



De Gruchy, John W. 2021. This Monastic Moment: The War of the Spirit & the Rule of Love. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books. ISBN: 978-1-6667-0234-7

Diagnosing a cultural mood is never easy, not least because our times are marked by a volatility where one can scarcely hold onto anything in the maelstrom of conflicting currents. Here, in South Africa, ‘morbid symptoms’ are painfully being felt in an interregnum where a genuinely new future seems perennially deferred with every crisis that seems to pile upon the last.¹ But a cultural mood is not the same thing as a theological or indeed monastic moment. What, then, is unique about a specifically Christian response when pessimism or enclavist retreat are the order of the day and where hope is in such short supply? The eminent theologian John de Gruchy, with characteristic perspicuity enters this malaise with a composed but urgent plea for us to “listen again” to what the “Spirit is saying.” This academically astute but readable text journeys through themes and figures (Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Merton, among many others) which have distinguished de Gruchy’s career as a public theologian, while he casts his net into the far reaches of Christianity’s early history up to the present, offering an absorbing narrative whose golden thread is that of monasticism.

But why the retrieval of monasticism for ‘this moment’? Are not the monotonous rhythms of monks cloistered away, attending their gardens between daily prayers and tolling bells, precisely the kind of escapism that we are to avoid at all costs? On the contrary, *This Monastic Moment* is an unromanticized retelling of the monastic tradition which guides the

1 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 276. A South African commentator recently made this connection to Gramsci and the present crisis; see S’theebiso Msomi, “We are in the nightmare of Gramsci’s ‘morbid symptoms’ — again,” *Sunday Times*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/opinion-and-analysis/opinion/2022-07-17-we-are-in-the-nightmare-of-gramscis-morbid-symptoms--again/>.

reader from its third century North African origins to our post-Christian context, all the while marking out signposts to warn us of the twin-dangers of Gnosticism and triumphalism. For de Gruchy monasticism, rightly understood, not only circumvents these ancient (and modern) heresies but is also a primordial form for the renewal and ecumenicity of the church, since it embodies the “rhythm of monastic chronos to cope with the kairos times in which we live” (p. 6). It is this charisma of the monastic tradition which equips us for the “war of the Spirit” in which we are engaged that de Gruchy seeks to distill and preserve, namely, the mystical intertwining with the prophetic in service of the church’s witness for the world today.

In four swiftly moving chapters, framed by a prologue and epilogue – composed of biographical reflections on the practice of intentional communal living – de Gruchy’s contemporary readership will find a resource from which to access the rich deposit of monasticism that informs diverse Christian traditions. In a deliberate attempt to drive this ecumenical point home, unexpected connections are littered throughout the text, giving the sense of a pulsating spirituality with its monastic antecedents: whether it be our earlier African monks in Egypt, the foundations of monasticism in Saint Benedict’s Rule, to mystical-feminist activists or the Trappists of KwaZulu-Natal. It is perhaps the third chapter which will be of particular interest for this journal’s audience, since it is here that de Gruchy’s extensive knowledge of the Reformation and its theologians, allows him to make a compelling argument for the monastic elements that are anything but subterranean in the legacy of Protestantism. Far from a simple rejection of this vital impulse in Luther or Calvin, de Gruchy demonstrates how the vestiges of monasticism were always present in the early reformers. These Lutheran lines of critique and Reformed lines of ecclesial renewal, all rooted in originally monastic concerns, are then unsurprisingly found in several fascinating remarks by both Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The latter, indeed, undergoes a ‘monastic turn’, where through his classic work, *Life Together*, de Gruchy discerns an early “rule of Love” for the kind of intentional “monastic communities” he has in mind.

Indeed, *This Monastic Moment*, was written for the present kairos; its expansive theological insight and wealth of historical knowledge are not ornamentals but act as a guide for building communities whose spirituality

is coupled with the struggle for justice and peace. In this way, de Gruchy's book inscribes something of a 'moment' itself, one which appositely relates to the recent concentration of churches on so-called 'missional spirituality' and the wider interest in spiritual exercises.² For all these reasons, this is a book that should be widely read by theologians and lay audiences alike, *and more importantly, its contents discussed in community together.*

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2 See the 2022 special edition of the *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* devoted to the Murray family, especially the writing of Andrew Murray Jr., whose mystical and evangelical roots in pietism and Benedictine spirituality are now under intense investigation.