

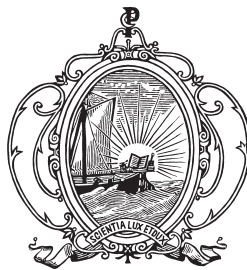
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Original Sin in the Provençal Ascetic Theology: John Cassian

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ABSTRACT

Original sin was not a fundamental issue in the so-called Augustinian controversy in Southern Gaul. Both the 'Provençal masters' and the 'Augustinian faction' shared the view that all mankind was condemned in Adam, so that every human being – born under the slavery of sin – needs Christ's redemption. According to John Cassian's ascetic theology, Man's inability to attain the highest good to which human nature must aspire – the perennial contemplation of God – is also a consequence of original sin. The *lex peccati* which fights against the spirit and pushes the ascetics away from *uisio dei* was introduced on human nature by God as a punishment of Adam's transgression. However, this *lex peccati* serves to a good purpose: it makes Man aware of his dependence upon God's grace and then prevents him from falling into the sin of pride. Besides, it incites the ascetic to continued spiritual advancement. Far from sharing Augustine's views on total annihilation of Man's capacity for good, Cassian states that only ascetics who strive for spiritual perfection can acknowledge the limitations of human post-lapsarian nature. Only they can fully understand Scripture's revelation about original sin and its consequences. As it is well known, Cassian appealed to his own ascetic experience in Egypt and Palestine to establish his rights to reshape Gallic monasticism. *Experientia* is also a keyword in Cassian's theological and anthropological teaching: according to the divine of Marseille, a full understanding of Scripture requires purification of sins. On this ground, Cassian could appeal to his own ascetic *experientia* to establish himself as a master of theology in Southern Gaul.

A study on the anthropology and theology of original sin in John Cassian¹ should perhaps take as a starting point the passage in *De institutis coenobiorum*

* This study was conducted thanks to a Beatriu de Pinós post-doctoral scholarship (2009 BP-A 00225) awarded by the Universities and Research Commission of the Government of Catalonia's Ministry of Innovation, Universities and Enterprise. The study was conducted as part of research project HAR2010-15183, whose principal investigator is Dr. Josep Vilella Masana. The author is a member of the Laboratoire d'études sur les monothéismes [Monotheisms Studies Laboratory] (UMR 8584) and the Grup de Recerques en Antiguitat Tardana [Late Antiquity Research Group] (University of Barcelona).

¹ Modern research has not paid too much attention to the way how Cassian incorporated the concept of original sin in his theological system, conceived as a theoretical basis for Christian ascetic life. This is perhaps due to the fact that the transmission of Adam's sin was not a point of

in which he states that knowledge of the Scriptures is obtained not from the study of the *commentatorum libri*, but only after purification of the vices. Man is prevented from a clear understanding of scriptural revelation not by his lack of some specific knowledge, but rather by sins.² Cassian's patristic dossier with which he concludes his *De incarnatione Domini* provides sufficient evidence that he never dispensed with these *commentatorum libri* when producing his spiritual and theological doctrine.³ But the Abbot of Marseille always gave more importance to the teachings of teachers and spiritual guides who taught from their own personal experience of Christianity than to the *uaniloqua disputatio* of those thinkers who, like Pelagius, tried to show the way to *consummatio uirtutum* through pure theological speculation.⁴

And the teaching of those who have attained *puritas cordis*, the highest degree of *πρακτική*, the 'practical life' of the ascetic,⁵ according to Cassian is a radically pessimistic teaching on the possibility of human nature attaining,

discussion between Cassian and the 'Augustinian faction' in Provence. See, besides the works quoted below: David J. McQueen, 'John Cassian on Grace and Free Will. With Particular Reference to *Institutio* xii and *Collatio* xiii', *RTAM* 44 (1977), 5-28; Dunstan O'Keefe, 'The *via media* of Monastic Theology. The Debate on Grace and Free Will in Fifth-Century Southern Gaul (III)', *DR* 113 (1995), 157-74, 157-62; Donato Ogliaari, 'The Conciliation of Grace and Free Will: Cassian's *Conlatio* 13 revisited', *Augustiniana* 50 (2000), 141-73; Salvatore Taranto, 'Giovanni Casiano e Agostino: la dottrina della grazia', in Christian Badilita and Attila Jakab (eds), *Jean Cassien entre l'Orient et l'Occident. Actes du colloque international organisé par le New Europe College en collaboration avec la Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft (Bucarest, 27-28 septembre 2001)* (Paris, 2003), 65-132.

² Cassianus, *De inst. coen.* 5, 34, ed. Michael Petschenig, CSEL 17 (Wien, 2004, *editio altera supplementis aucta curante Gottfried Kreuz*), 107. See also *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 6, 18 (125): '*impossibile uero scientiam spiritalem sine integritatis castimonia possideri*'. Evagrius Ponticus – Cassian's chief master – had asserted that purification of the sins is a pre-requisite to attain *γνώσις πνευματική*, also available to illiterates. See Salvatore Marsili, *Giovanni Cassiano ed Evagrio Pontico. Dottrina sulla carità e contemplazione*, *Studia Anselmiana* 5 (Roma, 1936), 128-33; Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York / Oxford, 1998), 90f.

³ Cassianus, *De inc. Dom.* 7, 24-30 (CSEL 17, 382-9).

⁴ See, for instance, *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 15, 1 (215), which clearly addresses Pelagius. *Experientia* and related terms are keywords in Cassian's theological and anthropological teaching. See also *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 19 (220); *id.*, *Conl.* 12, 16, 3, ed. M. Petschenig, CSEL 13 (Wien, 2004, *editio altera supplementis aucta curante Gottfried Kreuz*), 359; *id.*, *Conl.* 13, 18, 4 (395) – which addresses Augustine's defenders in Provence –; *id.*, *Conl.* 21, 32, 1 (606f.).

⁵ Ascetic progress is presented by Cassian as an ascent of Man from the fear of God, which causes him to despise the world through fear of divine punishment, to *puritas cordis*, a state in which Man does good no longer out of fear of eternal punishment, but out of love of virtue itself, without effort, *uelut naturaliter*. *Puritas cordis* opens the way to God's contemplation. See *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 4, 39 (75f.); *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 4, 43 (77f.). Compare Evagrius Pont., *Epist. ad Anatolium*, 8, ed. Antoine and Claire Guillaumont, SC 171 (Paris, 1971), 492; *id.*, *Liber pract.*, 81 (SC 171, 670). See also Michael Casey, 'The Journey from Fear to Love: John Cassian's Road Map', in Pauline Allen, Raymond Canning, Lawrence Cross and B. Janelle Caiger (eds), *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, 1 (Queensland, 1988), 181-95; Adalbert de Vogüé, *Histoire littéraire du mouvement monastique dans l'antiquité*, 6: *Les derniers écrits de Jérôme et l'œuvre de Jean Cassien (414-428)* (Paris, 2002), 98-107.

during this life, the highest good, the perennial contemplation of God, to which Man is called. He who has reached the perfection of virtue and purity of heart is the first to recognise that he is overwhelmed by the weight of sin.⁶ Indeed, separating oneself from divine contemplation or even giving only a moment of time to superfluous thoughts during prayer are trespasses whose sinful nature is recognised only by the perfect,⁷ inevitable sins that prove the current impossibility of *impeccantia* in Man.⁸

According to Cassian, the *infirmis* of human nature, Man's inability to attain the highest good by his own strengths, is a fundamental premise of the *traditiones* of the Desert Fathers of Egypt on which the Abbot of Saint Victor of Marseille tried to base the nascent monasticism in Gaul.⁹ We must remember that the works of Cassian were created in the context of a rise in ascetic spirituality among large sectors of the Christian Gallo-Roman aristocracy.¹⁰ As Cassian has it, the vice of vainglory had a hold particularly on monks belonging to a social class whose members often considered themselves the *pars melior humani generis* (Symmachus, *Ep.* 1, 52).¹¹ Faced with this threat, Cassian's spiritual doctrine places particular emphasis on the *fragilitas* of human nature and on Man's total dependence on divine grace at every stage of ascetic progress, from God's initial *uocatio* to the attainment of *puritas cordis*.¹²

⁶ Cassianus, *De inst. coen.* 12, 15, 1 (215f.).

⁷ *Id.*, *Conl.* 23, 5, 9 (648).

⁸ *Id.*, *Conl.* 23, 19, 1 (668f.). We should always keep in mind that Cassian's argumentation against *impeccantia* takes into account only ascetic experiences and sets the standard of sin higher than Pelagius and his supporters. According to Cassian, ascetics can achieve perfection in the 'practical life' with the help of God's grace. See Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1968), 103.

⁹ On Cassian's plans to use the monastic *instituta* observed in Egypt and Palestine as the basis to reform a Gallic monastic movement characterised by the 'improvisation' of its instigators, who, again according to Cassian, established monastic rules based on their own criteria and did not know the spiritual teachings of the Egyptian tradition, see Cassianus, *De inst. coen.*, *praef.* 8 (6f.). An essential work related to this topic is Richard J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian. Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (New York, 2007).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 19-31.

¹¹ See, for example, Cassianus, *De inst. coen.* 11, 13 (201), in which Cassian states that vanity is a vice that threatens not only those who have progressed on the path of asceticism, but also some *incipientes* who become proud because they have *parentes diuites ac nobiles* and because they have rejected the political career to which they were destined; *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 4, 4 (50), in which Cassian praises the Pachomian practice of forbidding postulants from bequeathing their money to the monastery, in order to prevent them looking down on their poorer peers; *id.*, *Conl.* 4, 20, 3 (116), monks who reject the priesthood because they feel it is beneath the social status they enjoyed as laymen; *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 27, 1 (225), monks who become proud because of their *nobilitas natalium, saeculi dignitas* and *pecunia*.

¹² See, for instance, *id.*, *Conl.* 3, 10, 6 (83). On ascetic perfection as a gift (*charisma*) from God in Cassian, see Alfons Kemmer, *Charisma maximum. Untersuchung zu Cassians Vollkommenheitslehre und seiner Stellung zum Messalianismus* (Löwen, 1938), 41-6.

There is a particularly strong awareness of this *infirmetas* or *fragilitas* of human nature among ascetics who have temporarily enjoyed the highest good to which Man should aspire: the contemplation of God. These ascetics thus realise that there is an innate law in human nature that forces people to abandon divine contemplation and give way to earthly thoughts. This *lex peccati*, the law of the flesh that fights against the spirit and pushes it away from the contemplation of God, is the punishment inflicted by divine justice for the *praeuaricatio* of the first man, a punishment to which all mankind is subject, without exception.¹³ Cassian states that all mankind was condemned in Adam.¹⁴ The Adamic transgression resulted in Adam's offspring becoming subject to the slavery of sin, and the sale of the entire human lineage to the devil.¹⁵ According to Cassian, when Adam became a servant of the devil, this condition was passed on to all his offspring because of carnal generation: a marriage between slaves can only engender slaves.¹⁶ Cassian agrees with Augustine and Ambrose that only Christ, who, conceived by a virgin without *utriusque sexus commixtio*, came into the world *in similitudine carnis peccati*, was without the sin that Adam contracted when he trespassed.¹⁷ Therefore only Christ was free from the sting of carnal lust that all men must suffer *natura iam administrante*.¹⁸

Indeed, this *lex peccati*, the struggle of the flesh against the spirit, as present in all men without exception since the downfall of Adam, may in a sense be considered part of human nature.¹⁹ According to Cassian, although this law of sin has its origin in the Adamic transgression, it was instituted by God and therefore must serve a good purpose. For Cassian, the *lex peccati* remains an expression of God's love for Man.²⁰ The war of the flesh against the spirit serves to incite Man to continued spiritual advancement: the peace that would follow the definitive end of this fight would have a detrimental effect.²¹ To fully understand this view held by Cassian, we must bear in mind his interpretation of the falls of Lucifer and Adam. Lucifer, whom the Creator's goodness made to shine over other heavenly beings, attributed his glory to the power of

¹³ Cassianus, *Conl.* 23, 11 (655f.). As A. Koch already explained, according to Cassian original sin is a theological presupposition that explains a reality that has been empirically observed: the physical mortality of Man and the opposition between the flesh and the spirit in all individuals. Alexander Koch, *Lehre des Johannes Cassianus von Natur und Gnade. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Gnadenstreits im 5. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1895), 24-34.

¹⁴ Cassianus, *Conl.* 5, 6, 3 (125).

¹⁵ *Id.*, *De inst. coen.* 3, 3, 3 (35); *Id.*, *Conl.* 23, 12, 2 (656-7).

¹⁶ *Id.*, *Conl.* 23, 12, 3 (657).

¹⁷ *Id.*, *Conl.* 22, 12, 1 (631). Compare Augustinus, *De nupt. et conc.* 2, 5, 15, ed. Karl F. Urbani and Joseph Zycha, CSEL 42 (Wien, 1902), 267.

¹⁸ Cassianus, *Conl.* 5, 6, 4 (126).

¹⁹ *Id.*, *Conl.* 4, 7, 1 (102).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Id.*, *Conl.* 4, 7, 2 (102). On this subject, see Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency. A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon [Georgia], 1996), 100.

his own nature and not to the bounty of the Creator. Lucifer believed he did not need God's help to persevere in his state of purity, but that the exercise of his free will was sufficient to achieve the perfection of virtue and perseverance in supreme bliss. His pride, which made him believe he was equal to God, was the cause of his fall.²² Lucifer then seduced Man by making him believe he could obtain God's glory by exercising his free will and using his own strength. The pride conceived by Adam made him lose the glory he had received by the grace of the Creator.²³ The interpretation of the case of Lucifer sheds light on the positive nature of the war of the flesh against the spirit – the punishment of original sin – in the spirituality of Cassian: the end of this war, the *pax pernicioso* that would follow, a peace that Lucifer enjoyed before his fall, would inevitably lead to another fall of Man into the sin of pride.²⁴ Therefore, even in ascetics who have attained the highest level of *πρακτική*, *puritas cordis*, their submission to the law of sin is crudely manifest. Cassian says, for instance, that ascetics will be subject to attacks of the lust of the flesh until they are able to acknowledge that all their efforts to overcome it are in vain without the help and protection of God.²⁵ The flesh rebels against the spirit to warn Man of his total dependence on the grace of God and prevent his vanity.

According to Cassian, Christ went to the cross *pro totius mundi salute*.²⁶ The Abbot of Saint Victor of Marseille asserts that to say God did not call all mankind to salvation, but only some people, necessarily implies denying that all mankind was born under the weight of original sin.²⁷ Because all sinned in Adam, all are offered redemption. Divine mercy would only exclude from redemption those who did not need it: those who are without original sin or personal sins. Cassian uses the notion of original sin to reject Augustine's theses about God having a salvific will restricted to only some people. Significantly, the only appearance of the term *originale peccatum* in all of Cassian's work is in a passage that aims to respond to the exegeses of 1Tim. 2:4 proposed by Augustine in his later treatises on grace.²⁸ However, the soteriology of Cassian is not very different from that of the Bishop of Hippo in regard to the centrality of the Cross of Christ in *historia salutis*: Man must remain in the servile condition inherited from Adam until Christ returns him to his original

²² Cassianus, *De inst. coen.* 12, 4, 2-3 (208f.).

²³ *Id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 5 (209).

²⁴ Indeed, the vice of pride attacks the *perfecti* – those who have attained *consummatio uirtutum* – even more virulently (*id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 1 [206], for instance).

²⁵ *Id.*, *De inst. coen.* 6, 5 (118).

²⁶ *Id.*, *De inst. coen.* 3, 3, 3 (35).

²⁷ *Id.*, *Conl.* 13, 7, 3 (370).

²⁸ As already seen in Donato Ogliaari, *Gratia et certamen. The Relationship between Grace and Free Will in the Discussion of Augustine with the so-called Semipelagians* (Leuven, 2003), 137. On Augustine's interpretations of 1Tim. 2:4 see Alexander Y. Hwang, 'Augustine's interpretations of 1 Tim. 2:4 in the Context of His Developing Views of Grace', *SP* 43 (2006), 137-42.

state of freedom.²⁹ The *sancti, electi* and *familiares deo* who lived before the Incarnation could not save themselves on their own, but also needed *aduentus domini et redemptio*.³⁰

Since men are endowed with freedom of choice from which they have not been totally deprived after Adam's fall, God does not save them against their will, *inuiti*. Otherwise, He could be accused of being unjust:

*Sed quia omnibus rationabilibus creaturis arbitrii libertatem creator indulserat, eos, qui contra fas edacis concupiscentiae transgressione uendiderant, inuitos ad ingenitam libertatem reuocare non debuit. abhorret siquidem ab illo iustitiae ac pietatis auctore, quidquid bonitati aequitatisque contrarium est. malum enim fuerat si concessae libertatis beneficium reuocasset, iniustum si liberum hominem potentia sua opprimens atque captiuans libertatis acceptae pontificium exequi non sinuisset.*³¹

Consequently, men must adhere freely to God's salvific plan. In none of his works does Cassian, a teacher of spirituality, address the case of children who have died before being baptised and therefore have not been able to participate in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. Perhaps Cassian could be included among the Provençal teachers who claimed that newborn babies who died without being baptised were punished by God for the sins they would have committed if they had reached adulthood.³² Indeed, although according to the testimony of Hilary of Marseille some Provençal theologians preferred to question whether babies received eternal damnation,³³ Cassian seems explicitly to reject a possible solution to this question: the 'Pelagian' distinction between *Regnum Dei* which would exclude the unbaptised, including children and *uita aeterna* which unbaptised children would be granted: '*ubi autem regnum dei est, ibi procul dubio et uita habetur aeterna*', says Cassian in his *Conlationes*.³⁴

According to Cassian, after the Adamic transgression, punished by God with the institution of a *lex peccati* in the flesh that fights against the spirit, Man acquires knowledge of evil, but does not lose the knowledge of good that he received by grace from the Creator.³⁵ He does not lose his free will either.³⁶ As Donato Ogliari rightly pointed out, Cassian's firm defence of the 'creationist theory' on the origin of the soul leads him to reject the existence of a radical

²⁹ Cassianus, *Conl.* 23, 12, 6 (658).

³⁰ *Id.*, *De inc. Dom.* 5, 15, 3 (324).

³¹ *Id.*, *Conl.* 23, 12, 4-5 (657). But compare *id.*, *De inst. coen.*, 12, 18 (219): '*ab eo nonnumquam etiam inuiti trahimur ad salutem*'; *id.*, *Conl.* 7, 8, 2 (190); *ibid.* 13, 9, 1 (372); *ibid.* 13, 15, 2 (389); *ibid.* 13, 17, 1-2 (393). In my opinion, the above-quoted passage from *Conlatio* 23 should be seen as Cassian's 'last word' on the subject.

³² Prosper Aquit., *Ep.* 225 (*inter Augustinianas*), 5, ed. Alois Goldbacher, CSEL 57 (Wien, 1911), 462.

³³ Hilarius, *Ep.* 226 (*inter Augustinianas*), 8 (CSEL 57, 477).

³⁴ Cassianus, *Conl.* 1, 14, 2 (21).

³⁵ *Id.*, *Conl.* 13, 12, 2 (378).

³⁶ *Id.*, *Conl.* 13, 12, 8 (381).

break between the original condition of Adam's soul and the condition of the souls of his descendants.³⁷ Just as Lucifer fell because he failed to recognise that he could not remain in the *puritas* in which he had been placed without the help of God, Man, both in his original condition and in his fallen state, needs divine grace at all stages of his spiritual progression. Free will enables people only to accept or reject the help of divine grace,³⁸ and each person's salvation or damnation ultimately depends on that decision.³⁹ But the human *fragilitas* depends on the help of God to such an extent that only through the enlightenment of divine grace can Man acknowledge that he depends on that divine grace.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, only those who strive, for example, to attain perpetual chastity can learn *experientiae magisterio* that the good to which they aspire can only be obtained by the gift of divine grace.⁴¹ Monks cannot completely overcome the vices until they understand that their ascetic *labor* does not suffice to obtain *puritas* and *integritas*, which can only be attained with the help of God's mercy. But this is a reality that must be learned *experimentis propriis*.⁴²

We have observed how for Cassian original sin is the theological presupposition that explains the agonising paradox that all ascetics are called to suffer: the *natural* inability of Man to attain the highest good to which a just God has called him, which is the perennial contemplation of the divine essence. Only he who progresses in *πρακτικῆ* to its highest degree – that is, to *puritas cordis* – can fully understand the meaning of the scriptural statements regarding original sin, the *lex peccati* to which all men are slaves and the human dependence upon divine grace. In Cassian, only the ascetic who fully develops the potential of human nature can acknowledge his wretched limitations and fully understand the magnitude of the sin of pride committed by Adam.

³⁷ D. Ogliari, *Gratia* (2003), 272f. See, for example, Cassianus, *Conl.* 8, 25, 1-2 (245).

³⁸ *Id.*, *Conl.* 13, 3, 6 (364f.); *ibid.* 13, 12, 8 (381).

³⁹ *Id.*, *Conl.* 1, 15, 2 (25); *ibid.* 3, 19, 1 (91).

⁴⁰ *Id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 18 (219).

⁴¹ *Id.*, *Conl.* 12, 4, 1-2 (338f.).

⁴² See also *id.*, *De inst. coen.* 12, 13 (214).

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