

John Cassian: The Transmission of Eastern Ascetical Spirituality to the West

- Born c. 360-365 in Dacia or Scythia Minor (modern Romania; Latin speaking part of the Roman Empire, though Cassian had received a classical education and knew Greek as well as Latin [Greek was also necessary to be involved with the government at Constantinople]).
- Left there sometime between 378-388 (when Cassian was probably in his twenties) together with his friend Germanus and joined a monastery in Bethlehem near the cave of the Nativity.
- With Germanus he twice visited Egypt to learn more of Egyptian ascetic and monastic life (first visit=7 years; the two visits together= c. 10 years).
- C. 399 with Germanus left Egypt for Constantinople (possibly left to seek refuge with Chrysostom after Theophilus in 399-402 responded to pressure from ascetic activists to condemn Origenism; cf. the Long Brothers' similar departure to seek refuge with Chrysostom).
- At Constantinople, shortly after 400 A.D., Cassian was ordained deacon by John Chrysostom.
- C. 404-405 Cassian (accompanied by Germanus) went to Rome on a mission representing Chrysostom's interests (the Emperor had ordered the exile of Chrysostom in 404; Cassian was apparently sent with letters from Chrysostom's supporters). At Rome Germanus disappears from the record; Cassian was ordained to the priesthood by Pope Innocent I and befriends the deacon (later Pope) Leo.
- C. 411-425 Cassian moved to Masillia (Marseille; southern France) and founded two monasteries (one for men and one for women) and wrote three works—the *Institutes*, the *Conferences*, and a Christological treatise *On the Incarnation against Nestorius*.
- Died c. 432-435, apparently at Massilia.

Institutes

- Latin *institutum* “teaching” or “guiding principle” (i.e. guide to the first stage of the monastic life and the nature of monastic community)
- Written between 419 and 426 at the request of Castor, bishop of Julia Apta (near Marseilles), who was founding a monastery and had asked for advice on how monasteries should function.
- A selective summary in Greek translation is extant in the *Epistula ad Castorem* falsely placed under the name of Athanasius in Migne, PG 28,849-871.

The *Institutes* is intended to provide teaching/orientation for new monks living in community (*pref.3*; p. 12) on

- rules governing the life of Egyptian monastic communities (Bks. I-IV)
 - Bks. I-III discuss monastic garb and monastic prayer
 - Bk. I: monastic garb and its symbolism (probably derived from Evagrius' letter to Anatolius)
 - Bks. II-III: daytime and nighttime prayer (beginnings of the liturgy of hours)
 - Bk. II: prayers and psalms of the night office in Egypt

- Bk. III: the daily office according to the Palestinian custom
 - Bk. IV discusses renunciation of the world; also discusses the ethos of obedience as a means to fight against one's old nature and arrive at humility (cf. §§ 29-30 on pp. 93-94; Abba Pinufius' flight to anonymity and his patient endurance of dishonor in §30 on pp. 94-96; compare also the definition of renunciation in §34 on p. 97 and the discussion of the monk as a crucified man in §35 on pp. 97-98).
- discussion of the eight principal vices and their remedies (Bks. V-XII)
 - For teaching on 8 vices is indebted to Evagrius but has a slightly different ordering
 - Bk. V: Gluttony
 - Bk. VI: Fornication
 - Bk. VII: Covetousness/avarice
 - Bk. VIII: Anger
 - Bk. IX: Dejection
 - Bk. X: Akeidia (see the famous passage in X.2 on p. 219)
 - Bk. XI: Vanity (Vainglory)
 - Bk. XII: Pride
 - Teaching on 8 vices is paralleled in *Confer.* 5 (Abba Serapion on 8 principal vices; cf. also *Confer.* 4, where Abba Daniel discusses lust; more treatment of the relationship between the vices here than in the *Institutes*)
 - Cassian is the bridge between Evagrius' eight evil thoughts and the medieval concept of the eight (later, seven) deadly sins.
 - Like Evagrius, describes
 - gluttony and lust as rooted in bodily drives (though often having an image/thought component) but vainglory and pride as rooted only in thoughts (Cassian, though, is willing to allow vices to arise from bodily drives, without insisting upon a coincident thought or the demonic introduction of a thought into the mind)
 - external causes provoke avarice and anger, while dejection and akeidia originate internally apart from direct external causes.
 - the interrelation between the vices (esp. in *Conf.* 5: "to conquer despair, sadness must be overcome; to drive out sadness, anger must be expelled; to extinguish anger, greed must be trampled under foot; to end greed, lust must first be suppressed; to overcome lust, the vice of gluttony must first be disciplined).

The Transmission of Eight Evil Reasonings to the Latin West and Their Transformation into the Seven Deadly Sins

This Greek list was taken over and adapted by Latin writers in the West (particularly John Cassian) to create the list of the **seven deadly sins** (the root sins which are fatal to spiritual progress) which one finds in Gregory the Great (540-604) and later Latin writers:

Some changes from the Greek list:

- "Inopportune grief" (= #5 in the Greek list) is dropped from the list.

- "Vainglory" (=7 in the Greek list) is treated as a species of "pride" (#8 in the Greek list) and is therefore no longer listed as a separate category.
- "Envy" is spun off as a separate category distinguishable from anger (=4 in the Greek list).
- "Love of money" (=3 in the Greek list) is broadened into "covetousness."

The final Latin list of the "seven deadly sins" is therefore as follows:

- (1) pride (*superbia* "arrogance" =8 in the Greek list. From Augustine onward, this is seen as the preeminent sin, which gives rise to all other sins and nurtures them, while being the chief obstacle to repentance and dependence upon God and thus the enemy of saving faith);
- (2) covetousness (=3 in the Greek list, but appropriately broadened beyond just money or riches);
- (3) lust (=2 in the Greek list, but expresses more clearly that one is focused upon inordinate or illicit sexual desire);
- (4) anger (=4 in the Greek list, but more narrowly focused on anger and irascibility-- envy is spun off as a separate entry=[6] below);
- (5) gluttony (=1 in the Greek list);
- (6) envy (an addition to the list, separated from the anger to which, in any case, it is often practically joined);
- (7) sloth (=6 in the Greek list).

Conferences (Collationes patrum)

- Later work (written c. 426-429) that is more comprehensive in scope (biblical basis for practices discussed in greater detail) and contains more discussion of the solitary (eremitic) life
- Interestingly, Cassian is quite willing to acknowledge the value of vocations in the world; cf. *Conf.* 14.6 "there are plenty of roads to God" and compare Luibheid, pp. 8-9 and on the different degrees of perfection, pp. 9-10.
- Consists of 3 groups of conversations (=Books 1-10, 11-17, 17-24; these 24 conversations with 18 *abbas*) that Cassian and Germanus are represented as having with famous ascetics in Egypt. These are not really dialogues; instead, the questions are prompts to introduce a summary of Egyptian ascetic teaching (problem made known and counsel received).
- Translated into Greek according to Photius *Bibliotheca* 197. A summary in Greek translation of Cassian's teaching on the eight evil reasonings is found in the second *Epistula ad Castorem* (PG 28, 872-905), which was recycled together with a little bit of supplementary material at the end from Evagrius and Nilus of Ancyra in ps.-Nilus *De octo vitiosis cogitationibus* (PG 79, 1436-1464), which was well-received in later Byzantine monasticism.
- *Conf.* 13 discusses the relation between grace and free will (perhaps intended to help monks respond to the teaching of Pelagius that had recently been condemned, and to provide a balanced approach to the introduction of Augustinian teaching in southern France).
 - In the conference, a monk named Chareromon says (§§8-9,11) that a good action may sometimes begin from divine grace and sometimes begin from

the human will but that both grace and human effort are needed to bring the action to completion, a statement which could be read as congruent with Chrysostom and contemporary Greek ascetic writers but incongruent with Augustine's later anti-Pelagian theology.

- There is also some material, taken up and developed by later writers like Faustus of Riez in his treatise *De gratia* (*On grace*; 473-474), which seems to teach that although the soul is powerless to choose the good without a preceding infusion of divine grace (e.g. at baptism), it subsequently has a role (not mechanically determined from without) in choosing and persevering in the good and that this is not incompatible with divine foreknowledge.
 - On Faustus, see Thomas A. Smith, *De gratia. Faustus of Riez's Treatise on Grace and Its Place in the History of Theology* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
- In §7, it also appears that unbaptized infants are not to be regarded as lost due to the persistence of original sin, although this could be taken to be a remnant of Gregory of Nyssa's Origenism rather than a repudiation of Augustine and the North African tradition.
- In *Conf.* 17, the discourse ascribed to the monk Joseph appears to reject Augustine's absolute prohibition of lying and accepts the value of deception in some circumstances.
 - Cf. 17.17: "If speaking the truth causes grievous crisis, we cannot but resort in desperation to what is not true; but only in such a way that our conscience bites us as we do it."
 - Compare 17.20.2: "Out of necessity one may pardonably acquiesce in the evil of a lie when...the damage done by speaking the truth and the [spiritual] benefit conferred on us from the truth could not offset the harm that would be caused."
 - What is meant by all this becomes clearer when we see that this discussion follows immediately upon a discussion in the previous conference (*Conf.* 16) of the value of relationships and of spiritual friendships grounded in a common goal and common moral commitments, where passive-aggressive displays of truthfulness and individual rightness are shown to be destructive (temptations to pride and lacking in love for the other).
 - This idea of non-transparency and the withholding of truthful information has continued to have a certain life in Western moral and pastoral theology.
 - For example, when a pastor is helping a couple whose marriage is in danger of collapsing, he may advise a husband who has been unfaithful or had other sexual partners prior to the marriage not to confess this to the wife at this particular time. Confessing these things at that time might be a self-directed personal project that is truthful and transparent and brings a sense of release from the weight of concealment, but it also lacks both love and discretion, because it chooses a time and an occasion to make this

revelation which is unreasonable for the wounded, struggling spouse to bear and which will result in the certain demise of a marriage which still has some possibility of being rebuilt and restored.

On the Incarnation of the Lord Against Nestorius (De incarnatione domini contra Nestorium)

- Written c. 429-430 in seven books at the request of Archdeacon (later Pope) Leo.
- Written under a certain pressure (not of the same value as Cassian's other two works).
- Consists of scriptural proofs for Christ's divinity and the unity of the two natures in Christ's person
- Evidences hostility toward Pelagianism.

Historical Influence of Cassian's Works

- Cassian's works became influential upon western monastic life.
 - Influenced both the *Rule of the Master (Regula magistri)* and the *Rule of Benedict* and were transmitted and read in Benedictine monasteries, since Cassian's works had been recommended by Benedict in his *Rule*.
 - For a modern appreciation of Cassian from within the Benedictine tradition, see Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005)
 - During the controversy caused by the rejection of Pelagianism and the question of how Augustine's later, anti-Pelagian account of grace and free will was to be received in the monasteries of southern France, Prosper of Aquitaine published a treatise against Cassian *Contra Collatorem (Against the Author of the Conferences)*. ET in P. De Letter (ed./tr.), *Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine* (New York: Newman Press, 1963), pp. 70-138.
- As mentioned previously, abbreviated Greek versions of the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* were circulated in the East and Cassian himself is mentioned in the *Apophthegmata patrum*.

Major Themes in Cassian

- There is a certain tension in Cassian's writings between Cassian's appreciation for the Egyptian desert fathers (who lived a more solitary, less structured life) and the communal life of the monasteries Cassian was founding and/or intended to address through his works.
- Cassian accepts and values the solitary life but treats the communal life as more humane and often better given our weakness and lack of self-awareness, which can only be improved by our being open to other's help and guidance, i.e. disclosure of thoughts to a spiritual director and seeking counsel regarding the specific nature of the temptations one was experiencing.
 - Later, especially under Gregory the Great, this practice was transferred over to pastoral care in the local parish and became part of the rite of

confession, which eventually became mandatory for all laypeople in the Western church and still exists in the Catholic church today.

Discretio

Discernment, i.e. a clear spiritual insight into a person's thoughts and actions, the demonic activity underlying the temptation, and insight into what needs to be done to resolve the issue. This allows the disciple to rely on the spiritual father's judgment even when the latter prescribes the relaxing or invigoration of one's ascetic regimen.

Gradual Correction Adapted to the Peculiar Situation of the Individual

E.g., there can be no uniform regulations for fasting; the spiritual director should take account of the person's age, physical health, spiritual state, etc.

Condensio

When the novice is severely tempted, it is appropriate for the spiritual director to recommend that the disciple divert his or her mind to the opposing vice: "In at least one way, vainglory is beneficial for novices who remain tempted by carnal vices. If a novice, otherwise harassed by the spirit of fornication, should hear a spoken word, he may think of the dignity of the priestly office or of the opinion of those who think that he is holy and innocent, and if because of this consideration he rejects the unholy temptation of desire...he restrains the greater evil through a lesser one."

This is familiar from Evagrius.

Another form of *condensio* involves relatively harmless but strictly necessary deception: "Out of necessity one forgives the evil of a lie when the damage of speaking the truth and the benefit granted by the truth do not offset the harm [caused by the truth]." Cf. beneficial lies/minor deceptions in some of the accounts of spiritual direction found in the *Apophthegmata patrum*, though this idea is much less prominent in Evagrius.

Purity of Heart (Cassian's Transformation of Evagrius' Apatheia)

For Cassian the goal (*telos*) of the Christian life is to arrive at communion with God ("the kingdom of God") through pure prayer. To get to this intermediate goal (*skopos*), one must attain "purity of heart" (*puritas cordis*), without which one cannot arrive at pure prayer/the kingdom of God. The concept of "purity of heart" thus allows Cassian to recognize Evagrius' idea that we must attain *apatheia* and overcome distractions in prayer and to give this a more biblical flavor.