

THE ENCOUNTER OF THE EARLY CHURCH WITH THE GREEK AND ROMAN WORLD: A VIEW FROM MONASTIC THEOLOGY

On my desk as I write this paper is an early eighteenth-century book entitled *Défense des saints Pères accusés de Platonisme*. It is an earnest tome. The author, Jean François Baltus, was the Jesuit Rector of the University at Strasbourg and an ardent apologist. His book responded to a polemic entitled *Platonisme dévoilé*, an attack on alleged Catholic crypto-Hellenism written by the Protestant minister in Poitiers.

Fr. Baltus's anxious defense of patristic writers, all 650 pages of it, earns him a place in the venerable company of those worried that early Christian use of Greco-Roman philosophy might be seen as corrupting the purity of the Gospel. Early Christian attitudes toward Greco-Roman culture were complex, mainly because early Christians themselves were unavoidably marked by the predominating culture of the age. In some geographical and linguistic regions the influence of Greco-Roman culture may have been attenuated, but it was never absent, particularly among the literate. I have been asked to use a particular perspective, that of monasticism, to look at how early Christianity understood its relation to Greco-Roman culture. I implore your patience as I strive to suggest why this request was not a momentary fit of madness, some burp of the brain, on the part of those who planned this conference.

I. WHY MONASTIC THEOLOGY FOR THE CTSA?

The monastic writings of the fourth and fifth centuries display the full range of attitudes toward Greek and Roman understandings of the cosmos, and the place of human beings within it, that can be found in the larger pool of Christian literature. It would be better to describe these more robustly as “strategies of acknowledgment and engagement” rather than as mere “attitudes.” My assumption is that the culture in which we live, like the air we breathe, is ubiquitous and inescapable. I mean here of course culture in its fullness: shared language, literature, the arts, the sciences, not just “popular culture.” Culture is necessary for self-understanding and for intelligible communication with others: it is the software enabling our good selves to function in a useful manner. Christian analysis or critique of any contemporaneous culture is, therefore, always a response from *inside* that culture. We have always to be alert to the danger of false objectification (“the Church” vs. “secular culture”). After all, we live in a world in which even the Pope has an iPod: though the fact that it was given to him by the Jesuits at Vatican Radio may weaken its

relevance to my argument. But again, like the air, cultural quality must be monitored and sometimes regulated. We have to remember how easily the Gospel, counterintuitive and culturally subversive as it is, can get turned inside out, smoothed down and neatly tucked to fit the comfortable bed of those who prefer the sleep of avoidance to vigilant discipleship.

The Greek world gave Christianity—as Hellenistic Judaism before it—its language and all that came with it: the opportunities and limitations of Greek grammar, a highly developed metaphysics, profound ethical reasoning. The early Christian Bible was Greek in both of its “testaments.” We easily forget this simple point. I have wondered if the slowly widening gap of misunderstanding between eastern and western churches over the latter centuries of the first millennium could be traced back beyond issues such as the Filioque, or even papal primacy, to be laid at the fiercely unwashed feet of St Jerome. What have been the consequences of his extraordinary, even perverse, decision to create a new Latin translation of the Old Testament from the “Hebrew truth” rather than from the equally Jewish Septuagint Greek? As no less a figure than St Augustine rather untactfully pointed out, what was good enough for the Evangelists was not good enough for our friend in Bethlehem, and we have been picking up the pieces ever since.

Another reason for using a monastic lens to view this question of early Christianity and Greco-Roman culture is that monasticism is not primarily concerned with “theology” as such but with theologically informed *practice*. Thus the famous dictum of Evagrius Ponticus, great teacher and monastic theorist of the late fourth century: “if you are a theologian, you will pray truly; if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.”¹ Evagrius was not reducing theology to piety, but affirming that theology shapes prayer and is in turn shaped by prayer: the apothegm turns on the adverb, *alēthōs*, “truly.” For Evagrius and his contemporaries both within and outside the monastic movement, prayer could indeed be true or false, depending on one’s understanding of the Holy Trinity, of the divine nature of Jesus Christ, of the uncircumscribable and indepictable being of God. Theological insight was attained through the clarifying work of spiritual disciplines that aimed first at self-knowledge, in the belief that insight into divine things comes only when distorted views about oneself and one’s neighbors have been refocused. Passing through this narrow gate of self-knowledge one gained access to deeper understanding of the Bible, the sacraments, and those fundamental elements of Christian conviction known in the early period as the “Rule of Faith.”

The disciplines of clarification, typically described as “asceticisms” (*askēseis*), had two principal sources. First, there were the common religious practices of devout Jews, rooted in the Hebrew Bible, further developed in sectarian Judaism of the intertestamental period, and powerfully influential within the early Christian movement. Among these were fasting from food, drink, and, sometimes, sex; prayer

¹*Prayer* 60/61, Greek text as in *PG* 79.1180B (no. 60); the better manuscripts number this chapter as 61, the numbering followed in most modern translations.

at regular times of day and week; memorization of sacred writings. These practices can, of course, be found in other religious traditions, but they came to early Christian ascetics through Judaism. Second were practices traceable to the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic world. These were designed on the one hand to hone self-awareness and self-criticism, and on the other hand to inculcate an orientation beyond the self, to redirect human self-interest toward a more universal claim on one's attention, be it "reason" or "nature," or even something more explicitly theistic. These practices would include things such as manifestation of thoughts to a spiritual guide; analysis of obsessive desires and aversions; the use of brief, memorized, texts as cognitive therapy. In Christian monastic practice such hard-won self-knowledge was laid before the demands of the gospel to love God and others without holding something back "just in case."

Those of you with the ears to hear will by now have detected topics that have become familiar over the past thirty years particularly through the work of two brilliant students of Hellenistic philosophy and its impact on early Christianity. One of them is very famous, even notorious, and you all know his name and perhaps his work: Michel Foucault, who died in 1984. The other is winning more and more attention for his careful and highly nuanced treatment of similar topics, but his name may be less familiar to you: Pierre Hadot. Foucault is famous for his attention to what he called "care of the self" (*souci de soi*) and the associated "technologies of the self," while Hadot has become associated with the phrase, "philosophy as a way of life" (*philosophie comme une manière de vivre*).² Although both Foucault and Hadot emphasize a practical, as opposed to purely theoretical, understanding of ancient philosophy, they differ on the question of ultimacy: Foucault famously admired an "aesthetics of the self," while Hadot insisted that the goal was always a transcendence of the self in pursuit of a higher truth or purpose. Given that Foucault's work in this area was for his *History of Sexuality*, his focus on aesthetics is perhaps understandable, though the topic of sexuality makes his strangely solitary understanding of self-engineering more unsettling. Hadot, who had been a Catholic priest, was intrigued by mysticism and the path to mystical experience through what he called "spiritual exercises." Both Foucault and Hadot appealed to the full array of Greek philosophies in support of their arguments, but one could sum it up by saying that Foucault was finally an Epicurean with uncomfortably Stoic tendencies, and Hadot a Stoic with occasional Neoplatonic hot flashes.

Both Foucault and Hadot became fascinated by the links between early Christian monasticism and Greco-Roman philosophy. We have a fragment on John Cassian by Foucault, perhaps intended for another installment of the *History of*

²For a brief introduction, see Thomas Flynn, "Philosophy as a Way of Life: Foucault and Hadot," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (2005): 609-22. See also Stewart, "Asceticism and Spirituality in Late Antiquity: New Vision, Impasse, or Hiatus?," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 4:1 (Summer 1996): 11-15; reprinted in *American Benedictine Review* 48 (1997): 254-65. See also Hadot's conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson in *La Philosophie comme manière de vivre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001).

Sexuality, which after three volumes was left incomplete at the time of Foucault's death in 1984. Meanwhile, Hadot had written a brilliant essay on so-called "Spiritual Exercises" in Greco-Roman philosophy, and then supplemented it with a study tracking such practices as they made their way into Christian monasticism.³ The interest of two French intellectual luminaries should reassure you of the possible relevance of early monastic theology, and perhaps even modern monasticism, to the critical inquiry of Catholic theologians today. Both Foucault and Hadot understood that monastic theology, because of its relentlessly practical character, is arguably engaged with a wider range of cultural issues than purely doctrinal, apologetic or polemical theologies and, at least in some instances, engages them more directly.

This engagement is evident in the ways that early monks interacted with the philosophical traditions of their day in ways both overt and covert, both thematized and encrypted. The early Christian monk, so often viewed by later historians as successor to the martyrs, can equally and perhaps more accurately, be seen as the Christian colleague of the philosopher of Greco-Roman antiquity. Because monastic literature is ambivalent about this equation, I thought that this theme could be a helpful example of "the relation of theology to nontheological sources and voices," the overarching topic of this annual gathering of the CTSA. You will need to make the appropriate transpositions. As background to the ambivalence found in the monastic sources, we need a brief resume of early Christian attitudes generally toward Greco-Roman (and other non-Jewish) religion and philosophy.

II. CHRISTIANS AND GRECO-ROMAN ("PAGAN") RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Early Christian apologetics and polemics had two forms. First, there were attempts to demonstrate the legitimacy of the new religion so as to win recognition and toleration by imperial authorities. Second, there were attempts to compete with polytheists or woolly theists (including the recently recrudescing Gnostics) in the religious marketplace. The first kind—Christian protestations of respectability—were not very persuasive. The religious controversies were livelier, since the competition was real and there was some hope of success, especially in major religious markets like Alexandria. Whatever the audience or intention, Christian critique of Greco-Roman (and other) paganism employed three recurring points of contrast between the old religion and the new:

³Both essays have been translated by Michael Chase in Arnold I. Davidson, ed., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford UK and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1995) 81-144. The French original can be found in the third edition of Hadot's *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002) which includes a fascinating essay entitled "Un dialogue interrompu avec Michel Foucault. Convergences et divergences."

- Pagan worship (described as bloody, idolatrous and superstitious, offered to embarrassingly fallible gods) vs. Christian worship (unbloody, offered to the “True” and much more respectable God)
- Pagan morality, especially sexual morality (licentious, pleasure-oriented) vs. Christian morality (monogamous, sober, Scripture-based)
- Pagan learning (imperfect, human, transitory) vs. Christian wisdom (complete, divine, eternal)

At the time of the “rise of monasticism” in the fourth century, these tropes were increasingly being adapted to disputes internal to Christianity. The critique of pagan worship had been quite important in pre-Constantinian polemics, since Christians had to explain themselves in a Mediterranean religious culture dominated by cults, temples, and sacrifice. Over time, this line of argument became more theological, used in disputes with Gnostics and others thought to have a defective understanding of the Christian God. The other two arguments originally directed at pagan Greco-Roman culture were also recycled for more internal purposes. In both their original and their transposed form, they often employed that favorite figure of fun, the “philosopher.” As I noted earlier, the philosopher was the generic “spiritual” person of the Late Antique world, though this was spirituality with an intellectual bent. The philosopher’s principal challenge to Christianity was not that of skepticism (i.e., philosophy as an intellectual corrosive to Christian beliefs) but that of representing a genuine alternative, especially for literate overachievers like us. Thus the work undertaken by Origen in Alexandria and, later, in Caesarea of Palestine, to engage well-educated Christians needing help in seeing how their embrace of the faith could be intellectually credible. Recall the later example of Augustine, repelled by the unpolished language of the Old Latin version of the Bible, and rescued by Ambrose’s sophisticated interpretation of the biblical text. Nor should we forget how moved Augustine was by the story of the conversion to Christianity of the leading Neoplatonist philosopher, Victorinus: such examples functioned as a kind of permission to others.⁴

In Christian portrayal, the pagan philosopher was always male, except when the topic was the scandalous appropriation by women of the philosopher’s distinctive cloak (the tragedy of Hypatia proves the resistance). Sometimes the philosopher is portrayed as a sincere, if clueless, seeker after truth. On other occasions, he appears as a diffident and perhaps effete intellectual (like Paul’s Athenian audience at the Areopagus). Sometimes he is a cunning and dangerous adversary. When philosophers turn up in the writings of the fourth and fifth centuries, they are often stand-ins for the real antagonists: Arians, Jovinians, Pelagians, and the rest. In the monastic texts specifically, the philosopher is antitype to the monk. Setting up the contrast was problematic, since what monk and

⁴*Confessions* 8.2.

philosopher shared was in many ways greater than what divided them. Both had dedicated themselves, often at great personal cost, to the pursuit of “higher” things.

This parallel between monk and philosopher is neither simple nor unproblematic. In drawing it, one must acknowledge the tendency of Christian monasticism both ancient and modern to get snarled up in conflicts about the place of the intellectual life in the monastic vocation. There can be a wariness about intellectual life in monasticism that at its best keeps the academically inclined monk like me humble, and at its worst degenerates into narrow-minded fanaticism (one can see this happening today on Mount Athos, and even, dare I suggest it, rather closer to home). Here again, monasticism holds up a mirror to the larger church, both ancient and modern.

The early Christian period saw two implosions in significant monastic centers because of extreme polarization over intellectual questions. In the late fourth century, Egyptian monasticism was bitterly divided by controversies about biblical interpretation, with particular energy around the use of Origen’s commentaries. The leading thinkers and writers of the Egyptian desert were forced to flee, mostly to Palestine and Constantinople, whither the conflict followed them. Egyptian monasticism never fully recovered its vigor, and the nasty aftertaste of the dispute is evident in the literature. Origen and his readers become the target of routine smears of the most puerile and vicious kind: a fifth- to sixth-century collection of anecdotes about Pachomius, fourth-century founder of communal monasticism, alleges that he could detect readers of Origen by their terrible smell.⁵

One hundred and fifty years later, in the mid-sixth century, the monasteries of the Judean desert in Palestine were caught up in arguments about the more esoteric speculations of Origen, and especially of his monastic heir, Evagrius (more later on him), a controversy which led to the formal condemnation of Origen at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553. Lest you think this sort of thing never happened among the more genteel medieval and early modern monks of the west, you might look up the spirited exchange about the place of studies in the monastic life between Jean Mabillon, that most erudite of 17th century Benedictines, and Armand-Jean de Rancé, Cistercian Abbot of La Trappe.⁶ A modern example would be Thomas Merton’s struggles at Gethsemane to integrate his two vocations of monk and writer within that same Trappist tradition. All of us know that the virus of anti-intellectualism is alive and well in the church today. The monastic variants of the virus give us case studies by which to understand the disease more deeply.

⁵*Paralipomena* 7, as in Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia II: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules*, Cistercian Studies 46 (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 28-29. Cf. the *First Greek Life of Pachomius* 31, as in Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia I: The Life of Saint Pachomius*, Cistercian Studies 45 (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980) 317-18.

⁶Mabillon wrote his famous *Traité des études monastiques* (Paris, 1691) as a response to Rancé’s criticisms, thereby beginning a literary dispute between the two.

III. ANTONY THE GREAT: MONK VS. PHILOSOPHER

The beginnings of Christian monasticism are conventionally associated with Antony the Great, the first famous example of what had become a well-established movement identifiable both by its emphasis on traditional ascetic practices and its insistence on some degree of separation from normal social and ecclesiastical environments. Antony acquired his fame largely through the work of his energetic postmortem publicist, the beleaguered bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who realized that Antony could be a great poster child for his various campaigns. The first was to encourage a particular model of asceticism (loyal to the episcopate, distant from urban centers of power, not intellectually curious). Athanasius's second campaign was against the various strains of Arianism abroad in the 350s.⁷ Depending on the exact date of Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, there may have been other campaigns as well, e.g. against the Emperor Julian's attempt to restore paganism.

Athanasius portrayed Antony as “unlettered”—meaning he could not read and was innocent of Greek. This is historically inaccurate—we have letters written by Antony in Coptic that demonstrate at least some knowledge of Greek language and thought.⁸ Even Athanasius can't ultimately sustain the pretense of Antony's illiteracy, and has him encouraging his monks to jot down their troubling thoughts. The simplest reading of the text shows the impossibility of keeping the caricature going. For his own purposes, however, Athanasius needed to tell the story in bold strokes rather than in shades of grey. One of the most significant sections of the *Life* is an address by Antony to his monastic disciples. This extended discourse is a primer on monastic anthropology and psychology, and became a key source for later monastic development of those fundamental topics. Antony tells his monastic disciples, “the Greeks leave home and cross the sea to learn letters, but we have no need to go anywhere for the kingdom of heaven, or to cross the sea for the sake of virtue: for the Lord has said, ‘the Kingdom of heaven is within you.’” He then continues: “Virtue, then, needs only for us to will it, for it is in us and exists from us. Virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual [part] according to nature (*kata physin*).”⁹

Sounds like . . . Stoicism. The emphasis on will, and the inherence of a capacity to will the good, was a piece of Stoic thought that had been especially important for Origen, who borrowed the Stoic concept of natural “seeds of virtue” for

⁷See Columba Stewart, “Anthony of the Desert,” in Philip Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000) 1088-1101.

⁸See the discussion in Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 38-42.

⁹*Life* 20.4-5 (SC 400:188-90).

his analysis of human freedom.¹⁰ Other monastic authors will use the same concept.¹¹ Our interest tonight is in the *chutzpah* shown in the story: first Antony brags about how different Christians are from “Greeks” (meaning of course non-Christian Hellenes), using a biblical text for support. Then he applies a Stoic hermeneutic to his biblical proof text. If this really were a naïve monk cluelessly using the pop psychology of his day to explain a saying of Jesus, then the inconsistency could be explicable. But this is by the pen of Athanasius, sophisticated Alexandrian, second most important bishop of Christendom, canny disputant and tireless anti-Arian.

Athanasius’s Antony also has direct encounters with philosophers. Athanasius presents them as seekers coming to meet someone famed for his wisdom. The scenes are classic, the template for later variants such as those found in the *Way of the Pilgrim* and its less pious (but eminently readable) literary descendant, J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*. In the three such encounters depicted in Athanasius’s *Life*, Antony astounds by his oracular quips as well as by his skill in deploying the usual arguments against pagan religion. Athanasius’s Antony is no rhetorical slouch.

Given the gap between Athanasius’s portrayal of Antony and what we can learn about the great monk from other sources, Athanasius was clearly using his authority (both authorial and ecclesiastical) to refashion Antony’s legacy into something more congenial to Athanasius’s own views about monasticism, and to use his distorted portrait of Antony as a rhetorical tool in battling both Arianism and Greek intellectual hubris. Why is this so significant? The *Life of Antony* has been the most wildly successful work of hagiography in Christian history, read and loved to this day. I teach it annually to novices and graduate students for its concise presentation of monastic essentials, as well as for the ways Athanasius turns the story to his own ends. In this most central and influential of monastic texts, the early Christian ambivalence about non-Christian, nontheological, voices is patent.

IV. EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS: MONK AND PHILOSOPHER

Now it is time to return to Evagrius, with whom I began this lecture. He is the monk you’d want on a panel with Foucault and Hadot. One of their colleagues at the Collège de France, Antoine Guillaumont, actually entitled his own study of Evagrius, *Un philosophe au désert*.¹² Evagrius learned his philosophy and theology in Cappadocia from the likes of Gregory Nazianzen and Basil the Great. He ran with the big boys in Constantinople when Gregory was sent to the capital in 379 to rally the Nicene party, and stayed on after Gregory’s humiliating failure to master the politics of the imperial court and church. Evagrius was handsome and urbane,

¹⁰Seeds of wisdom and justice: *Princ.* 1.3.6; cf. 4.4.10, claiming that the *intellectus* always retains “seeds” that can call it back to something better when it has turned away from the good.

¹¹Evagrius, *Praktikos* 57 (SC 171:634); Cassian, *Conference* 23.11.

¹²Paris: J. Vrin, 2004.

and rather predictably, soon got into trouble. Like the hero of a nineteenth-century French novel, this lad from the provinces had come to the capital, hung out with people above his station in life, fallen in love with a married woman of a higher social class, and then had to leave town ignominiously when it all came crashing down. When a cleric got into such trouble in those days, he didn't go on medical leave or check into a treatment facility. Instead, he went off to a wise physician of the soul or joined a monastery. Evagrius did both, after consulting with one of the most learned women of monastic Jerusalem, Melania the Elder, who heard him out and determined that only the Egyptian desert could provide the environment he needed for what today would be called recovery. So Evagrius put away his nice clothes (he was known to change them in the course of the day, a vanity unheard of in the ancient world), donned the monastic habit, and went off to Egypt. There he apprenticed himself to one of Antony's disciples, Macarius the Great, and soon ended up in the remote settlement known as "Kellia," the Cells. This was an intense place, founded on traditional ascetic practices such as vigils and fasting, and with a strong emphasis on solitude. It also had a tolerance for Greek learning when used to understand Scripture and the monastic life. Evagrius went right to it, first managing to ruin his digestion with an overly zealous dietary regimen of refusing cooked food, then calming down from first fervor and starting to write.

Evagrius's monastic writings are among the most extensive and certainly the most wide-ranging and systematic in the whole of monastic literature. He was a true pedagogue, adapting key elements of existing philosophical pedagogy to the circumstances of the Egyptian monastic desert. These included the use of brief "chapters," akin to those used by Epictetus in his famous *Manual*, late Antiquity's best self-help book. He expected these chapters to be memorized in sequence, and even left instructions for scribes on how his works were to be formatted. He developed multipart programs of instruction pitched to novice, intermediate, and advanced monks.¹³

If it all sounds a bit too tidy, it is. It was also too ambitious, especially in its upper ranges. Evagrius emulated his principal theological source, Origen, by extending his scope far beyond normal parameters in the direction of both "protology" and eschatology. That is to say, Evagrius took up Origen's speculations about an original "first creation" of human intellects devoted to contemplative union with God, which was followed later by a "second creation" in which those same intellects, having drifted from perfect contemplation, were popped into material bodies and placed in this world to learn a lesson or two. Depending on the degree of their distraction, they became what we know as angels, humans, and demons, rational creatures all. Evagrius also followed Origen in looking beyond this world to successive worlds that will be further stages of our journey of return to union with God. In effect, both Origen and Evagrius created a kind of eschatological

¹³See Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy," in *Abba, a Festschrift* (Crestwood NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003) 241-71.

graduate school whose requirements and programs led finally to the beatific vision. In the third century Origen played around with these ideas as a way to engage Middle Platonist yuppies, but was careful to say that they were just speculations. By the late fourth century such ideas were clearly out of bounds. Evagrius compounded his imprudence by presenting them as doctrine rather than as speculations.¹⁴

Despite his overreaching in those upper ranges, the this-worldly portion of Evagrius's schematization of the monastic life proved to be immensely helpful and influential. At its core is an ascetical agenda focused on dealing with eight "thoughts" or passions that upset monastic serenity.¹⁵ For the most part, the litany is familiar to you: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sadness, accidie, vainglory, and pride. The Stoic inspiration is obvious enough, filtered through Origen's brilliant essay on the will and the thoughts in book III of *On First Principles*, and arranged by Evagrius on a grid derived from Platonic anthropology. The system of the eight thoughts was destined for a great career in the Byzantine monastic tradition because it was really useful. It was translated into Latin by John Cassian, and taken up by Gregory the Great, who turned it into the schema of the Seven Deadly Sins, which had a great run in western moral texts and has recently also had its 15 minutes of cinematic fame. This is surely great stuff. I want to focus, however, on the Platonic anthropology upon which Evagrius plots his eight thoughts.

Evagrius followed Plato in seeing the soul as tripartite, consisting of intellect (*nous*), desire (*epithumia*) and aversion (*thumos*).¹⁶ Many earlier Christian writers mention the Platonic model of the soul and occasionally make use of its terminology. In the *Life of Antony*, the Platonic anthropology makes a single, brief appearance near the section I quoted earlier.¹⁷ Evagrius brought it to the forefront of his monastic teaching. He had his reasons: this interplay of reason and the passions suited his analysis of the psychodynamics of temptation.

Knowing that his constant use of the tripartite model of the soul was unusual for a Christian writer, Evagrius took care to make it seem eminently traditional. His most well-known presentation of the scheme begins with the words, "Since according to our wise teacher the rational soul is tripartite. . . ." ¹⁸ The reader is meant to understand here an allusion to Gregory Nazianzen, Evagrius's theological

¹⁴See Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 179-210, for a brief overview and references to the major studies.

¹⁵See Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus and the Eight Generic Logismoi" for *In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies) 3-34.

¹⁶*Republic* 435ff; *Phaedrus* 246a-c, 253c-e.

¹⁷"Let our struggle be that *thumos* not tyrannize us, nor *epithumia* control us . . . for we have fierce and vicious enemies, the wicked demons," *Life* 21.1-2 (*SC* 400:192); cf. 19.4 (*SC* 400:186).

¹⁸*Praktikos* 89 (*SC* 171:680).

mentor.¹⁹ The problem is that Gregory does not use this system, and indeed few early Christian writers do. Evagrius had in fact borrowed this material from an ethical manual that circulated widely in antiquity as a treatise of (Pseudo-) Aristotle entitled “On the Virtues and the Vices.”²⁰ From this synthesis of the Platonic tripartite model of the soul and Aristotelian and Stoic teaching on the virtues, Evagrius extracted a brief section that relates eight virtues to the three parts of the soul. The source text begins, “Since according to *Plato* the soul is thought to be tripartite. . . .” When Evagrius got hold of it, he also Christianized the list of virtues found in the source text, though carefully retaining the four cardinal virtues emphasized by the Stoics (prudence, temperance, courage, justice) that had become stock elements of Hellenistic ethics.

In his remodeling of this bit of Hellenistic pop psychology Evagrius does disservice to both Gregory and Plato. To Gregory, by attributing to him a system that he did not use, and thereby using his name to cover his own philosophical tracks. He does disservice to Plato and subsequent philosophers by suppressing the Platonic inspiration of this tripartite model of the soul. What was Evagrius’s game? Was it simple caution in an increasingly polarized monastic environment? Perhaps. He may also have been a little embarrassed for using an anthropology avoided by his mentors. Origen, like any educated Christian author, knew the Platonic model and occasionally mentioned it when referring specifically to the irrational part of the soul. But he generally preferred Paul’s Semitic, biblical, anthropology of spirit, soul and body (1 Thess. 5:23).²¹ Plato’s model, wrote Origen, lacked biblical support²² and left no place for the animating power of “spirit.” As we all know, Origen was first and always an exegete. Evagrius’s major general error may have been to stray too far from the safety net of exegesis. Faced with the need to cite authorities acceptable to his audience, he even remodeled Antony in his own image and likeness. Just a few lines after that fishy chapter on anthropology, Evagrius cites an otherwise unknown saying of Antony. Our hero of the desert is in conversation with . . . you guessed it, a philosopher. The visitor asks the monk how he lives without the consolation of books, and receives this reply: “my book, O philosopher, is the nature of created things, and it is there whenever I want to read the words of God.”²³ Dear, unlettered, Antony, promoting a “spiritual exercise” that would have made any Stoic sage feel right at home. The saying is otherwise unknown. Of

¹⁹On this identification, see Antoine and Claire Guillaumont in *SC* 171:683-84n.

²⁰The text is reproduced in *SC* 171:682-83n; the essential section was included in the *Peri Pathon* falsely attributed to the Peripatetic philosopher Andronicus of Rhodes (1st c. BCE).

²¹See Jacques Dupuis, *L’esprit de l’homme: Étude sur l’anthropologie religieuse d’Origène*, Museum Lessianum section théologique 62 (Paris/Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967) esp. 36-39.

²²*De principiis* 3.4.1 (*SC* 268:200, ll. 30-33); cf. *Contra Celsum* 5.47 (*SC* 147:12-13), where Origen notes the Stoic rejection of the tripartite Platonic model.

²³*Prak.* 92 (*SC* 171:694). Cf. *In Ps. 138:16* (*PG* 12:1661C-D), “the contemplation of bodies and of the unembodied is the book of God.”

course it is: because this is not Antony speaking, but Evagrius himself. The contemplation of creation, *theoria physike*, was a key part of his system, another borrowing from the philosophers themselves. As Evagrius writes in a treatise addressed to Melania, “God, out of his love, has provided created things as a mediator, like letters [to us].”²⁴

V. CONCLUSION

Evagrius’s strategy of concealed engagement has a long history in Christian thought. As you have heard tonight, lurking behind our monastic examples stands their manifest, but always anonymous, theological inspiration, the great “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” of the Christian tradition, Origen. The name itself, Origen/origin, makes for an apt pun in English, but a sad one as well. Evagrius never mentioned Origen by name despite plundering his thought on a massive scale. Why not? Two decades later, Evagrius’s disciple John Cassian would mention neither Origen or Evagrius, despite direct borrowings from both.²⁵ Cassian had more obvious justification for his reticence, having had to edit the dangerously esoteric elements of his two masters’ theology in order to rescue their more practical instruction. And, by the time he wrote, both Origen and Evagrius were associated with that tragic late fourth-century division in Egyptian monasticism, a crisis that had driven Cassian himself into the exile. There he would write his formidable Latin synthesis of monastic teaching as a foundation for the nascent monasticism of the west. Surely he must have decided that he could not endanger his larger project by linking to it such polarizing names. Evagrius’s own writings would be relabeled as the work of others or lost in their original Greek, many of them surviving only in translations made in less politically sensitive regions of the Christian world.

At least now we can acknowledge our debt to Origen, the early church’s most creative mind, my own most brilliant teacher. And we can publish Evagrius’s writings under his own name, and see his extraordinary contribution to monastic spirituality despite his esotericism. Their more immediate followers could not do so. As we pursue the early monastic engagement with Greco-Roman thought, we find a literary form of the Russian “matrouschka” dolls: open one, and find another, and another, a regression of sources, each concealing another. Athanasius concealing the real Antony, even his Antony concealing his debt to Greek thought. Cassian concealing Evagrius, Evagrius concealing Origen and Hellenistic psychology.

²⁴*Letter to Melania*. Syriac text in Wilhelm Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Neue Folge 13.2* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1912) 612, ll. 24-25.

²⁵“John Cassian’s Schema of Eight Principal Faults and his Debt to Origen and Evagrius,” in Cristian Badilita, ed., *Jean Cassien entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2003).

The examples I have shared with you tonight from the monastic microcosm suggest the abiding ambivalence of the early church toward Hellenistic thought, and toward its bolder Christian exponents. Sometimes the ambivalence was prudent, or at least understandable; sometimes purely formal and ridiculous; sometimes poignant in its reserve. Lest we think that this strategy of concealed engagement was a phenomenon only of the noncopyrighted and exuberantly plagiaristic ancient world, a moment's reflection will bring to mind twentieth-century parallels aplenty. As I wrote this paper, I realized that the three modern scholars I cited were all French. One was hostile to Christianity but became fascinated with it; another was disgusted by ecclesiastical resistance to modern thought and found refuge in the later Stoics; the third remained a believer, while sympathetic to Evagrius's use of Origen's bolder intellectual explorations. Perhaps no other nation did more for Catholic theology in the twentieth century than France, and in the first half of that century none suffered more than French theologians in the fierce reaction to their brilliant effort to read the tradition in the light of their own times: Marie-Joseph Lagrange of the École Biblique, Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar. As in the early Christian world, responses to their work ranged from the prudent to the ridiculous to the poignant, and they have their present-day counterparts.

The early monastic reticence about the real influence of Greco-Roman thought upon their theology and practice was perhaps the price paid to bring nontheological, and even non-Christian, voices into creative play with Christian thought. But such strategies have their own cost. Like our spiritual ancestors of the monastic desert, we too must use every tool available to us to make sense of ourselves, our life together, and the wondrous Universe we have been allowed to inhabit. When our use of those tools is excluded a priori, or indeed, when we ourselves fail to use them critically, the price becomes insupportable.

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