

“If You Pray Truly...”
What Happens Next? On the Uses and
Abuses of an Evagrian Dictum

Augustine Casiday

Introduction

Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345–399), protégé of Basil the Great in Cappadocia, deacon to Gregory the Theologian during his archiepiscopacy in Constantinople, correspondent and friend with Rufinus of Aquileia and Melania the Elder in Palestine, disciple of Macarius the Alexandrian and Macarius the Egyptian in the Egyptian deserts, teacher of the historian Palladius of Hellenopolis, contemporary and fellow-traveller with the monastic reformer John Cassian, has emerged from centuries of obscurity since his works have been recovered, edited and published over the past hundred years.¹ The obscurity that overwhelmed the memory of Evagrius is attributable to his intellectual affiliation with Origen of Alexandria and his affinity to Didymus the Blind, whose writings inspired lively discussion in general and (at the Monastery of St Sabas in sixth-century Palestine in particular) ferocious debates that were quelled by the direct intervention of Emperor Justinian, a formidable theologian in his own right, and sealed by the condemnations of Origenism. Evidence suggests that Evagrius’s works were read with enormous caution – as we see already from *Letters* 600–604 in the correspondence of the

¹ For a detailed presentation of Evagrius’s life and works, see my *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), which includes specific references for the claims made in this paragraph.

venerable monks Barsanuphius of Gaza (ob. c. 540) and John the Prophet – and we know that many of his writings were preserved pseudonymously. The current of Evagrius’s theology ran underground, so to speak, but although his name is rarely spoken his strong advocacy of ascetical, contemplative and prayerful living has nourished Eastern Christianity for a millennium and a half.

An exemplary work in that respect is *On Prayer*, traditionally attributed to the much less controversial Nilus of Ancyra. But in the early decades of the twentieth century the research of Fr Irénée Hausherr established beyond any doubt that credit for that text belongs to Evagrius. It is in that text that Evagrius, who was a master of aphorisms, wrote his best known line: “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.”² I will comment on the implications of that chapter (as this line and the other 152 like it are called), but before coming to that task I need to clear the ground.

Evagrius has emerged from obscurity, but that does not mean that he was unknown before 1912 (when Wilhelm von Frankenberg published a massive collection of Evagrian texts that have survived in ancient Syriac translation and so initiated the modern study of Evagrius). To the contrary, Evagrius was known precisely as one of the three heretics whose writings stoked at least two major controversies: in Egypt c. 399–400, and in Palestine c. 525–565. The modern recovery of a substantial corpus of writings, however, justifies the review by scholars of Evagrius’s theological significance; in the end, this interpretation may or may not buttress the ancient condemnation – who can say? – but what is of the utmost importance is that the intervening historical fact of Evagrius’s condemnation cannot be allowed to prejudice the scholar’s conclusions. I

² Evagrius, *On Prayer* 61, trans. A. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 192. At present, no critical edition of this text has been published, precisely because it is so widespread. In the absence of a published critical edition, I have made use of the typescript of an edition prepared by Simon Tugwell, OP, with his generous permission. In the case of this verse, Fr Tugwell prefers a variant reading that uses the future tense, rather than the often cited version that uses only the present tense, and I agree with him. S. Tugwell, ed. (Oxford: privately printed, 1981), p.12.

have written about these matters already, and will not rehearse those considerations here.³

Instead, I propose to explore the very specific use that some modern Orthodox Christians have made of Evagrius’ *On Prayer* 61. This exploration will illuminate features of contemporary Orthodox theology that strike me as interesting. I will then attempt to explain, if briefly, what the quotation from Evagrius means in the context of Evagrius’ writings. To anticipate my conclusion, this exploration will reveal that rather poor use is being made of Evagrius’ insight even by the population that has the best *prima facie* claim to receive, to understand, and to apply it.

***On Prayer and on Modern Orthodox Theology:
A Few Specimens***

Evagrius’s *On Prayer* has been published in two collections: it appears in the *Philokalia*⁴ and also in volume 79 of Abbé Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*. The line of transmission through the *Philokalia* is most important for our purposes, because the publication of that volume was a significant event within the complex processes whereby monasticism came to exercise a major impact upon modern Orthodox theology. The repercussions of monks at the periphery of the Ottoman Empire, attempting to recover and to propagate their ancient heritage, continue to be felt today. Indeed, many characteristic features of contemporary Orthodox theology look back to eighteenth-century Mt Athos for their precedents. It suffices to mention the constant recurrence to monastic literature, the prominence of mystical themes, and perhaps the keen nostalgia for the bygone glories of Constantinople, to evoke a reasonably accurate sense for the prevailing ethos of Orthodox theolo-

³ In addition to the monograph mentioned in n. 1, above, see also my “Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 48 (2004): 249–297; and “On Heresy in Modern Patristic Scholarship: the Case of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012): 241–252.

⁴ A collection of ascetical, theological texts edited by Sts Macarius of Corinth and Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain, based on earlier collections, and published by Bortoli of Venice in 1782.