

Nicholas Buxton
Tantalus and the Pelican
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Perhaps the title may at first give the impression that this is a children's story. But the subtitle is 'Exploring Monastic Spirituality', and this explains it all.

The book tells us of the author's own personal faith journey, from the days of his scepticism as a rebellious teenager to the time when he was accepted as an ordinand in the Church of England. (He is now a Minor Canon of Ripon Cathedral.)

Tantalus, a character in Greek mythology, was frustrated in the pursuit of desires which were impossible to fulfil. The author likens this to the human condition. Only when we recognize our own limitations can we thirst for the spiritual. The pelican in Christian iconography symbolises sacrifice because of the ancient belief that it feeds its chicks with its own blood. This points to the sacrifice of Christ, and to the call to follow him.

While seeking answers to the big questions of life, Buxton had turned to Buddhism. He lived for a time in an ashram in India, and he spent six months in a Buddhist monastery in New Zealand. He made a comprehensive study of the Buddhist scriptures, and he also studied Hindu and Moslem writings, as well as reading the Bible.

But he came to realise that Buddhism was not really for him. He returned to England, where he discovered (apparently to his surprise) that there were monks and nuns in the Church of England. He contacted the Anglican Benedictines at Elmore, and began a series of frequent visits to them. He became an ardent believer in the Benedictine way of life.

In 2005 he was one of the five visitors who participated in the very successful TV series, *The Monastery*, which was filmed at Worth Abbey. Subsequently he spent a month at the Carthusian monastery at Parkminster, living in complete silence and immersed in contemplative prayer.

It is a fascinating book. The author's very personal sharing of his own story makes compelling reading. The wealth of material on the different expressions of monastic life, and especially the section on the Benedictine tradition, will form an excellent introduction to a very wide subject, from the pen of one who clearly is well qualified to write. Indeed, the author's enthusiasm makes it all sound very exciting.

Martin SSF