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BOOK PROFILE: THE VALUE OF SOLITUDE

John Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography*
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MANY INDIVIDUALS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY are searching for “spirituality” and “authenticity.” John Barbour’s (Religion, St. Olaf College USA) *The Value of Solitude: The Spirituality and Ethics of Aloneness in Autobiography* reminds its readers that the search for genuine encounters with God and for authenticity of the self amid the pressures of society are not simply a modern phenomena. Barbour’s book is a nuanced, engaging, and insightful study of the various reasons why individuals with varying degrees of relation to Western Christianity ascribe religious and spiritual meaning to the practice of intentional solitude. He is especially concerned to show the impact of moral interpretations of solitude on spirituality and to trace the differences between the view of solitude as necessary for moral improvement and as an escape from society.

Barbour’s first chapter begins by describing the difference between the concept of solitude and the content of loneliness. He then distinguishes voluntary solitude for other ways that individuals are separated from the larger society. Barbour defines loneliness as a desire to connect with others. Solitude, on the other hand, is a state of being apart from society. Because solitaries often feel that what they gain in this apartness must be shared with those who have not had the time away, many of them write narratives to share their stories.

Barbour’s second chapter begins his historical treatment of solitude with the earliest solitaries found in the Christian tradition - the desert fathers and mothers. Barbour argues that the Scriptures do not extol solitude, but that the solitary state can help individuals find deeper communion with God. He notes that early Christian hermits did not offer programs for societal, reform yet the very existence of Christian solitaries caused those “in the world” to question the

order of society. The irony of course, is that made “hermits” who withdrew from the world become notable figures, perhaps preventing them from withdrawing from the social sphere entirely. This lack of total withdrawal allows the message of the solitary hermit to become known. The truth’s solitaries speak; they speak to the world.

From the monastic and desert traditions in ancient times, Barbour proceeds to Augustine of Hippo’s view of solitude. Augustine’s thought on almost any subject remains formative to Christianity. Unlike the monastic writers that preceded him, Augustine did not believe that an authentic Christian existence required withdrawal from the secular world and its toils. Being an astute reader, Barbour notes that Augustine’s statements on the spiritual value of solitude are not consistent. In places Augustine praises the discipline of solitude. However, at other points his writings disparage the practice as “too escapist,” Hence, he ends up taking the via media, arguing that periods of solitude helped individuals come to self knowledge, emotional release, and the chance to encounter God apart from the world.

From these early Christian sources, Barbour turns to the Humanistic traditions of the Renaissance. Hence he examines the writings of Petrarch, Montaigne, and the historian Edward Gibbon in a single chapter. Petrarch was the first writer to devote an entire treatise to the “pleasures of solitude.” His work displays a social critique of those who dwell in the cities, portraying them as driven by gossip and lack of direction. Rather than ascribing a specifically religious motivation to solitude Petrarch approves of it for any individual seeking the greater good. Thus, Barbour argues that Petrarch’s book marks a crucial turning point in the understanding of solitude. Petrarch did not justify it with a Christian purpose as earlier authors had; he simply argued that it allowed “an individual’s personality the right to realize its distinctive qualities.” (p. 49)

The next figure that Barbour’s chapter on Renaissance traditions treats in depth is Rousseau and his writings in the volume *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Rousseau believed that humans were naturally solitary. Barbour notes that Rousseau wrote his autobiography after the public learned that he had given away his children to an orphanage. Drawing on earlier traditions, Rousseau imagined that his autobiographical reflections were done for moral development and assessment. Yet the *Reveries* also show how uncomfortable their author was in dealing with people since such interactions reminded him of time’s passage.

Barbour devotes the final part of his chapter on humanist thinkers to Edward Gibbon the English historian who wrote the classic work *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon’s move to Switzerland after completing his university

studies made him a bit of an outsider because he did not speak French. Gibbon argued that he felt like an “exile and a prisoner.”

Thoreau’s *Writings from Walden Pond* are the subject of chapter 5. In them, Barbour presses toward an understanding of the relationship of the solitary to the natural and social world. Thoreau interacted with his neighbors and others but, as Barbour notes repeatedly, withdrew before he could become engaged in the social fabric of life outside of Walden. It was this engagement that allows Thoreau to critique others.

Barbour gives a general overview of solitude in the 20th century, before turning to the writings of a religious figure, Thomas Merton, and a secular writer, Paul Auster. He treats Augustine and earlier figures carefully. However, his last chapter is a whirlwind tour through various modern authors’ treatment of solitude. Barbour makes important points in these chapters, but his analysis seems rushed in comparison to the book’s earlier portions. One wishes that he would have spent more time on each of these authors or focused this chapter in greater depth.

Barbour’s 6th chapter is a general treatment of the various reasons that 20th century individuals seek out solitude. He identifies common themes in the modern search for solitude, often justified by attunement to nature, healing, adventure, creative work and self formation.” (p. 128) He makes an explicit break in this chapter by exploring authors who are not affiliated, (although they may be influenced by) the Christian tradition.

Barbour identifies one common thread between the Romantic and modern conceptions of solitude, which is the way in which the desire for solitude is rooted in the desire for sensitivity to nature. The ways that they make sense of their experience is not focused on explicitly Christian categories. Barbour notes that Dillard engages a variety of spiritual traditions and is able to find plausibility in each of them, insofar as they respect the natural world. In the same way, the Artic explorer Byrd found that his solitude made him lonely for the company of others. Physical and psychic Healing of the self is yet another theme in some writings on solitude.

The final figure the work treats in depth is Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and one of the 20th century’s proponents of the monastic life. Merton’s vast corpus allows Barbour to trace the ways in which one individual’s view of the Christian life changes across his lifespan. Barbour shows that even those who commit to the discipline of solitude for a particular reason discover new meanings of the practice while they are living within it. Yet Merton’s life also reveals a profound

tension between the desire for solitude for communion with God and active engagement in the life of the world through writing and communication with others. Merton raises an interesting question, "Can an individual's solitude be beneficial to society if the individual will not share the fruits of that solitude by breaking it in order to communicate with the wider world?" Through a careful treatment of Merton's love for women named "M," with whom he fell in love while a monk, one sees the sacrifices individuals who choose long term solitude have to make.

Barbour's work eloquently and richly reveals the various spiritual understandings and meanings solitude has been given through time within a Christian framework. His rich, careful, and thoughtful probing of autobiographical texts make rich reading for anyone interested in the topic of autobiography and theology. His work contributes to the growing interest and discussion about in the value of practices in the Christian life.

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