, Eucherius praised the desert for its paradoxical fecundity, its regenerative and protective qualities. Although we might think of the desert Christians infantilised in this praise of the desert and hear resonance with the psalmist's expression of calm experienced in one's mother's arms (Ps. 131), what strikes me most is this association of fecundity with experience of the maternal. Similarly, the desert Christian Syncletica taught: "We are on this earth as if in a second maternal womb" (Pseudo-Athanasius 2005:90). Syncletica also acknowledges space as generative and liminal, and seems to have believed that multiple births, or moments of transformation, mark stages in the spiritual life as one prepared for eventual habitation in a heavenly Jerusalem, named not only homeland but significantly as "mother".¹ This elaboration from Eucherius and Syncletica makes me wonder if indeed an *amma desert* or mother desert might be named as a meaningful presence in the Christian desert tradition, without whom the transformative experiences, deriving from disciplined abstinence from some things the desert Christians found they

1 I note that the text by Pseudo-Athanasius (2005) also has Syncletica create a contrast between the feminising of location and a patriarchal God. Jerusalem is Mother; God is Father.

could do without such as some interpersonal relationships and from the joy of living among animals and working with the land, would not and even could not have occurred. Though similar to the feminisation of earth as Gaia and of nature as mother, the associating of the feminine with desert particularly focuses on a place paradoxically experienced as barren, dry, and lacking in resources essential to life.

Focus on natality rather than death in these passages evoking maternal experience is notable for its alignment with female rather than with male interests, as they have been construed culturally. Jantzen (1999:128-155) explores this critical difference in her work between what is considered necrophilic and what is oriented toward the novelty of new life. Whenever we read of women in the Christian desert tradition, we may wonder to what extent these women had been or were being socialised into a male ascetic ethos that remained unhealthily self-mortifying and to what extent they were able to imagine new forms of spiritual life that honoured their gendered experience. Might their mundane lives have offered them other options for clarifying how the sacred emerges in family life, through relationships and the wisdom known by and exchanged among women, and other means of recognising what are legitimate sources of joy and pleasure, not leading us away from but toward affirming God's presence?

Recently, Frykholm (2021) traced the journey of the desert Christian Mary of Egypt while reflecting on a parallel journey with the progress of cancer that a good friend was enduring. The coincidence of her reflection on mortality through the extremity of desert spaces with that effected also by Lane (1998) and Williams (1991) is striking. All three authors respond to *women's* health issues as they engage desert landscapes in all their peril and beauty. These writers are not necrophilic in their outlook toward the desert, despite their grappling with imminent losses. In the desert, they found what Lane recognised as "solace" and Williams named as "refuge" in a play on words, with the natural world providing sanctuary for avian wildlife, even as the natural world embraced her and her grief. These authors experienced and witnessed to the regenerative powers at work even and especially in such places perceived as harsh and unwelcoming – regenerative powers that seem remarkably to align with and supplement, if not substitute for maternal power. That both Lane and Williams write of their *mother's* illnesses is notable, as is the fact that Frykholm pursues part of her travels in the footsteps of Mary of Egypt with her own mother. Somehow celebration of the paradoxical protection offered by desert places recalls the significance of women's maternal lives as generative and protecting. Mothers' laps, indeed.

There are caveats to voice with this association, however. Just as ecofeminists would carefully scrutinise any association between the natural world and the feminine that might result in justifying degradation or exploitation of either, so we can appreciate how readily the desert writers could associate the protection and provision of the natural world with the care they experienced or witnessed of mothers, without essentialising women's identities or their social roles as constitutive of those identities. Certainly not all experience their mothers as protective nor the desert as anything but hostile in its seeming disregard for the continuation of human life. Furthermore, not all who are physically capable of having children will do so or even desire to do so. Indeed, persons of other genders may have more developed gifts of nurturing than some women.

Nevertheless, it has come to feel important to me to celebrate such small indications in the Christian desert tradition of valuing the feminine, the maternal, the generative as emergent from the power of women's bodies and the power that sources other natural bodies. Similarly, returning to the literature of the Christian desert tradition having engaged the experience of contemporary writers as well as sojourning for a time in the desert myself renders me apt to note with appreciation how the desert is praised and loved by ancient writers and desert-dwellers, even as problematic attitudes toward the real women in these individuals' lives persist. I am reminded by this work of grappling with paradoxes that we all have mothers whom we may honour as indeed we honour how all women – and others – nurture our lives often beyond our notice or affirmation. To return to Waaijman's provocative question: "What is the point?"

This question introduced me to another perspective that may or may not have readily seen the point and was generous enough to voice an invitation to consider and clarify for myself the work I created. When I, soon enough, encountered more ways in which the tradition was inhospitable and devastating to me, I drew on the generosity of this conversation to listen closely to my love for the Christian desert tradition and for all its representatives who were trying to accomplish in good faith, though disreputable methods, and to marvel at the shifting sands of meaning that might emerge from ancient texts so blatantly sexist, though hopeful in curating new ways of being human that made room for the sacred that resists containment. What I found and continue to focus on is that the coming together of desert as sacred space and women's lives in imagery of generation in both ancient and contemporary texts suggests a persistent nudge for all of us to cherish more deeply that which gives life, of both the human and the more-than-human.

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