

A monkish way to mutual help

THE MONASTIC IMPULSE

by Walter Capps

(Crossroad: \$10.95; 163 pp.)

Walter Capps teaches in the excellent religious studies department at UC Santa Barbara. Captivated by the thoughts of the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Capps grew curious about what he calls the "monastic impulse" in western nations and whether the contemplative life today has any links to the counterculture movements of the 1960s.

The book takes the reader on short, impressionistic visits to seven monasteries in France and the United States and

Reviewed by John Dart

on an intellectual survey of what several social commentators have said about inward-looking, possibly narcissist, cultural trends. Capps found Theodore Roszak to be the most perceptive. Roszak foresaw the monasteries providing the imaginative responses to protracted social crises, demonstrating a model of mutual aid and modest living.

Capps speaks of the "dawning of the contemplative era" and a new interest in monastic life, but he gives little evidence. Compelling statistics or assessments are lacking to show that a new asceticism tied to monastic ideals is about to become an influential force.

Capps' book may be best read as the personal journey of an issues-oriented academic, who most recently wrote "Vietnam and the American Conscience." He seems primarily interested in the secular, societal benefits from the monastic impulse, describing the monks' goal, for instance, as seeking a deeper reality. Even if one questions just how deeply religious, distanced lives can affect the rest of us, Capps' view has value, bringing a remote way of life into near focus.

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