

The Spiritual Fruits of Desert Fathers (2)



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ABSTRACT: This paper is the continuation of our previous work, "The Spiritual Fruits of Desert Fathers (1)." Our inquiry has explored the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, specifically examining the notion that the emphasis lies not on achieving success but on producing fruitful outcomes by looking at the spirituality of the Desert Fathers about forgiveness, humor, poverty, solitude, and community within the broader context of a fruitful life. The purpose is to convey the spiritual essence of the Desert Fathers to a broad audience, ensuring that it is comprehensible and relatable to ordinary individuals while avoiding the use of intricate theological explanations or contentions.

KEYWORDS: community, Desert Fathers, forgiveness, humor, poverty, solitude

1. INTRODUCTION

In our current era, we have a multitude of resources and opportunities, yet paradoxically, we find ourselves in a state of greater poverty and emptiness compared to any previous time. In our highly digitalized, personalized, and less hierarchical postmodern society, a significant number of individuals experience a heightened sense of freedom. However, this newfound abundance and liberty come at a cost, as we face grave challenges such as the degradation of our ecological systems and the emergence of diseases like COVID-19. On one side, many people experience feelings of exclusion and dissatisfaction within a vast capitalist societal structure that appears insurmountable for individuals to overcome. Conversely, contemporary individuals are displaying a growing inclination towards exploring their inner selves as a means of finding respite from the pressures of an intricate and demanding social existence (Go et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2021; Chung, 2023; Seok & Chung, 2024). In the present circumstances, "spirituality" will emerge as a pivotal concept in 21st-century religion. From the perspective of Christianity, it refers to a sublime essence that becomes evident in the lives of contemporary individuals who cultivate an inner connection with God, regardless of their physical location, and who renounce the materialistic desires, conceit, and hubris prevalent in society. A close examination of the historical trajectory of Christianity reveals a consistent, profound sense of spirituality accompanying authentic resurgences of the Christian faith (Seok et al., 2021; Lee & Chung, 2024). This is due to the presence of devout individuals who maintain a personal and intimate connection with God, adhering to the teachings of Jesus (Kim & Chung, 2021). Consequently, their lives emit the essence of Christ, permeating their surroundings and influencing others. If Christianity does not prioritize numerical expansion through militaristic missionary evangelism, it can ensure its relevance in the 21st century by comprehending the diverse circumstances and requirements of individuals in our society and assisting them in leading a life of humble discipleship (Choi & Chung, 2023). This entails cultivating inner resilience that empowers them to apply the teachings of the Bible in practical situations, going through a process of maturation rather than just expansion. This maturation will involve the transformation of individuals' lives and the promotion of happiness, not primarily via numerical growth but through the development of their inner world (Kim et al., 2022). In this context, the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, recognized since the fourth century, is enlightening. Even if the general populace recognized the desert fathers, they often misinterpreted them as individuals with a vehement disdain for the world seeking refuge in the desert. We aim to transcend that preconception and uncover the quintessential embodiment of the Desert Fathers' innovative spirituality, a realm characterized by boundless liberation and exultation in the divine presence. They exhibited a profound devotion to both God and their fellow

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human beings. Despite facing challenging circumstances, they managed to lead a life of freedom and happiness by maintaining a state of equanimity, or inner calm. These individuals were truly remarkable, as they were able to overcome their self-centeredness and discover their authentic selves through their connection with God. By delving into the profound and aromatic desert spirituality, we aim to reconnect with the authentic essence of Christian spirituality. This study does not intend to analyze the intricate and obscure theological concepts of desert spirituality. Instead, we structure it as a practical theology or an educational coaching Psychology that encourages the fostering of spirituality in individuals, thereby bringing about practical transformation in our lives (Seok, 2024). Ultimately, the goal is to purify our communities and society as a whole.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The teachings of the Desert Fathers, who practiced asceticism in the desert during the 4th century, provide us with comfort, courage, humility, and a broadened life perspective as we live in the 21st century. However, we must reassess the historical accounts of their language and behavior, initially conveyed in the antiquated dialect of the 4th century. We need to modify them to fit modern language to successfully utilize the precious knowledge they provide for our current existence. Therefore, this investigation is essential. Although their calm spirituality is praiseworthy, it is crucial to acknowledge that they are imperfect individuals rather than celestial beings who transcend the boundaries of humanity. Similar to us, the Fathers also demonstrate susceptibility to participating in weak conduct (Kim et al., 2022). As a result, they have devised and executed multiple measures to fight this tendency. Through their reflective analysis and discernment, they demonstrate a deep understanding of the fundamental dichotomy within human beings, particularly the simultaneous presence of innocence and depravity. Instead of criticizing weak individuals, they developed a spiritual practice in the desert that focused on God's love and grace. This allowed them to rise above their limitations and achieve exceptional outcomes.

At the outset, we have employed two texts for our research: *The Sayings and Stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* by Tom Vivian (2021), which is an English translation of the ancient language that recorded the words and deeds of the Desert Fathers, and *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, translated by Benedicta Ward (1995). We have utilized both of these texts to acquire knowledge. Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), a highly intelligent figure among the Desert Fathers, authored *The Praktikos* (Teachings for Ascetics) in Greek. We have rendered it in English and Korean (Dysinger, 2024; Kang & Chung, 2013). For this inquiry, we used it as the primary source material. In addition, we included four published works on the spirituality of the Desert Fathers as supplementary evidence in our research: Antony Rich's "Discernment in the Desert Fathers" and Haekyung Jung's "Exploring the Practice and Goals of Evagrius' Spirituality." Jung (2022) posited that the Desert Fathers' spirituality predominantly revolved around the achievement of tranquility (apatheia), whereas Rich (2007) contended that the Desert Fathers' spirituality was primarily focused on the notion of discernment (diakrisis). This research uses Graham Gould's (1993) investigation of the Desert Fathers' society to better understand the interactions among the desert hermits. Furthermore, Jun-Ki Chung's (2004a) research is highly beneficial in comprehending the essence of the spirituality exhibited by the Desert Fathers. This study presents the authentic words of the Fathers, which Chung has translated into Korean. We acknowledge that these works are exceptional and have had a significant impact on the formation of the Desert Fathers' theological identity during that specific era. What distinguishes our research from the ones they conducted? Prior research has explored the spirituality of the same subject, and our work is similar to past studies. Nevertheless, our profession encompasses a wide range of tasks and responsibilities. Our goal is to simplify and evaluate the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, aiming to improve comprehension for both scholars and the broader public. We are certain that this will greatly help more individuals experience the advantages of integrating the spiritual teachings of the Fathers into their daily lives. In this study, we will explore the concepts of forgiveness, humor, poverty, solitude, and community with the overarching concept of a "fruitful life," building upon our prior research.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Forgiveness

The tree of love yields forgiveness. The underlying foundation for both love and forgiveness is the same: the transcendent love emanating from God's divine nature. True forgiveness is attainable when we acknowledge the inherent worth of ourselves and others from a divine perspective, understanding that God's love extends to both us and our fellow human beings. Hate is the complete opposite of forgiveness. The current society we live in is filled with a tremendous deal of hate and hostility (Jeong & Chung, 2022; Park et al., 2022). In the media, there is a continuous presence of reports on armed conflict, acts of terrorism, and the recurring cycle of abuse and retaliation (Lee et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2021; Tsyrfya et al, 2023). The cultivation of hatred is an inescapable consequence of division and conflict within the human domain. Feelings of helplessness and loneliness give rise to resentment towards those who are weak, neglected, and marginalized (Chung, 2010). They strongly dislike people who have considerable influence, possess prominent positions, and are members of the prevailing majority. They

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experience a sense of relative deprivation due to their perceived loss of possessions. Individuals who have a negative self-perception and feel a strong dislike for themselves are likely to project their hate onto others, seeing them as worthless, ignoring them, and holding hostility towards them (Chung, 2004b; Limaji et al., 2023). Regardless of one's growing worth or triumph over the target of animosity, enmity persists unresolved. Hatred, like a dual-purpose weapon, not only inflicts harm on others but also engenders mental devastation within oneself. The one who possesses hatred eventually suffers the most from this destructive emotion due to its inherent self-destructive character. Unfortunately, it is an indisputable reality that animosity begets further animosity, and this circle of animosity continues indefinitely.

God has offered a remedy for individuals ensnared by animosity. The instruction was explicit and unambiguous: "Demonstrate affection towards your opponents; engage in benevolent actions towards those who hold contempt for you" (Luke 6:27); and "If your opponent requires sustenance, provide nourishment; if they are thirsty, offer them a beverage" (Romans 12:20). However, the problem is that no matter how strongly we commit to following the commandments and how persistently we strive to forgive our enemies with pure determination, forgiveness remains unachievable. Strict adherence to the commandments alone cannot achieve forgiveness (Chung et al., 2021; Kim & Chung, 2023b). Forgiveness stems from the concept that "the divine holds deep affection for every individual." If you feel hatred because you believe you have no worth, you can overcome this hatred by acknowledging that you are an immensely valued being whom God loved unconditionally, even to the point of giving his son. If you believe that God values every person regardless of their worth, even if your neighbor acts as an enemy and causes you harm, you will sincerely respect and forgive them. None of the individuals currently in existence has the requisite worth or qualities to deserve the experience of divine love, based only on their abilities and circumstances. Hence, it is futile to evaluate a person's merit or lack thereof based on the standards of this world. The erroneous beliefs we hold about our values present a difficulty in the act of granting forgiveness to others. The offensive remarks and violations carried out by our neighbors cause us significant emotional distress, making it difficult for us to forgive (Seok & Chung, 2023). I am unable to expunge from my memory the words and acts he or she directed towards me, and consequently, I am experiencing emotions of anger, resentment, and even hostility. However, my neighbor's misdeeds do not diminish my inherent value as an individual. This implies that the actions or opinions of others should not affect my consistent values. My value's consistency stems from its divine source. The adjacent objects do not bisect, duplicate, or triple. Recognizing this truth allows us to embrace a more unbiased perspective on our neighbors' imperfections and wrongdoings (Seok & Chung, 2024).

However, forgiveness does not mean completely accepting and supporting the wicked actions of one's neighbors. The notions of sin and God's love are fundamentally incompatible, much like the impossibility of water and oil to blend. Forgiveness is not hiding wrongdoings but instead showing love and truthfulness towards one's neighbors. Forgiveness is the act of assisting our neighbors in their emotional recovery through love, which is the ultimate purpose behind God's creation. Forgiveness is crucial for fostering a healthy and affectionate bond with both God and our fellow human beings. People often perceive love and truth as challenging virtues to share. In a situation characterized by abundant love, the influence of truth weakens, rendering people more prone to indulging excessively in self-pleasure. On the other hand, when the truth is clear, it becomes simple to make the connection uninteresting due to a lack of affection. However, Jesus demonstrated a plentiful amount of love and truth and did not show any bias towards either group. He attained the establishment of truth by harnessing the force of love and then amplified the potency of love via the quest for truth. In John 8, Jesus neither pardons the woman who was apprehended for adultery nor pronounces a capital punishment upon her. If she had approached it in a dichotomous fashion, she would have needed to classify herself as either innocent or guilty. Jesus acknowledged that her wrongdoing justified the punishment, declaring, "Execute her by stoning," and confirmed her honesty by advising her to "refrain from sin in the future." He saved her from the brink of death by speaking the words, "Let the individual who is without sin towards her be the first to throw a stone at her." By saying the words, "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus forgave her for her wrongdoings, showing deep understanding and compassion. Her unwavering commitment to Jesus acted as the driving force that rescued her from the depths of her spiritual decline and immoral behavior, allowing her to fully accept her true identity. Like Jesus, the Desert Fathers had exceptional fortitude and a willingness to forgive the mistakes of others.

One day, a monk residing in the desert committed an error. The senior members convened a meeting, and a representative was dispatched to Father Moses. However, he declined. Another monk returned and informed Moses: The rest of the monks are eagerly anticipating your arrival; therefore, please hasten. Father Moses stood up, filled a perforated basket with sand, carried it on his back, and went to their meeting. When the monks asked, "What is that, Master?" he replied, "The transgressions I have committed are seeping out from behind me, but I am unable to perceive them." Today, I have arrived at this place to pass judgment on the transgressions of others. This information rendered the monks speechless, prompting them to grant forgiveness to the monk who had erred (Chung, 2004a, 219).

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The text does not provide details about the specific mistake the investigators found in this scenario, nor does it specify the severity of the offense. However, the Desert Father's community had already exposed his errors, leading to such widespread condemnation that the elders organized a disciplinary gathering. It is possible that the monk became aware of his transgressions and experienced a period of deep sorrow, guilt, and remorse. Father Moses possessed knowledge of this fact. For someone already condemned and grieving, additional censure is unnecessary. Excessive criticism will simply diminish his spirit or incite him to rebel. Father Moses had profound empathy for the man's predicament. He has a profound understanding that the person who commits sins and experiences the consequences of his actions must be forgiven. Father Moses exemplified the universal reality that humans are incapable of passing judgment on others, demonstrating this concept through his entire physique. How can a man, who easily discards his misdeeds like sand slipping through a basket with holes, pass judgment on the sins of others? Deepening awareness of our transgressions diminishes our tendency to judge others' transgressions, paving the way for genuine forgiveness. The Desert Fathers were acutely aware that every individual was a comparable transgressor in the presence of a divine deity, particularly regarding their transgressions. People who experience grief and remorse due to their transgressions often exhibit a natural inclination towards pardoning the minor errors committed by others. A young monk asked a senior monk the following question:

Is it advisable to conceal my brother's errors when I observe them? The elder replied, "When we conceal our brother's errors, God likewise conceals ours." Whenever we reveal our brother's errors, God also reveals ours (Chung, 2004a, 220).

We achieve genuine forgiveness when we recognize our equality with our fellow human beings in God's eyes. We do not enact forgiveness from a position of superiority as a morally upright individual, but rather from the perspective of a flawed individual who has received forgiveness for our transgressions. Forgiveness, like love, arises from togetherness rather than division. While forgiving our neighbor, true forgiveness is not based on a person's belief in our superiority or inferiority. Forgiveness is a mutual process. Forgiveness is possible when we acknowledge the inherent worth of our fellow human beings in the eyes of God, irrespective of our own opinions, desires, and evaluations (Kim & Chung, 2024a, b). Both I and my neighbors derive our value equally from a divine source. From that perspective, my neighbor and I are considered one organism and one entity. Transcending selfish division, embracing our fellow human beings as a unified entity, and fostering love and companionship can lead to genuine forgiveness. Forgiveness has the power to restore relationships with those who were formerly distant.

Engaging in seclusion and meditation in the desert served as a form of training to achieve self-awareness and reflect upon the hidden transgressions of deceased individuals within one's own dwelling. Despite his extensive training as a monk in seclusion, focusing solely on other people's wrongdoings and neglecting self-reflection would limit his spiritual progress. Conversely, providing affectionate welcome, nourishment, and solace to individuals who were grieving over their transgressions was a significant task associated with the divine realm. We, as individuals, inhabit the same world, and whether consciously or unconsciously, we all possess inherent vulnerabilities and engage in morally wrong actions, resulting in a pervasive sense of moral decay. As individuals, we possess inherent worth despite our vulnerability, as God demonstrates by extending forgiveness and love to us first. If we acknowledge our role as companions on a shared journey, display forgiveness towards our fellow individuals with heightened empathy and comprehension, and proceed together as a unified entity on the joyous pilgrimage, we shall find ourselves on the route leading to paradise.

3.2. Humor

A distinguishing characteristic of a mature personality is their distinct and individual sense of humor, which sets it apart from comedy in a broader sense. They abstain from employing malicious humor that elicits amusement at the expense of others, condescending comedy that mocks others' perceived inadequacy, or comedy that derives pleasure from obscene or sexual jokes. Self-objectification and self-awareness convey authentic and occasionally educational humor. Humor is always devoid of any intention to humiliate or highlight the errors of others. Nevertheless, the comedy does not exhibit self-deprecation or superficiality, akin to the performance of a clown. This type of comedy, typically resulting in smiles rather than laughter, is straightforward and spontaneous rather than deliberate. Consequently, individuals who are accustomed to superficial laughter or jokes may perceive those with such humor as dull and inclined towards seriousness. We believe that the Desert Fathers are often subject to a significant misconception. For certain people, the mental image associated with deserts could be that of individuals who are tough, unemotional, and excessively serious. Nevertheless, the Desert Fathers were genuinely developed individuals who possessed a high level of self-fulfillment, and they exhibited a remarkable ability to express cleverness and amusement. They were individuals who could view themselves as objects and embrace their true selves without judgment. They achieved self-awareness and embraced their true selves, free from concerns about others' opinions. Furthermore, when they saw others, they perceived them not as mere objects serving their desires, but rather as they truly were. Allow us to personally

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experience the humor of the Desert Fathers as expressed in their own words, which arises from deep thought and sincere self-examination:

One day, Abraham, a disciple of the revered Desert Father Sisoës, respectfully suggested to his teacher, "Master, given your advanced age, could we try to interact more closely with the world of common people?" If there are no women present, then we should proceed. In response to his student, the master replied, and the disciple countered by inquiring, "Apart from the desert, where are women absent?" Then simply abandon me in the desert, the master said (Chung, 2004a, 225).

The disciple expressed concern about his teacher's advancing age, suggesting that he may have also experienced the constraints of living in the desert and desired a stronger connection to the outside world. The teacher may have scrutinized the student's cognitive condition. However, he responded affirmatively to his disciple's request, stating that he could travel to any place where there were no ladies present. In this context, a location devoid of women signifies an environment free from allure and moral transgressions. The teacher knew his student would dispute his answer. Nevertheless, rather than stubbornly asserting the superiority of his viewpoint, the teacher humbly placed his trust in his student and, simultaneously, reaffirmed his determination to remain only in the desert. Rather than asserting his position with a strong statement like "I will not leave the desert even if I die," the instructor answered calmly by distancing himself from the issue. He presented the pupil with a passive response, giving him the option to "leave me alone in the desert." The master displayed neither embarrassment nor attempted to conceal his own physical frailty. The teacher's sincere yet thoughtful demeanor as he discusses his vulnerability and potential abandonment in the desert makes us smile inwardly. In addition, he greatly appreciates the wisdom with which he clearly and confidently explains his decision to stay in the desert without imposing himself on the other individual. Now, let us examine another illustration that Evagrius gave in his *Praktikos* section 97:

One of the brothers possessed solely a book of the gospels, and he sold it to feed the hungry, saying something worthy of memory: I have sold the word that told me, "Sell what you have and give to the poor (Mt. 19:21)" (Dysinger, 2024). What could be more entertaining and thought-provoking than reflecting on one's own poverty? Despite sacrificing all his possessions for the benefit of the impoverished, the monk exhibited neither self-pity nor vanity. Instead, the monk's self-deprecating humor, which treats his exceedingly destitute condition as an object, is so fitting to the circumstances that it elicits genuine laughter from the audience. His humor serves to satirize his anguish as he attempts to adhere to the teachings of the Bible, highlighting the core of the dilemma. We appreciate the refined and clever sense of humor that effectively conveys the essence of Christianity while downplaying concepts such as poverty, compassion, and sacrifice. The emergence of such humor was possible due to their mature and detached inner selves, which remained unaffected by their difficulties and external circumstances:

A senior monk was a recluse near the Jordan River. He sought refuge in a cave due to the intense heat, only to encounter an enraged lion that immediately began snarling. Then, the elder addressed the lion. What's the reason for your excessive enthusiasm and reprimands toward me? Despite our proximity, our presence will not create a confined or crowded space. "If you desire to separate, you have the option to exit the premises, correct?" However, the lion was unwilling to depart (Chung, 2004a, 227).

The wit of the Desert Fathers extended even to lions. Despite being face-to-face with a lion, rather than feeling fear, he remained calm and confident enough to tell the lion, "If you're not happy, leave!" This artwork depicts the fantastical goals of the Desert Fathers, who sought to achieve a deep connection between humanity and the environment. It also showcases the Desert Fathers' distinctive wit and humor, despite appearing unrealistic:

Once, a group of three monks visited an elder in his hut. One stated, "Master, I have committed to memorizing both the Old and New Testaments." The elder responded, "You have engaged in extensive conversation." Upon hearing that another monk said that he had duplicated the Old and New Testaments by hand, the elder responded by saying, "You have merely filled the closet with paper." Subsequently, the third monk expressed, "In my residence, the grass is sprouting within the heating system." The elder responded by saying the person was expelling the practice of hosting and accommodating visitors from his home (Chung, 2004a, 228).

The teacher employs humor to convey the message that the mere acts of memorizing the Bible, duplicating it, and fasting lack inherent significance. Presumably, the three monks desired to flaunt their virtue before their teacher. The teacher straightforwardly interpreted their achievements, aiming to impart the importance of humility and restraint as fundamental qualities. The teacher's statements are intriguing as they accurately mirror reality. We can infer that one student engaged in extensive verbal communication, given his thorough memorization of the Bible. The second student replicated the complete Bible, indicating that it must have contained a substantial amount of paper. Considering the presence of grass growing in the

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furnace, would it not be reasonable to assume that he would have ceased providing service to guests? The teacher used humor not to cause harm to others but to help his students recognize their ignorance and grasp fundamental concepts.

From the drawings we have previously examined, numerous ones provided insight into the humorous nature of the Desert Fathers. They had a fondness for analogies, and they considered reality to be akin to a different type of humor. Equating the act of blaming others while being oblivious to one's own wrongdoings to the metaphorical scenario of leaving a deceased individual at one's residence and grieving over the passing of someone else resulted in a combination of amusement and illumination. The humor of the Desert Father contained a sharp parody of reality, as demonstrated by Father Moses' act of pouring sand into a basket with holes and spilling it while on his way to condemn a brother. He humorously remarked, "My sins are leaking like this." The specific conditions of existence deeply ingrained the wisdom of the Desert Fathers. They transcended the boundaries of self and the universe; they fearlessly tackled even the most profound subjects, perceiving life as a marvelous and delightful source of humor.

3.3. Poverty

To fully understand the poverty of the Desert Fathers, it is crucial to avoid taking a broad or general viewpoint. In society, poverty, destitution, and a lack of material possessions are concepts that are associated with a negative perception and suggest a deficiency in abilities and drive (Park et al., 2021). However, the Desert Fathers considered poverty to be equal to worldly affluence. In the desert, the person with nothing was considered the most spiritually prosperous, just as riches determine one's material abundance in the world. In the desert, poverty meant a complete lack of material possessions. They willingly gave up all their possessions and belongings, aiming to own as little as possible. The experience of poverty, like a precious resource, profoundly nourished their spirits. According to Father Hyperechius, the monks' wealth resides in their conscious decision to willingly adopt a life of poverty: "Hello, monk! Deposit your precious belongings in the celestial realm, for it is there that you shall discover everlasting tranquility" (Chung, 2004a, 230).

We have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the significance of the desert fathers' state of extreme poverty from four distinct viewpoints. First and foremost, poverty might be likened to a voyage that ultimately leads to a state of utter humility. Due to their lack of personal possessions, the Desert Fathers had to depend on their work or the money they received through inheritance to acquire the materials essential for their survival. The Fathers experienced fatigue and hardship due to their little income, which they earned via strenuous manual work to meet their basic needs. Overcoming poverty is a challenging endeavor, but those who succeed in doing so experience solace and gradually enhance their resilience to endure adversity along the way. The Fathers recognized that poverty is an essential prerequisite for cultivating humility and that individuals who possess modesty find tranquility in the possessions they possess in this existence. Another consequence of poverty is that it forces individuals to choose a lifestyle that closely resembles that of a martyr. The Desert Fathers perceived themselves as living martyrs, embodying an ideal state of existence in their own lives. This is primarily due to the deceased's lack of interest in the material and external aspects of this life. Furthermore, poverty cultivates individuals' complete reliance on and appreciation for God. Immediate financial deprivation does not directly induce feelings of anxiousness. Anxiety stems from a lack of steadfast faith in God, irrespective of one's financial circumstances, whether they are impoverished or affluent, similar to how even wealthy individuals experience distress. Nevertheless, the Desert Fathers discovered that embracing destitution enabled them to conquer unease and maintain an unwavering devotion to God. A youthful monk advised an elderly and ill monk to offer financial assistance because of his advanced age and poor health. The senior monk in question suffers from leprosy. Subsequently, the elder monk asserted that while enduring this situation for six decades, he remained devoid of remorse, affirming that he derived the necessary provisions and sustenance from a celestial origin (Chung, 2004a, 232). Despite the old master's meager daily earnings, he astutely recognized the divine provision for his fundamental needs. He was concerned that the growing profusion of material possessions could undermine his belief in God. Reflecting on his enduring life of destitution spanning six decades, he asserted his complete contentment with God, who would supply his future needs. Moreover, their careful handling of resources directly resulted in the impoverishment of the Desert Fathers. To sustain themselves on Earth, individuals need clothing, nourishment, and shelter. However, the Desert Fathers firmly believed that these resources did not belong to them but were instead under their temporary care. Since nothing inherently owns everything, there is no need to form emotional connections or assert ownership. The Desert Fathers had a deep comprehension that God is the supreme owner of everything, and they acknowledged themselves as simply caretakers. Consequently, they regarded everyone who requested to borrow from them, stating, "Take whatever you need." Upon the debtor's arrival to settle the bill, they explicitly directed, "Restore it to its initial state." If the other party fails to make payment owing to extenuating circumstances, whether deliberately or inadvertently, they choose not to bring it up again. Individuals residing in a capitalist society, characterized by a prevailing conviction that material possessions are the key to pleasure, may perceive the lifestyle of the Desert Fathers, who get

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contentment from mere existence, as unachievable. Individuals, frequently entangled by their cravings and erroneously convinced of their possession of all things, can attain enlightenment through the teachings of the Desert Fathers. The central idea revolves around the notion that, as finite beings, we can only hold onto possessions for a limited time and that nothing truly belongs to us. The teachings have profound consequences. Similar to how a master commands a steward to give up all his possessions, we must also submit our lives. Understanding this concept will enable us to achieve an unrestricted sense of freedom, as demonstrated and embodied in the lives of the Desert Fathers, regardless of our financial situation:

One day, burglars entered the dwelling of an elderly monk and demanded, "Surrender all possessions within your quarters." "Choose whatever you desire, children," the elder responded. The thieves absconded with all of his possessions, then vanished. Nevertheless, the monk pursued them with the misplaced wallet and exclaimed, "Gentlemen, please accept this as well!" The thieves expressed their admiration for the elder's [freedom of possession], returned all the stolen stuff, and humbly prostrated themselves before the monk. They engaged in a dialogue, asserting that this monk was undeniably a devout follower of the divine (Chung, 2004a, 237).

In line with this perspective, Schweiger (2019) argues that churches, along with other religious institutions globally, must promptly grasp the spiritual aspect of poverty and thereafter share this comprehension with those who are suffering from hunger and fatigue in different places.

3.4. Solitude

Desert spirituality, which involves rigorous training in isolation and silence, also leads to a state of seclusion. The Desert Fathers sought solace in the desert, not just as a means of avoiding worldly distractions but also to embrace a life of seclusion in those isolated regions. They were not hermitic, misanthropic individuals who shunned human contact. The desert rendezvous and subsequent establishment of a teacher-disciple bond unambiguously demonstrate their social nature. Nevertheless, the society they aspired to establish diverged from the shallow, transitory, and egocentric secular world. Instead, it aimed to be a realm where individuals could explore and encounter their concealed, authentic, and sacred essence in the presence of God (Seo & Chung, 2021). According to their perspective, a laboratory named isolation was necessary for humans to truly develop into social beings. Here, solitude refers not only to being physically alone but also to an internal state of seclusion (Yang & Chung, 2023).

There is a narrative that tells of a female monk who lived in the desert and had a profound awareness of this particular characteristic (Chung, 2004a, 238). She believed that a significant number of monks had lost their spiritual lives on the mountain that was renowned for its tranquility throughout its history. Even though they worked alone in their physical bodies, they were constantly looking for ways to deepen their emotional connection to the outside world. As a result, they were unable to achieve salvation. It was as if they did not feel a sense of belonging to either the world or to God; they found themselves in a state of ambiguity. Conversely, non-religious people in a culture devoid of religious practices achieved salvation through a life focused on cultivating inner tranquility within themselves. The Desert Fathers assert that one can find genuine isolation within oneself. Isolation creates the necessary environment for God to transform and renew us. The absence of solitude hinders the process of making fresh discoveries. When our minds are already filled with negative influences, how can we enrich ourselves with new experiences? We might liken solitude to discarding putrid, malodorous refuse and replenishing it with vibrant, life-giving water. By fully submitting ourselves to God and relinquishing all aspects of our existence, we enable God to bring out a new state of being. Isolation can lead us to freedom from societal impositions. Solitude compels us to fully dedicate ourselves to God, thereby serving as a conduit for His divine power. Individuals gain genuine introspection and profound understanding of their fellow human beings through solitude, a phenomenon that can be considered God's innovative artistic expression. When we are alone, we confront our authentic identities. In solitude, we engage in introspection and reconnect with our inner selves, which we have neglected due to a lack of self-reflection. By reestablishing eye contact and engaging in communication with our inner being, we have the potential to awaken from our emotional numbness, become aware of our wrongdoings, and seek forgiveness (Chung, 1996; Chung, 2003a, b). Solitude not only allows us to explore our own identity, but it also enables us to establish genuine connections with our neighbors. Paradoxically, solitude enables genuine togetherness. Living in solitude does not result in social isolation, and cohabitation does not automatically foster a sense of unity. One discovers one's authentic identity while alone and does not take advantage of one's neighbors for personal gain. Love and friendship flourish in such connections. Through solitude, we can cultivate authentic connections with others who live nearby. Solitude serves as a reminder of the genuine worth of both ourselves and others. In this world, we must demonstrate our worthiness through love. Through isolation, we gain the realization that our value is not dependent on the evaluation of society or individuals. How do we articulate the esoteric insights we uncover when we detach ourselves from the relentless demands of reality and immerse ourselves in solitude? Those who have encountered inner silence will understand the divine illumination that stirs them to recognize the

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origin of their being. It is a profound revelation and a transformative experience, akin to a blind individual gaining sight. During that period, we instinctively realize that we exist as absolute beings in God's presence and receive unconditional love. The inherent nobility of humans stems from their creation in the divine likeness of God and the Creator's profound satisfaction and delight in them. Solitude catalyzes new beginnings. We comprehend the genuine worth of ourselves and our fellow human beings as cherished entities in the eyes of God and will cease to engage in the acts of comparing, judging, or feeling envious of our neighbors.

It is also important to recognize that isolation encompasses the moments when we actively listen to God communicating with us. At times, we become preoccupied with making requests to God and overlook the messages that God is trying to convey to us. Thus, we must engage in consistent training to cultivate the ability to remain silent in a serene environment, thereby enabling us to receive divine communication (Montgomery, 2022).

3.5. Community

People may mistakenly perceive the Desert Fathers as individualists who completely oppose communal living due to their secluded lifestyle. Nevertheless, despite their efforts to isolate themselves from society and adopt a solitary lifestyle as monks in the desert, they did not fully embody the principles of individualism. Disciples sought advice from their teachers, who accepted young monks seeking guidance as their students, thereby establishing a social tie among monks. In addition, it was customary for reclusive monks to reside individually in a secluded dwelling known as a skete. However, there were other instances where they cohabitated and shared accommodations and meals with fellow monks. The huts of the monks so-called sketes stood in a secluded spot, with the sketes of other monks positioned nearby, though not readily visible. Consequently, the monks lived communally, providing assistance and support to one another as neighbors. When a monk remained silent for an extended period, nearby monks would visit him to ascertain his well-being. Despite their pursuit of personal seclusion, the Desert Fathers also had a profound affection for their neighbors and demonstrated their generosity by selflessly giving of themselves, thus building a distinctive society. While the Desert Fathers did not establish a community based on familial or occupational ties, it is evident that they indeed constituted a community. What type of neighborhood were they targeting? In a secular culture, a community is defined as a cohesive group that shares a common goal and ideology or as an interest group that collaborates for tangible advantages such as financial gain or recognition. Self-interest, financial interdependencies, and political and economic intentions all connect global communities (Kim & Chung, 2023b,c; Kim & Chung, 2024c). These societies establish a clear hierarchy between the upper and lower classes, further dividing individuals based on factors like wealth and power dynamics (Kim et al., 2023). There are instances in which individuals form a strong and cohesive bond with one another for the betterment of the community, but this union is limited in scope and duration and is primarily motivated by self-interest. The Desert Fathers did not withdraw from human society but rather from a social structure that was characterized by division and separation. The Fathers sought to avoid subjugation to others through formal structures of organization or authority. Furthermore, they had no desire to exert control or influence over others. The society was characterized by an ideal state where equality, freedom, and necessity were paramount. In the desert community, genuine love and openness thrived as individuals actively strived to overcome their self-centered tendencies. Deep and genuine connections fostered emotions in this location. Despite the unfavorable physical conditions, the attainment of pure love, as described in the Bible, transformed the setting into a paradise.

The bond between the teacher (Abbas) and the disciples established the desert community. Rather than selecting a teacher based on religious regulations or institutional criteria, the desert community granted the designation of a servant of God as a teacher to anyone who had endured years of hardship. Regardless of the emperor's advisor's social background or physical characteristics, including being a farmer, a slave, a black man, or a dwarf, anyone could become a teacher as long as other monks recognized them as dedicated servants of God. In our previous discussion, we clarified that love and obedience preserve the bond between the teacher and the student. The essence of the priestly bond was to renounce egocentrism and demonstrate love towards one another as fellow inhabitants (Augustine, 397).

Respect and obedience demonstrated the disciple's love for the instructor, while discipline and forbearance exhibited the teacher's love for the disciple (Kim et al., 2021). The Desert Fathers recognized the significance of community, particularly the ties between monks, in the advancement of spiritual growth.

The Fathers were aware that the community plays a crucial role in assisting pilgrims in reaching their common destination by providing support and nurturing for one another. The allurements and injuries that one is prone to succumbing to in solitude become far more manageable in the presence of a supportive community. The monks were honest with their fellow monks and did not conceal anything. They openly disclosed their innermost desires, including impure thoughts, avarice, wrath,

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and laziness. Within a nurturing group, monks were able to openly share their vulnerabilities and find solace, as opposed to facing harsh judgment for their errors. Every monk in this desert village established a natural and interconnected bond with their neighbors. They established a community to collectively seek a deeper connection with God. However, as they delved deeper into their pursuit of God, they increasingly uncovered the presence of their neighbors and gained a newfound appreciation for their worth and significance. They realized that it is unattainable to seek a connection with God without the involvement and support of others who live near them. Their interactions with their neighbors reveal God's love for us, and we cultivate our love for God by showing love toward our neighbors (Kim & Chung, 2023a). The Desert Fathers possessed a profound understanding that these two entities were not distinct but rather unified as one.

Let us examine the communal lifestyle that the Desert Fathers followed. The Fathers not only prioritized individual discipline but also fostered collaboration and kept proximity to their neighbors, enabling them to actively listen to their concerns (Kangas, 2011; Chung et al., 2021). One monk resided with his fellow monks and offered guidance to the non-monastic inhabitants in the surrounding area. They had a comprehension of the importance of seclusion and committing themselves to the city, as well as being sensitive to God's love for their fellow inhabitants. Within the arid village, they cultivated close connections with their neighbors, establishing a cohesive collective community. They could only achieve this accomplishment by straying from human nature's inherent self-centeredness and self-absorption. In the desert, monks prioritized the act of demonstrating hospitality towards their neighbors over engaging in fasting. Within their group, one rarely observes egocentrism, characterized by a preoccupation with one's personal belongings, possessions, and entitlements. Empathy, the desire to understand, experience, and help others as an extension of oneself, drives monks to follow the Bible's command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Within the desert community, the monks were coming to recognize an enlarged sense of self, perceiving their neighbors as an extension of their being. The Desert Fathers acknowledged that egocentrism resulted in strife and fragmentation within human society as individuals asserted their possession and adamantly refused to surrender it. Due to their complete lack of self-centeredness, the mature monks were unable to generate any conflict situations. Their notions of possession and ownership were devoid of significance. Gould (1993) has aptly noted that the Desert Fathers founded monastic communities in the desert to foster their spirituality through seclusion while still prioritizing collective spiritual goals. The group prioritized correcting the deleterious influence that certain monks had on other members. They worked together to focus all their efforts on resolving this problem and improving the spiritual welfare of the entire desert community. These habits played a crucial role in shaping the identity of desert spiritual cultures.

4. CONCLUSION

The Desert Fathers were indifferent to achieving success and unconcerned with other people's evaluations of them. They did not discriminate based on a person's wealth, race, education, or moral character. The Fathers did not allow any form of differentiation or division. They embraced and cherished every individual—not only their outward attributes but the entire essence of their being. As a result, the collective's support, pardon, and affection rejuvenated even individuals with limited strength, deficiencies, and errors and remedied their injuries. Recognizing the absence of ideal individuals and acknowledging that each person is fallible and prone to errors, they embraced one another as integral parts of a whole entity. The desert community provided the ideal environment for the cultivation of virtues such as obedience among priests, love for neighbors, forgiveness, humility, poverty, and solitude, allowing them to flourish in perfect harmony. The community fostered a culture of openness and mutual respect, allowing individuals to maintain their independence and live in solitude rather than merging into a collective entity. An aspect of paradise would be a society where people unconditionally love and embrace their neighbors, similar to how God loved humans. This community would thrive and evolve naturally and energetically, without imposing any pressure or force on its neighbors, and would bring forth new life. The monks, who managed to free themselves from the confines of self-centeredness and establish a strong connection with God's love, were responsible for creating that paradise.

Every aspect of the Desert Fathers' lives demonstrated the practical benefits of their faith. On the other hand, exercising caution in specific areas is necessary for reaching this level of spirituality. Gould, Jng, and Rich, contrary to some admirers, correctly point out that we should not mistake the Desert Fathers' spirituality for a supernatural movement or an extraordinary manifestation of the Holy Spirit. We should not assume that the Desert Fathers actively pursued mystical practices or engaged in enigmatic activities for self-promotion, even though they may have achieved a state of ecstatic serenity through deep contemplation, silent prayer, and Scripture memorization to connect with God. In fact, they showed us how to live by Bible teachings. The Desert Fathers' pure simplicity was based on a spiritual quest that leads to acute tranquility (apatheia) and an extraordinary depth of discernment (diakrisis), and this is the fundamental aspect of their simplicity that we must acknowledge.

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