

Evagrius: Still Confounding, Still Profound

Books Discussed in this Review Essay

Julia S. Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), xi + 217 pp.

Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Bamberger (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), xciv + 96 pp.

Augustine M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), xii + 252 pp.

Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), viii + 245 pp.

Jeremy Driscoll, *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies in Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2005), 185 pp.

Antoine Guillaumont, *Un philosophe au désert. Évagre le Pontique* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2004), 430 pp.

Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. and commentary by Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford University Press, 2003), xl + 369 pp.

Students at the Sheptytsky Institute have often asked me, “Is Evagrius the Origenist heretic that he is made out to be?” That question, of course, is not easily answerable. It is difficult even to begin to respond to such a query without clarifying a host of problems. There are issues of whether the second Origenist controversy in the sixth century, or even the first at the turn of the fourth to the fifth, properly grasped or presented the thought either of Origen or of Evagrius. There is the question of motivation on the part of Evagrius’s most vehement critics. There is the issue of the very approach to the fundamental interpretation of the teaching of Evagrius: is there a key to his often-enigmatic statements? Does he present an entirely coherent system of thought on central doctrinal issues? Scholarship in Evagrian studies has been divided on these and other issues. Sometimes I am tempted to respond to the inquiring student: “Who said so?”

This is more than just a facetious response. Evagrius was named as a foul purveyor of heresy at the time of Justinian. That is clear. The foundational divide among students of Evagrius sometimes seems to run along the fault line of whether being a heretic is a good thing or not. Among adherents of the latter, there are those who try to establish that he was a heretic, perhaps more endemically Origenist than Origen himself, in order to remove some of the heat from Origen. Hans Urs von Balthasar was a major proponent of such a view. Others seem to look for a way to interpret Evagrius that would allow for the possibility of avoiding the dichotomy that has reigned, explicitly or implicitly, for centuries: the tendency to accept the learned monk’s ascetical wisdom without having to reject his more speculative thought. Those, of course, who think that heresy is a value to be sought out, a characteristic of the fruitful and liberated mind, gleefully present Evagrius as a heretic, because these days heresy is all the rage in certain quarters, and Evagrius becomes yet another “free thinker” whose legacy was all but crushed by the oppressive patriarchy of orthodoxy. Thus, Evagrius’s presumed Origenist excesses are heroic, alongside Gnosticism, Arianism, and the implicit Nestorianism of those who continually abstract Christ’s humanity from His divinity.

Augustine Casiday has done an admirable job of describing the various camps in the Evagrian fray with his astute and expansive 2004 review essay.¹ He classifies the two main approaches as the Benedictine School and the Heresiological School. The first is led by the hermit and scholar Gabriel Bunge, and Jeremy Driscoll, but also includes Daniel Hombergen, Luke Dysinger, and Columba Stewart. All of the above are actual Benedictines, though for Casiday this group also includes some associated scholars: Andrew Louth, Robin Darling Young, and Samuel Rubenson. Perhaps it would be more profitable to classify these scholars in another way. What seems to unite them is the fact that they really take seriously the fact that Evagrius first and foremost sought a way of communing with God rather than about creating a system of thought. The Heresiological School, as Casiday names it, is inconceivable without the antecedent of the philologists who did the pioneering work of editing Evagrian manuscripts, Wilhelm von Frankenberg, Barsegh Sarkissian, Hugo Greßmann in the early 1900's, and Joseph Muyltermans at mid-century – along with some more recent scholars.

It was Antoine Guillaumont who would bring about a significant reorientation of Evagrian studies by focusing on a Syriac version of Evagrius's *Gnostic Chapters* that appeared much more in line with those propositions that were condemned as heretical in the sixth century. The earlier-published Syriac text seemed much more difficult to pin down in comparison. What Guillaumont would do is to locate a sort of key to all of Evagrius's thought in that most apparently suspect work. This line of thought would be continued by François Refoulé, Michael O'Laughlin, and Elizabeth Clark.

The main difference between the so-called Benedictine School and the Heresiological School has to do with a fundamental approach. To the latter, what makes Evagrius interesting and attractive is precisely what they focus on as his unorthodox thought. It is not as if the former are bent on proving Evagrius orthodox. Rather, they are intent on finding in something other than the Syriac version of the *Kephalaia Gnostica*

¹ Augustine, Casiday, "Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 48 (2004): 249–97.