

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014, 221 pp.**

Dennis Okholm, a Benedictine oblate, assistant priest at Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Costa Mesa, California, professor of theology at Azusa Pacific University and adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary offers the public a book able to initiate a dialogue between spiritual care of the ancient monks and modern psychology. As Okholm states in the introduction, his intent with this book is first “to bring forward the insights of early church monks” - Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian, and Pope Gregory I in particular - “in order to offer what one might call a truly Christian psychology,” and second to “make a bit of an apologetic case for the priority of this Christian psychology” (p. 8).

This readable work explores the origin, meaning, and remedy for the classical seven deadly sins. The introduction (pp. 1-10) reveals that initially the desert father, Evagrius, formulated a list of eight evil thoughts, which Cassian identified as eight principal sins that deflect the heart from God. Gregory the First modified Cassian’s list into the classical catalog of seven deadly sins. The thesis promoted by the author is that “ascetic theologians and monastics of the fourth through seventh centuries (...) provide the church with a psychology which is not only specifically Christian in its orientation, but relevant to modern people if taken seriously” (p. 8).

The ascetic theologians identify the pastoral treatment goal for these capital sins as *apatheia* - not emotional indifference - but the “abiding sense of peace and joy that comes from the full harmony of the passions” (p. 22). The Christian monks’ restorative goal was the “harmonious integration of the emotional life” (p. 22), free from sinful desires, guilt and compulsions. In general, redirection of disordered thoughts and behaviors is achieved by *ascesis*, or spiritual habits informed by the Word of God. The ascetics propose that in theory it is possible to attain this outcome, but in practice what realistically can be achieved in this life is just an approach

Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins...*

to this ideal. From the monks, Okholm insists that “the *first* thing we must understand is that we cannot win these battles in our own strength”. (p. 32).

The first of the deadly sins, gluttony (pp. 11-36), deals with excessive consumption of food, material goods, or physical pleasures as substitutes for ultimate satisfaction that is found only in God. This sin comes from inordinate thinking and desires manifested in lack of moderation in these areas. The outcomes of gluttony are potentially enslaving addictions. The ascetics’ therapeutic remedy for such disordered cravings, again, is *ascesis* in the form of opposite thought processes and behaviours, principally the practice of fasting, communal accountability, and spiritual direction.

The second deadly sin related to gluttony is lust or “the spirit of fornication” (pp. 37-60). Like gluttony, lust is the sinful abuse of a God-given function necessary for maintenance of life. Like other deadly sins, lust originates in wrong thinking and unholy desires, sometimes overwhelming one’s own will. Lust grows when the soul’s rational and volitional powers (the higher faculties) informed by God’s Word no longer control the lower appetites which crave immediate sensual gratification. As expressed by Thomas Aquinas, “When it comes to sex we do tend to be more impetuous and less inclined to listen to reason” (p. 42). The ascetics’ remedy for lust is not simply monkish celibacy. In the physical realm, they encourage flight from the temptation and pursuit of “bodily fasting” or abstinence within a safe community (p. 43). In the area of the mind, a contrite and teachable spirit must be cultivated along with constant meditation on Scripture. In terms of contemporary brain science, Okholm underlines that the dopamine high experienced in a sexual addiction must be replaced by more healthy and reward-producing activities. Whereas the previously mentioned practices ideally lead to continence, the higher goal of chastity can be achieved only by the gift of God’s grace. Willpower alone fails to subdue the devilish stronghold of lust; God’s power, which brings victory over lust, opens the door to health of the soul and true love of God and neighbour.

The third examined sin is greed (pp. 61-92), which the author deems as “death by consumption”. It is also the “least psychological of the seven” vices. Loving and coveting after money and things bring man into the bondage of the material goods. Gregory notes how such people count how much they give away but quickly forget how much they are seizing. Cas-

sian and Gregory urges us to fight greed firstly with self-reminders about greed often giving us the opposite of what we seek. The second thing is to avoid greed like a plague. Thirdly, they recommend a simple life and pursuing those things that help, not consume us.

The fourth vice is anger (pp. 93-116), which Evagrius called the “most fierce passion”. Cassian teaches us that anger, which is a natural human emotion should be directed against sin. We are reminded too that anger can inhibit praying, prevent listening or good discernment, obscures our sight of the divine. Cassian also teaches us not to pour out or suppress anger, but to adopt patience and humility in community. The monks learn to do that by retreating to their cells to read and to pray. The community is important because it provides opportunities to practice patience and humility. Okholm briefly mentions abusive relationships as he applies Cassian’s wisdom to this modern problem.

The fifth vice is envy (pp. 117-134) which the ancients had defined in various ways like wanting something that another had; desiring something a “relative equal” had; refusal to submit to trust in God; etc. According to Cassian, this sin is the most difficult to cure because the man ruled by it also envies the very person who comes to help him. Envy is also elusive and hard to detect. Gregory devises some remedies: love what others have instead of envying them for possessing it. This means learning to see the good of others more than ourselves. Okholm observes the dangers of envy in the academic world and states that people in that environment need to be “immunized against envy’s bite”.

Sixth, sloth or acedia (pp. 135-156) is according to Evagrius the “noon-day demon”. In helping us understand the roots of depression, Okholm points out the concepts of acedia and tristitia. The former is “carelessness” while the latter is a kind of sorrow or dejection. According to Solomon Schimmel, sloth is “misdirected activity” which in Gregory’s terms is neglecting oneself and not directing to “higher things”. Instead of rightly desiring the divine, the men with sloth crave for pleasure.

The final vice is vainglory (pp. 157-180) which has been interchangeably used with pride. Modern psychologists call this the “dark side of self-esteem”. Evagrius calls it “most damaging” while Gregory points it out as the “queen of sins”. The subtle sin of vainglory is the desire to seek identity and happiness in the praise of others apart from God’s approval and enablement. Vainglory, the ascetics observe, typically afflicts those who

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have achieved significant spiritual progress and material gain. The remedy for vainglory proposed by the early monks is manifold: humility, recognition of our many faults, and finding our intrinsic worth in God alone rather than in the praise of men.

Okholm's project is both academic and pastoral. He speaks as a theologian drawing wisdom from the past to reframe the Christian study of psychology. His careful research, clear exposition and extensive annotations bring to light the extraordinary wisdom found in the writings of the early ascetic theologians. Impressive is the fact that 1,500 years ago these early Christian authorities used methods of soul care that anticipated and even exceeded (because rooted in Scripture) the regimens of contemporary psychology as helpful as these may be. Counselors, clergy, and serious Christians need to become better informed with the fertile and fruitful insights of the early Christian monks and ascetics regarding the care and nurture of the undying soul. The book can serve as fine resource for teaching and preaching on the perils of the seven deadly sins.

**Rev. Adrian MURG**