

BOOK REVIEW

Evagrius of Pontus, The Gnostic Trilogy, Translated and Annotated by Robin Darling Young, Joel Kalvesmaki, Columba Stewart, Charles Stang and Luke Dysinger, Oxford University Press, New York, 2024. Hbk.pp.528. £78.00. ISBN 9780199997671
doi:[10.1017/S1740355324000214](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000214)

This major work of scholarship brings together for the first time in one volume new translations of Evagrius's *Praktikos*, *Gnostikos* and *Kephalaia Gnostica*, the threefold guide to the Christian spiritual life which was his life's work. Evagrius (345-399) was a controversial figure in his lifetime because of his admiration for Origen who had become a contentious and deeply divisive figure, so much so that Evagrius was condemned, along with Origen, in successive Church Councils. After that Evagrius's name virtually disappeared from history. Even in modern times when there has been a new interest in his work there has been a tendency to dismiss him as the purveyor of an esoteric and intellectualist approach to prayer and spirituality. Thomas Merton was fairly scathing about him. Nonetheless, some of his writings on prayer were discreetly passed down in monastic circles, sometimes attributed to others to avoid the scandal of association with heresy. In this way, his remarkable insights into the psychology of temptation and sin, the eight evil thoughts, would become the seven deadly sins of the Western spiritual tradition, promoted by John Cassian and Gregory the Great. The Greek text of Evagrius's *Praktikos*, a series of instructions to a monk, survived intact in mediaeval manuscripts and has been available in translation for many years, even though it has sometimes carried a health warning that his writing is 'not without its dangers'¹. In the East he influenced Maximus the Confessor and, through him, the Greek pastoral tradition which has retained a vivid recognition that the roots of temptation and sin may be discerned in the everyday disturbances of body and spirit. Some chapters retrieved for this collection were found in a manuscript under the name of Maximus and are now kept in a Moscow museum.

As scholarly interest in Evagrius has grown, so has the task of attempting to retrieve those parts of his work which have been lost. Uniquely, the Syrian Church has continued to revere Evagrius, regarding him as a saint. This has meant that Syriac translations of his writings have continued in existence and provide an essential element in the attempt to reconstruct the original Greek texts of his more

¹J. Leclercq OSB in the Preface to *Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1981.

controversial writings. The work of retrieval on which this volume depends has been long and arduous. This is reflected in the diligent translation which includes helpful comparisons between Greek and Syrian sources of particular texts. Sometimes it has been possible to reconstruct the parts of the *Gnostikos* and *Kephalia Gnostica* by comparison with other fragments of Evagrius's writings which survive independently, often as *scholia*, footnotes of commentary on the Psalms and other wisdom literature. Evagrius used and reused his sayings in different contexts, but always with the view not only to instruct but to inspire, intriguing the mind and expanding the spirit. The word 'Gnostic' did not carry for him the negative connotations it came to have later. Like Clement of Alexandria, Evagrius used the word to convey spiritual maturity and the capacity to guide others towards God. Asceticism, wisdom and mysticism were all aspects of the human soul's journey to the Trinity, and Evagrius knew that souls might be initially puzzled by an apparent obscurity but could also be led on by the same difficulty to deeper exploration. Knowledge of God required bodily purification, calmed emotions and mental clarity.

Two decades ago, Robert Sinkewicz produced a new translation and commentary on Evagrius's Greek 'Ascetic Corpus'², exclusive of his Biblical scholia and his most obscure and controversial work *The Gnostikos*. In 2016, a group of scholars produced a fascinating series of essays on *Evagrius and his Legacy*³. Several of these scholars have played a part as translators and commentators in this volume, including Robin Darling Young, Columba Stewart and Luke Dysinger. The result of their labours is a triumph of scholarship. It is a welcome gift to have Evagrius's three works together in one volume, so that readers are able to approach the whole spiritual syllabus and recognize its progressive character. Evagrius taught the spiritual life in three stages. This began with basic asceticism, the main subject of the *Praktikos*. If followed correctly, this would bring about the detachment from bodily and mental craving which led to *theoria physike*, or natural contemplation, the capacity to appreciate the created world as it actually is in God's providence. This stage in the spiritual journey is marked by the birth of authentic and unselfish love, which leads ultimately to the third stage, *Gnosis*, the knowledge of God and the capacity to guide and instruct others.

Evagrius's entire spiritual schema is derived from Platonism. The tripartite division of the soul has its origins in Plato and was a key part of Origen's understanding of the human person. It is possible⁴ that Evagrius had access to an esoteric tradition built on psychological approaches drawn from Plato and Aristotle and related to *The Republic* and *Phaedrus*. Interestingly, the editors suggest that the *Kephalia Gnostica* was written first, with the *Gnostikos* and the *Praktikos* written later. But, however much Evagrius drew on Plato, his principle text was always scripture. Many of his comments reflect, allude to and echo scripture, which for him was the pre-syllabus to be absorbed by all aspiring Christian souls.

²Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetical Corpus*, translated with introduction and commentary by Robert E. Sinkewicz, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford University Press, 2003.

³University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 2016.

⁴Kevin Corrigan, *Uncovering the Origins and Structure of the Seven Deadly Sins Tradition: Evagrius and the eight "Reasonings" in Evagrius and Gregory, Mind, soul and Body in the 4th century*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity, Ashgate 2009.

Evagrius's main form of expression was *kephalia*, or what we would naturally translate as 'chapters', even 'headings' made up of single sentences or brief clusters of sentences. These can best be understood as a form of wisdom literature, themes linked around common ideas or repeated phrases. The *kephalia* are short enough to be memorized, or read and reflected on in short chunks. The best of them stick in the mind, like mantras, no doubt generating in those who received them deeper and deeper levels of understanding. As in all his writings, Evagrius comes across as psychologically astute even when read through the lens of contemporary understanding.

From time to time in this volume, we get a glimpse of what we might call Evagrius's pastoral method. For example, 'The Gnostic must not be sullen or aloof: the first is typical of one ignorant of the *logoi* (true meaning) of things, and the latter of someone "not wanting all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"'. This is an insight which might be shared by today's spiritual directors and even counsellors and therapists who attempt to approach their patients with 'unconditional positive regard.' Although some of these *kephalia* emphasize the punishment that will befall angels and men for persistent sin, there is at least a suggestion in these writings that Evagrius, like Origen, had universalist tendencies. He sees the human project not just in individualist terms but in terms of human destiny as a whole. He also had a sympathy for frailty and a sense of humour, as the above example, along with his characterizations of the Evil Thoughts in the *Praktikos* illustrate.

Above all, Evagrius understood the intractable complexity of the human person, and how our quest for the divine involves dealing truthfully and compassionately with our spontaneous fantasies, fears and imaginings. The Christian faith has often made the quest for virtue an issue of moral conformity, as though it were wholly a matter of the will. Evagrius's great insight was his recognition that will was not supreme and that anyone aspiring to know God had to confront the turbulent life of the mind in the quest for true knowledge.

This book, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, is a huge achievement. One of its many virtues are the comparisons offered between Greek and Syriac versions of the text. These are especially instructive, revealing minor and sometimes more major changes in emphasis and tone which may result from the same teaching being refracted through different contexts. This volume gives the reader an authentic glimpse of Evagrius's work as a whole – not a complete whole because much is still missing or obscure but certainly the best now available.

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