

Clements, Niki Kasumi. *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. 288 pages. \$65.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978–0–268–10785–7.

This study continues the popular trend of reading ancient authors through the lenses of gender, feminist, and queer theories (4). The subject of this particular work is John Cassian, the early fifth-century writer who imported Egyptian desert asceticism to Gaul, and thereby laid the foundation for the Western monastic tradition that would flower with Benedict of Nursia. The author’s central claim is that the heart of Cassian’s literary project is not radical self-renunciation, but a plan for ethical formation. The text is divided into two parts: the first is titled “Constructions of Ethics in Asceticism,” and the second is titled “Practices of Ascetic Formation.”

The first chapter establishes the theoretical conditions for assessing Cassian’s writings. It pays particular attention to ethics as a way of life, rather than abstract knowledge as often is the case in the study of ethics or philosophy today. It continues by reviewing theories of embodiment, affectivity, and social formation for agency. This, Clements says, helps “illuminate historical texts and how historical texts can help change theoretical discourses to recognize the contingency of their own categories” (29). She briefly discusses how many current scholars (Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, Pierre Hadot, Charles Taylor, and Edith Wyschogrod) have used ethical systems from antiquity as critiques of contemporary “code-based” morality (30). Clements sees her own project as continuing this trajectory.

Chapter 2 investigates Cassian’s biography and historical contexts. It summarizes basic parts of Cassian’s life while ignoring others. She states that he was born in Dobrudja (45), but this is not certain. Little is said about his time in Egypt, and even less is said about his time in Constantinople and Rome. Clements continues by reviewing what is known about Cassian’s three texts (his *Institutiones*, *Collationes*, and *De incarnatione*), his involvement in the so-called Semi-Pelagian controversy, his influence on the development of monasticism, his fourth-century context, the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, the monastic concepts of *praktike* and *theoretike*, the connection between the “interior life” and the “exterior life,” and the transformative role of biblical exegesis in the life of the monk.

Chapter three succinctly reviews Cassian’s understanding of the relationship between human free will (*liberum arbitrium*) and God’s grace (*gratia*) (67). Cassian’s exploration of this

question—discussed in *Institutio* 12 and *Collatio* 3, but most importantly (and exclusively addressed here by Clements) in *Collatio* 13 (*De protectione Dei*)—resulted in a cloud of suspicion over his head during his own lifetime, because Prosper of Aquitaine in Gaul saw him as barely distinguishable from the Pelagians (73–76). In certain circles, this cloud continues to loom until today. Cassian tried to find the virtue between Pelagius (whom he concluded overly emphasized the agency of the will), and Augustine (whom he concluded overly emphasized the necessity of God’s assistance). For Cassian, there is a necessary (and mysterious) interplay between the action of both God and the individual. Much like a seed that requires both the rain that comes down from the heavens as well as the farmer tilling the soil, so also the sinner needs God’s intervention as well as his own initiative to choose the Good (66).

The next chapter investigates how different practices of the body—such as manual labor and ritualized prayer—shape ethical practice, especially in response to the vice of *acedia*. This vice, the noonday demon, plagued desert monks in the ancient world, and, as Dom Jean-Charles Nault has so eloquently said in his book *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, The Unnamed Evil of Our Times*,¹ that now plagues contemporary Western culture, especially in the restlessness of married couples who often fall to the temptation of divorce, a lack of openness to children, a rejection of the mystery of life, and the incessant search for novelty. The first bodily practices assessed are dietary. Cassian offered the dietary practices of the Egyptian monks as models for monastic practice in Gaul. This diet included, in its most basic form, two pieces of hard bread, a drop of oil, a mixture of salt and water, and a restricted amount of water intake (96). More importantly than Cassian’s descriptions of what they ate were their moderate fasting practices. He also anticipated Benedict of Nursia when he prescribed manual labor, such as collecting wood, making ropes, weaving baskets and mats, and farming as necessary for shaping the monastic practice (98). Prayer, as one would assume, is also necessary. The physicality of prayer through different postures—such as standing, sitting, and kneeling—is just as important (if not more so) than mental prayer, such as the Lord’s Prayer.

The fifth chapter engages how reading practices of moral exemplars help shape ethical formation. These practices, centered around reading, recitation, and imitation of the exemplars, are the preferred method of formation for Gallic monks. The imitation of exemplars falls into three categories: imitation of biblical figures (especially those in the Psalms), imitation of the abbas, and imitation of the young Cassian and Germanus as they struggle to make sense of the ascetic life (115). Imitation in this way is so central for Cassian’s pedagogical objective because he knows

that his audience of Gallic monks cannot move across the Mediterranean to sit at the desert monks' feet to learn directly from them. If Cassian can't bring the Gallic monks to the Egyptian desert, the next best thing is for him to bring the Egyptian desert to Gaul through texts.

The final chapter explores how communal practices of friendship, spiritual direction, and liturgy shape the ethical response to pride, the worst of the spirits (137). The import of friendship is displayed in the relationship between the young Cassian and Germanus. Their friendship persisted over a long duration and multiple geographic locations. Most importantly, it flowered because of their shared pursuit of spiritual perfection (142). Their friendship helped them each persevere during temptations. A more common relationship in ascetic community is one between novice and elder. After the novice shares with the elder his most intimate thoughts, the elder discerns for the novice which thoughts come from the novice himself, and which ones come from either God or demons. This process, over time, allows the novice to become less embarrassed by these thoughts, which then promotes spiritual progress. Liturgy offers the most important communal practice for formation. The offices throughout the day, evening, and night are foundational for the Egyptian monks, and should be imitated in Gaul, which, at the time Cassian wrote, did not have a standardized practice. *Meditatio* and psalmic recitation were at the heart of the *synaxes*.

In the end, I'm not left with an overly positive or negative assessment of this book. On the one hand, it plays the contemporary academic game as well as it can be played. The author quotes all of the names that are found in scholarly journals and monographs today, such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Amy Hollywood, my own former professor at The University of Chicago. For that reason, this book probably will win several prestigious awards. On the other hand, I am unclear about the significance of the contribution that it makes. While I agree that Cassian's project is centrally concerned with ethical formation, I'm at a loss as to how that insight is noteworthy. From the First Century until today, the lives of all Christians have been about exploring the nature of a flourishing life. It is unsurprising, then, that Cassian's project was little more than a detailed exploration of that issue.

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Note

1. Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times*, translated by Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2015).