

Mysticism: Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian

Evagrius (345-399)

A disciple came to Macarius the Elder one day and said: 'Macarius, what must I do to save my soul?' Macarius answered: 'Go and insult the dead.' The disciple went to the cemetery, he insulted the dead, and came back to Macarius. 'What did the dead say?' asked Macarius. 'They said nothing,' replied the disciple. Then Macarius told him to return to the cemetery and bless the dead. The disciple did so and came back to Macarius. 'what did the dead say?' asked Macarius. 'They said nothing,' replied the disciple. 'Be like the dead,' said Macarius. 'Judge nobody and learn to keep silent.'

This story is emblematic of what might be called the "teaching" of the desert. The great anchorites did not write and they wrote little. When they did instruct, it was often a teaching that was enacted rather than given verbally. Thus to 2 disciples who asked him whether the frequent visits he received did not prevent his praying, Abba Joseph made no reply. He went alone to the back of his cave and returned dressed in rags and walked about without a word. Then he went back again and this time he returned wearing clothes normally reserved for feast-days and continued his walking in silence. The disciples understood from this that, whether he were poorly or richly clad, the ascetic remained essentially the same man, and it mattered not at all whether he spoke or held his tongue. It is what is in a man's heart that matters; his appearance is of no consequence. All this was expressed and communicated *without a word*.

With Evagrius Ponticus, however, the tradition of the desert fathers finds a voice. In him we find the combination of one who is steeped in philosophy and theology, especially the thought of Origen, and who at the same time spent years in the desert learning by observation and through practical experience. In Evagrius the desert spirituality becomes articulate. This is how James Cowan (*Desert Father*) puts it:

He was the heir to the pioneering work of Anthony and Macarius the Egyptian and reflected their austere yet vigorous spirituality. He was the first man to clearly articulate the ascetic experience as it has been developed by Anthony and his successors. It is to him, then, that we must turn if we are to understand the method (*theoria*) of the desert anchorites. . . . In a sense, Anthony lived on in the person of Evagrius. (94)

It is clear, from stories that have been preserved about Evagrius, however, that before he spoke/wrote, he learned how to learn.

He came to the desert after a brilliant career in Constantinople. In one of the stories he comes to one of the elders (likely Macarius the Great) to pose the customary question we heard asked in the first of the stories I've retrieved: "'Tell me some piece of advice by which I might be able to save my soul.' The old man replied: 'If you wish to save your soul do not speak before you are asked a question.' Now this piece of advice was very disturbing to Evagrius and he displayed some chagrin at having asked it for he thought: 'Indeed, I have read many books and I cannot accept instruction of this kind.' Having derived much profit from his visit he left the old man."

There are other stories told about Evagrius that make it clear that being a cultured Greek among the desert anchorites was no easy road. Rather than being valued for his learning, it is apparent that Evagrius was informed that, in the desert, he was the apprentice. It is also apparent that he learned well. He is remembered and revered as not only a gifted writer and strenuous ascetic, but also as a lovable and charitable master. As he grew in purity of heart and attained a high degree of self-control that is a prerequisite for contemplation, he also grew in charity. He gathered disciples around him both because of his spiritual mastery and his human qualities.

How he came to the Egyptian desert makes for an interesting story in itself, but I want to use our time to speak about what he wrote and give something of the flavor of it.

First, the writings themselves.

In his own time and thereafter Evagrius was an enormously influential figure in the tradition of Christian spirituality. Yet he is a relative unknown among Christians—even among those whose profession is to investigate such areas. The Trappist writer, John Eudes Bamberger can write (1981): “the prevailing view fifty years ago was that Evagrius was an able teacher who left us some interesting, if not very impressive literary works.” Part of the difficulty was that some of his writings circulated (in Greek) under other names. *On Prayer* was attributed to St. Nilus, a commentary on the psalms circulated under Origen’s name. John Cassian cites Evagrius, at times virtually textually, without attribution. As for Evagrius himself, he was too important to be entirely written out of the *Lausiac History*, but it is apparent from scholarly research into this text that his role has been greatly reduced.

So, the question naturally occurs, “What happened?” You may recall that, in discussing more recent theological perspectives on mysticism, I noted that the continental Protestant tradition remained rather suspicious of mysticism in the Christian tradition. And that the reason for this is that mysticism was regarded as a kind of foreign import into Christianity, an alien intrusion that was deformative of the gospel rather than complementary with it. (Albert Schweitzer is a partial exception to this in allowing a Pauline mysticism that is eschatologically informed. Following Paul, however, the Greek influence intrudes and Schweitzer’s take on mysticism conforms to the continental tradition.) In Evagrius’s day the influence Greek thought, or the “Hellenization of Christianity” was a neuralgic issue. Much of the controversy centered around the contributions of Origen, and “Origenism” became a contagious stigma. Evagrius died before the storm broke, as it were, but his writings and his own person were engulfed in the condemnations of Origenism that were issued in the 5th and 6th centuries. Evagrius did not introduce Origenist ideas into the desert, but his writings are reflective of them and it is apparent that some of the condemnations had his interpretations of Origen in mind, more so than Origen’s own writings. Hence the necessity, in using Evagrius’ ideas, of being rather coy about the actual source. Also, the survival of some of his writings because they circulated under other names.

Among his writings the 2 most of concern to us are:

The *Praktikos* (also known under the title *The Monk*) This deals with the ascetic life as a means of cleansing the affections of passionate and disordered impulses, but in the nature of the case has much on prayer. It is one of Evagrius's most popular works.

Treatise on Prayer (or Chapters on Prayer) Bamberger calls this "the most important of all the Evagrian corpus."

A listing of his other writings can be found in Bamberger's publication, *Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer* (Cistercian Publications, 1981) There is no need to list them here, but I do want to mention one additional writing, since it is part of the detective story of the recovery of Evagrius's writings, the *Kephalaia Gnostica*. (As a result of official condemnation of Origenism and Evagrius personally, the Emperor Justinian ordered all Greek copies of this work destroyed. An expurgated version circulated in a Syriac translation, and an Armenian made from the Syriac, which toned down the Origenism found in the original Greek. Only the rather recent discovery of a text of a longer version, more faithful to the original text, makes it possible to better appreciate what Evagrius actually thought and wrote, and what was found objectionable.)

The form of Evagrius's writings is noteworthy. He writes in short, pithy, at times rather gnomic sayings of a single to a few sentences. The *Praktikos* has 100 (a "century" of such sayings), *On Prayer* 153 sayings.

A preliminary caution: we can work out a schematic presentation of Evagrius's thought. However, as suggested, he is taking his years of practical experience of living the monastic life and marrying that up with his impressive learning in Greek thought. While there is a degree of systematizing at work, one should not look for a fully worked out and finished system. There are elements in Evagrius's thought that fit awkwardly or not very well at all. That said, there remains an impressive degree of coherence in his writings.

The *Praktikos* first. As with Origen, for Evagrius the way of the soul is divided into 3 stages, although he adopts his own terminology. In Evagrius's terms: *praktike*, *physike*, and *theologia*.

Praktike: refers to the stage during which the soul develops the practice of the virtues. It is the life of struggle with demons (we'll have to say more of this aspect of desert spirituality), a struggle to overcome temptation and subdue the passions.

Physike: refers to the stage of natural contemplation—through contemplation of the natural order the soul rises beyond it to discern the principles that lie behind it. There is a natural movement from the immaterial to the immaterial.

Theologia: refers to knowledge of the Holy Trinity, contemplation of God as He is in Himself.

The goal of *praktike* is to bring the soul to the state of *apatheia*. This is the major concern of the *Praktikos*. In a succinct formulation, the goal of ascetical practice is to

purify the part of the soul that is the seat of the passions. In this treatise Evagrius sets himself the goal of explaining the method for attaining purity of heart through the sublimation and right ordering of the emotions (or, as he would call them, the passions).

Let it be said that the desert provided a context free from the distractions of city and court that had characterized Evagrius's earlier life. It enabled him to become a master diagnostician of the soul, understanding the interplay of its emotions, the complex interplay of vices and virtues. Bamberger goes so far as to say that "the method of observation employed by Evagrius is as close to a scientific psychology as clinicians are now able to establish." After citing a particularly perceptive text from the *Praktikos* he remarks that "except for the reference to demons [it] reads very much like a practical bit of advice for an intern in clinical psychology. It is the approach of dynamic psychoanalysis with its emphasis on careful observations upon one's most interior and spontaneous thoughts in their risings and fallings, in their associations and relations to one another" (9).

To give a concrete instance:

The passions are accustomed to be stirred up by the senses, so that when charity and continence are lodged in the soul then the passions are not stirred up. And when they are absent the passions are stirred up. Anger stands more in need of concupiscence and for that reason the love that is charity is to be reckoned a great thing indeed in that it is able to bridle anger. (#38)

In other words, to master anger more than good intentions are necessary. One must do more than desire not to harbor or express anger. The notion apparently is that specific virtues are counterweights to given vices. To master the vice one must actively cultivate the virtue.

Anger is not always and everywhere a vice, however. It can, suitably expressed and with a suitable object, serve the spiritual life:

When you are tempted do not fall immediately to prayer. First utter some angry words against the one who afflicts you. The reason for this is found in the fact that your soul cannot pray purely when it is under the influence of various thoughts. By first speaking out in anger against them you confound and bring to nothing the devices of the enemy. To be sure this is the effect of anger even upon more worthy thoughts. (#42)

The "devices of the enemy" draws our attention back to a salient feature of the *Praktikos* and of desert spirituality more generally: the prominence accorded the demonic. Of the century of sayings that form the *Praktikos*, fully 2/3 mention demons.

As noted in the earlier saying, the passions are connected with the senses. However, they are also connected with the demonic. It seems that Evagrius envisioned a sort of division of labor among demons. There were demons who specialized, as it were, in anger, others in vainglory, others still in avarice. (Evagrius has a list of 8 *logismoj*, or evil

thoughts. Many of these would be familiar to those who can recall the “seven capital sins” of the catechism, although with Evagrius they function more as a diagnostic than as a topic in moral theology. Further, he has in mind more the temptations these represent than the actual sins that can result.)

Back to the demons: these were a part of Evagrius’s world, inherited from neo-platonism as well as the NT. In desert spirituality they assume a prominence greater than the NT itself, however. Part of the “white martyrdom” undergone by the ascetic was the battle against demons. Certainly we don’t regard them in the same way as the 4th century context of Evagrius. Their prominent presence need not however distract us from appreciating the insights of Evagrius the diagnostician of the soul. Let me reproduce the passage Bamberger made reference to earlier:

If there is any monk who wishes to take the measure of some of the more fierce demons so as to gain experience in his monastic art, then let him keep careful watch over his thoughts. Let him observe their intensity, their periods of decline, and follow them as they rise and fall. Let him note well the complexity of his thoughts, their periodicity, the demons which cause them, with the order of their succession and the nature of their associations. Then let him ask from Christ the explanation of these data he has observed. (#50)

The desert monks are sometimes accused of being preoccupied with analysis of the dynamics of the soul to the detriment of the love of Christ. Passages such as the one just referenced challenge that easy generalization.

Before leaving the *Praktikos* some words on the interim goal of asceticism: *apatheia*. The closeness of this term to our word “apathy” should not lead to a ready equation of the two.

The first stage of *praktike* is struggle with the desiring part of the soul. This afflicts the soul by causing distractions. When the soul has reached the stage in which it can pray without distractions then the struggle engages the passionate part of the soul. Here is where anger, for example and especially can have a negative impact on prayer.

When the soul has calmed the irrational part (i.e., the desiring and passionate part) it enjoys undistracted and untroubled prayer. But we’re not out of the woods yet. Then it is open to a more subtle form of attack: two of the *logismoi*, vainglory (“most subtle and it readily grows up in the souls of those who practice virtue. It leads them to desire to make their struggles known publicly, to hunt after the praise of men”) and pride (“the cause of the most damaging fall for the soul. for it induces the monk to deny that God is his helper and to consider that he himself is the cause of his virtuous actions”). [Recall the remark made in one of the earlier classes about keeping a “successful Lent”!]

To have engaged these struggles and to have resisted the temptations to vainglory and pride is to have attained the freedom to pray, to contemplate. To enter into the second stage of natural contemplation and then to move to the stage of *theologia*. Suffice it to say here that this stage of prayer leads to a kind of knowledge of God. When the soul is stripped naked it can know God. This is not an ecstatic state, nor is it an apophatic

experience. Since God is infinite progress in knowledge of God is always possible, so there is an ignorance that is always yielding to knowledge. At this stage prayer is less something one does than something one is, not so much an activity as a state. *Apatheia* constitutes a foundational prerequisite to these higher states of prayer. To attempt them in its absence is dangerous. This is captured in the following from *On Prayer*:

The man who stores up injuries and resentments and yet fancies that he prays might as well draw water from a well and pour it into a cask full of holes. (#22)

Along with Evagrius's understanding of contemplation this writing contains eminently practical advice for every Christian, regardless of their degree of spiritual progress. For example,

Many times while I was at prayer, I would keep asking for what seemed good to me. I kept insisting on my own request, unreasonably putting pressure on the will of God. I simply would not leave it up to his Providence to arrange what he knew would turn out for my profit. Finally, when I obtained my request I became greatly chagrined at having been so stubborn about getting my own way, for in the end the matter did not turn out to be what I fancied it would. (#32)

Before leaving Evagrius, I've noted earlier that, despite his marginalization, he still managed to exert a great deal of influence on Christian spirituality, especially in its monastic forms. It's time to be a bit more precise about that, at least to the extent to naming some of those who bear the imprint of his experience and thought.

Prominent among those who would transmit Evagrius's teaching, albeit interpreted and tempered for a different climate, was John Cassian, of whom more in a bit. In Andrew Louth's succinct formulation, Cassian "introduced the Evagrian tradition in a modified form: the heretical elements were elided, the teaching about contemplative prayer very much modified, so it was the practical wisdom of Evagrius the monk was made known to the West." And through Cassian's writings the ideas of Evagrius found welcome in the spirituality of Benedictine monasteries. Thomas Merton judges Cassian an important source of the sense of the necessity to "preserve a healthy alternation between bodily and spiritual works, so that our faculties and powers apply themselves *in turn* in different ways to prayer, and one rests while the other works. This is the secret of Benedictine balance and sobriety, which we should always try to preserve at all costs because without it perpetual prayer is really impossible." Another conduit in the west of Evagrius's wisdom was the Pseudo-Denis, the Aeropagite. He is now known to have borrowed some of the basic elements of his own theology from Evagrius, where they passed into the mystical writers of the Middle Ages.

His writings found strong response in Syria. Issac the Syrian, a great theologian of the mystical life, was profoundly indebted to Evagrius. The translation of Issac's works into Greek put Evagrius's ideas into circulation under cover of a more respectable name.

Also in the east one can name Maximus the Confessor, John Climachus, Simeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas. The spiritual descendents of the last of these figures compiled the *Philokalia*, through which Russian Orthodox spirituality was fed.

Of necessity I shall be much briefer in the treatment of John Cassian. Since Evagrius, despite his influence, has been a relatively unknown figure in the Tradition, it seemed appropriate to apportion greater time and attention to him.

Cassian was concerned with the Christian life, that is with the *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ. This imitation found its ideal expression in the earliest Christian communities as those are described in the Acts of the Apostles. Cassian can write that “the system of cenobites took its rise in the days of the preaching of the Apostles. . . . The whole church, I say, was then such as now are the few who can be found with difficulty in the *coenobia*” (*Conferences* 18, 5).

It becomes apparent from Cassian’s writings that he did not think the monastic life the extraordinary way to Christ, one of many possible ways to imitate Christ and reach Christian perfection. It is the Christian life *par excellence*, the way of the serious Christian.

This is to say that Christian teaching, as he understood it, demanded serious effort, serious exertion to reach purity. To continue to live in the world, to have the responsibilities of family, to be subject to the demands of society—all this was incompatible with the ultimate goal of Christian life. This was nothing less than the restoration of the human soul to a state of original purity. In attaining this state the soul had to wage a battle against vices and sin.

Cassian takes over a list of basic vices from Evagrius. But this is more than a laundry list of things not to do. The root of these vices is self-assertion and self-love—in short, ego-building. The “fruit” of these 8 vices are the full range of our activities, including all the minor sins of our daily life. Here is how Peter Munz represents it:

In Cassian’s view this ego-building (or personality building as we might say today) can be reduced, step by step, to the eight vices; and conversely, each of the eight vices is responsible for one feature in our make-up; from gluttony we proceed to drunkenness; from fornication to scurrility and foolish talk; from covetousness to theft, perjury, greed and violence; from anger to murder; from dejection to bitterness and despair; from accidie to laziness and restlessness; from vainglory to heresy; from pride to envy and disobedience. This scheme is not exhaustive. But the trend of Cassian’s thought is clear. . . . He naturally concludes that salvation would consist in the gradual undoing of this superstructure which is built up so spontaneously upon the foundation of the basic vices in the course of ordinary life.

The process of undoing had to be a gradual one. The purity of heart of which salvation consisted had to be achieved, step by step, through the disappearance of the vices and their shoots.

(Peter Munz, “John Cassian” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 11 (1960): 1-22, at 4)

Through the driving out of our faults, virtues increase. The battle against vice is a battle against egotism. This battle against egotism is the necessary preliminary stage for freeing the mind for the contemplation of God. A mind that is constantly preoccupied with its own little schemes and agendas is precluded from contemplation of God.

The interim goal of this battle against vice is the *apatheia* we saw with Evagrius. Interim goal because *apatheia* is only the means to higher states of the soul's relationship with God. The battle against vice leads to self-surrender before God. It also leads, in a positive way, to the virtue of charity. This is not a mere feeling of "good will to all", a monastic version of Lucy's "I love humanity" (because you likely know the sequel: "it's people I can't stand!"). Charity manifests itself in the ability to be a true friend, the ability to bear the inconveniences imposed on us by other people. Charity, in short, is another name for purity of heart. At this point it is necessary that the stress on human effort (graced effort, to be sure, but real effort) gives way to an at times lyrical appreciation of God's graciousness toward us, as befits any theology of contemplation. Cassian's purity of heart is a state of perfection—or very nearly so. It is not the sort of perfection that we could expect to achieve on our own.

Put another way, purification of the heart involves the systematic dismantling of the screen we have built around our true self and behind which it lies concealed (even, and perhaps especially, from us). The gift of contemplative prayer indicates that we have made progress in the dismantling of that screen. At the same time it is a help to closer union with God in praying without images, a prayer in which the mind is enlightened with heavenly light.

To draw on Munz's formulations once again:

It is, therefore, understandable that Cassian should have thought that the essence of the Christian life is a war within the personality and that the Christian way is not quiet or gentle or pleasant, but a battle fought within the soul. . . . Both Cassian and Origen thought of deification as the clearing of the divine kernel from all accretions of supposed self-hood and not as the transformation of the human into the divine. (14-15)

I shall end with the somewhat schematic, rather general overview of Cassian's understanding of the Christian life as one that leads the soul to contemplation. For background on Cassian's life, principal writings and influence, consult Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950, 2nd edition 1968). Also worth reading is Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*. Ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005). The principal works that bear upon spirituality are the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*. Merton covers sections of both of these works in his lectures on Cassian, giving explanations and applications.

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