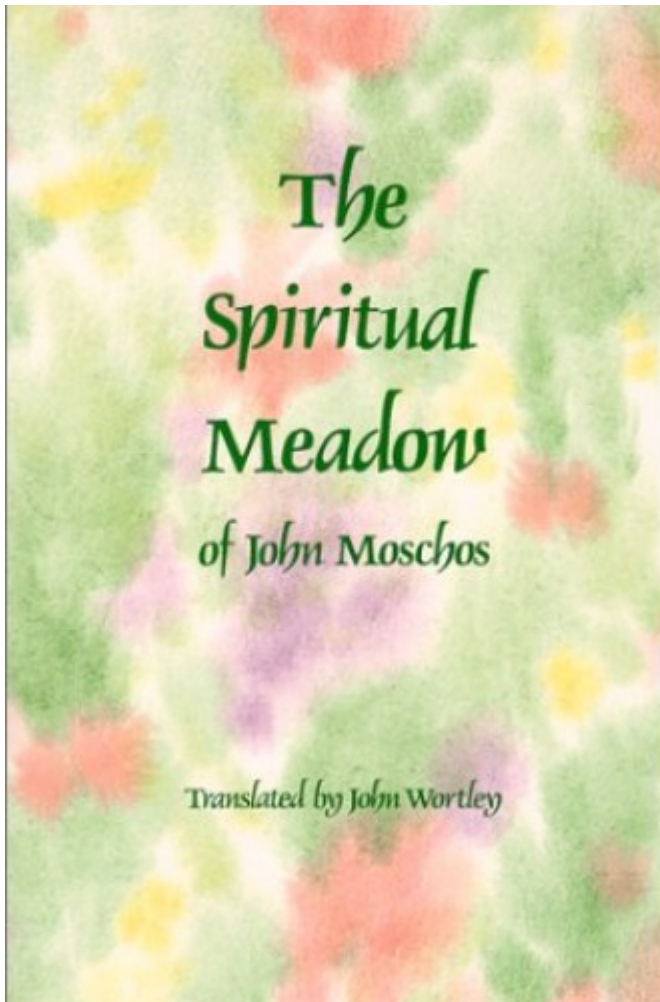


Weird monk jokes

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

September 27, 2012

In Review



The Spiritual Meadow

by John Moschos

Cistercian Publications

I have lately been reading stories of the desert monastics, collected by the monk John Moschos in the seventh century. I don't think I get it.

My pattern has been to feel slightly offended—sometimes even disgusted—by a story, and then walk away from it, wander around for awhile and finally realize that the story was probably a joke. In its own context, the main thing it elicited was probably laughter. But for me the humor is so strange, so wry, so unexpected that I don't perceive it for hours.

Take this one. A monk was visiting another community when he died and was buried in the strangers' cemetery. The day after his burial, a woman was buried on top of him. A few hours later, the earth "threw her up." They buried her again on the same spot. But the next day they found her again on top of the grave. So they buried her somewhere else.

A few days later, another woman died and they buried her on top of the monk's grave. When the earth threw her up as well, they realized that the monk "would not allow a woman to be buried on top of him."

Here's one where the joke hits a little closer to home for me. A priest had the job of baptizing new converts, but "it was an occasion of acute embarrassment to him whenever he had to baptize a woman." Nobody would let him get out of it. His superiors refused to appoint a female deacon to do the job. He prayed to John the Baptist for help, but none came.

Finally, when he had to baptize a beautiful "Persian damsel," he was so distressed that he ran away. On the hills above his monastery, he encountered John the Baptist. John said kindly to him, "Go back to your place. I will make it easier for you."

But the priest was angry and said, "You have often made that promise to me and you have done nothing about it. I won't go back."

So John made him sit down, stripped him of his clothes and made the sign of the cross three times "beneath his navel." "I wanted you to carry some reward from the struggle," John said, "but since you did not wish it to be so, I have caused the struggle to cease. But you shall have no reward for this."

The priest returned to his duties, and the next day baptized the Persian woman "without even being aware that she was of the female sex." Twelve years later, he died.

As the humor of these stories slowly dawns on me, I hope the wisdom will as well.