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Dissertation Proposal

Exercising Obedience: John Cassian and the  
Formation of Early Monastic Subjectivity

By

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## **Thesis and Scope**

At the end of the fourth century A.D., a war of sorts had been ignited between two factions of Egyptian monks. The subject of the dispute was the corporeality (or incorporeality) of God. According to the 5<sup>th</sup> century church history written by Socrates, the less educated monks all posited that God had a body, that in fact this body was the divine image in which humans had been created (Gen. 1:26). Socrates also notes that the more educated monks believed the opposite: God, as an unlimited being, could not be circumscribed by a body or subject to the passions unfailingly associated with bodies (*EH*, 6.7). Moreover, the controversy had been stirred up not by the monks themselves but by Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria. He had sent a letter to be read to all monks in his bishopric. The letter proclaimed that the notion of God's incorporeality was heretical, and that those who espoused such a belief should be ignored or condemned. A group of four monks, known as the Tall Brothers, had already been jailed once by Theophilus for this belief. Socrates says that Theophilus' letter kindled a violent feud between the two monastic factions. The end to this conflict came when Theophilus, having armed the uneducated monks for use as his henchmen, marched with them out to Nitria, the monastic settlement of the Tall Brothers and their faction in the Egyptian desert, and forcibly evicted them from the area (*EH*, 6.7). The Tall Brothers escaped to Jerusalem with approximately eighty other monks. Among those fleeing monks was John Cassian.

Cassian was born around 360 C.E., probably in the region of Scythia Minor (now Romania and Bulgaria) and well-educated in Latin and Greek. He later became a monk, starting

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his monastic career at a monastery in Bethlehem where he spent three years as a novice.<sup>1</sup> He later traveled with a friend and fellow monk, Germanus, to the Egyptian desert. He visited well-known monasteries, lived there as a monk, met some of the most eminent senior monks, and learned from them for some fifteen years.<sup>2</sup> Much later, he secured his place in the history of monasticism when he went to the region of Gaul to help establish a monastery there and wrote monastic manuals, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*. These seminal writings represent the first known attempt to bring the idealized monastic traditions from Egypt, long understood to be the cradle of monasticism, to the West. Eventually, they became the basis of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and subsequent Western monastic rules. Cassian is venerated as a saint by both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

One of the first things a reader first notices in Cassian's writings is his insistence on the practice of solitude, increasing gradually and systematically throughout a monk's life, as necessary for the achievement of spiritual and moral perfection.<sup>3</sup> Such prescriptive solitude shapes the subjectivity of individual monks by purging all human influence from monastic selves, and then reconstituting them with only the divine as a formative source. However, Cassian's recommendation for individual perfection, which he had no doubt learned from his Egyptian elders, had a far more ambitious aim.

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<sup>1</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences*, Translated by Colm Luibheid (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> See Introduction to above translation of *Conferences*, written by Owen Chadwick, 1.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Conferences*, 19.8, where Cassian says that solitude allows the monk "to have his mind freed from all earthly things, and to unite it, as far as human frailty allows, with Christ."

By the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century when Cassian was writing, monks in Egypt and Palestine could refer to a veritable litany of their own monastic traditions, both oral and written, which appear to have all but ignored much of earlier Christian theological tradition. In Cassian's writings, as well as in the larger corpus of monastic writings from his era, monks never referred to early Church fathers as authorities. Instead, they cited either scripture – almost always in allegorical interpretations – or quotes and stories exclusively from earlier, venerated monks.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, monastic discourse such as Cassian's formed *a closed system*, consciously excluding the institutional Church. Thus, the thesis of this dissertation is that Cassian insisted on the maintenance of monasticism as a closed system so that it could achieve autonomy, becoming separate from, rather than subject to, the institutional church. Furthermore, Cassian wanted monastics to replace the clergy as arbiters of Christianity for lay people.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, I believe that the solitary monk may have been, for Cassian, a kind of synecdoche for a larger, ideal form of monasticism.

It is beyond the scope of this project to make an argument about the entire institution of early Christian monasticism. In fact, because there is such a large corpus of writings both by and

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<sup>4</sup> “This emphasis on principles, on techniques that had little reference to the personalities involved, shows how the discipline of the spiritual life had come to depend less on the insight and authority of holy men, and more on a sense of corporate tradition, custom, and experience.” Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the age of Jerome and Cassian*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 198. One monk tells a novice “If you can't be silent, you had better talk about the sayings of the [monastic] Fathers than about the Scriptures; it is not so dangerous.” Benedicta Ward, ed., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 32.

<sup>5</sup> I don't believe Cassian wanted all Christians to become monastics. Rather, he wanted monastics to replace clergy as the authorities to whom laypeople would go for advice and upon whose example laypeople could base their conduct. This was already happening in the Egyptian desert and even some clergy were apparently visiting monks for spiritual advice. See, for example, Ward, *Sayings*, 10, #7 and 215, #15.

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about early monastics, I will limit myself to Cassian's writings, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* with additional contributions from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, and other monastic documents from roughly the same era (late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.) My intent is not to argue that all monastics saw themselves as ideally separate from the Church. Rather, I plan to show that Cassian and the group of educated monks with whom he had associated saw such a separation as the ideal form of Christianity. The violent conflict between the bishop of Alexandria and Cassian's monastic community could only have confirmed his desire to separate monks from an errant Church hierarchy. Perhaps this explains his bold assertion that "a monk ought by all means to fly from women and bishops" (*Inst.*, 11.18).

### **Methodology**

In explaining how Cassian attempts to create a certain form of individual and collective monastic subjectivity, I find great analytical help in the writings of Michel Foucault. Specifically, in this dissertation I apply Foucault's theory of governmentality and the creation of subjects to the writings of Cassian (and other concurrent monastic literature) in order to demonstrate what I believe Cassian is attempting to accomplish. In addition to a close reading of Cassian's writings, Foucault's analysis helps to make my argument that Cassian is a) trying to shape the individual subjectivity of monks and b) trying in turn to form a larger, unified, collective monastic subjectivity which may ultimately replace the authority of the clergy with a certain type of ascetic, monastic subjects as ultimate authorities in Christianity.

Foucault began discussions on the formation of the subject by discussing what he called "governmentality." Often defined tersely as "the conduct of conduct," governmentality in Foucault's definition is "where the way individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves," a "versatile equilibrium... between techniques which assure coercion and

processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself."<sup>6</sup> Referring to these interweaving processes of external coercion and work on the self or self-formation, Foucault summarized his entire body of work, noting that his overall objective was "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."<sup>7</sup>

The subject, in Foucauldian terms, is not the autonomous actor or agent often idealized in modern thought, an individual whose self is the mere result of her own well or poorly-made choices. Instead, Foucault believed the subject to be a social construction whose specific vantage point is the result of the constant interplay of multiple forms of power (including that of the subject herself). What interested Foucault, then, was the specific mechanisms or techniques by which such subjects were formed.

In a 1980 lecture published under the title "Subjectivity and Truth," Foucault notes that the history of the formation of subjects is best undertaken by acknowledging both techniques of domination and techniques of the self.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Foucault saw that the formation of subjectivity was far more complex than a simple heavy handed exercise of dominating power. Rather, it occurred through an intersection of the exercise of domination and the self-

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self*, (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 19-37. *Original Publication: L'origine de l'herméneutique de soi: Conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College*, (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, edited by H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, (2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208-226. *Original Publication: Le Sujet et le Pouvoir* (Gallimard, D&E Vol.4 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *About the beginning*, 25. Foucault writes that one who wants to study a genealogy of the subject must "take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination."

construction of potential subjects. Foucault's ultimate question, then, was how techniques of domination, especially those reinforced through discourse, were used to convince subjects to work on themselves in order to form themselves into an ideal which in turn may serve the dominant forces.

Foucault identified three means by which subjects are created: First, modes of investigation create subjects as objects of knowledge; Second, practices and procedures divide subjects both from within, and from other subjects according to standards of norm and deviance; and third, practices and procedures of self-management are introduced, by which subjects transform themselves as subjects in order to meet an externally imposed ideal.<sup>9</sup> I find Foucault's analysis useful in analyzing Cassian's rhetoric. Indeed, in Cassian's writings, I find all three of Foucault's modes of subjectivation present. This grants great explanatory power in understanding how Cassian aims at the creation of a very specific mode of subjectivity which, if realized at the necessary critical mass of individuals, would result in the realization of Cassian's vision for an ideal and powerful monastic institution. That is, these individual subjects would then ideally cause monks to form a collective subjectivity as the building blocks of a monasticism outside of the strictures as well as what Cassian viewed as the moral and spiritual failings of the Church.

Cassian begins his *Institutes* with the assumption that certain monks in the Egyptian desert, monks with whom Cassian himself lived and studied, live in the correct monastic way. This way includes correct asceticism – as opposed to either luxuriant living or extreme asceticism, both of which must be eschewed – as well as correct, daily behaviors, including

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Subject and Power*, 208.

work, prayer and study, literally accounting for the behavior of each monk during every hour of every day. I argue that Cassian's description of how correct monks behave forms a specific type of knowledge, a kind of standard of correct behaviors by which Cassian himself, as self-appointed arbiter of proper monasticism, could measure the spiritual progress (or lack thereof) of the monks of Gaul for whom he was writing. Cassian writes as if before his arrival in Gaul, the Gallian monks who make up his audience have not had access to the 'science' (επιστήμη) of living a correct monastic and ascetic life. Among other methods, he solidifies this form of knowledge by using well-known and well-respected monks as his mouthpieces; this in turn gives rhetorical credence to his particular formation of monastic subjectivity.

Through the building of this 'science' (επιστήμη) of proper monastic practice, Cassian forces his audience to choose between the correct, established methods he outlines and a failure to meet these exalted standards. This in turn divides individual monastic subjects within themselves, for if they aspire to become proper monks, they must work on themselves. At the same time, they are divided, both from laypeople but also from clergy and errant monks. That is, true monks, as delimited by Cassian's list of correct behaviors, are established by Cassian as the norm, implicitly establishing all others as deviant.

Finally, Cassian list of proper monastic behaviors include a strict daily routine, control of appetites – both alimentary and sexual – and frequent confession of one's most shameful thoughts to one's spiritual master; in other words, the conduct of conduct. These practices, or "technologies of the self," in Foucauldian parlance, then intersect with Cassian's rhetorical techniques of domination to create a unique form of monastic subjectivity, one which will serve both Cassian's spiritual goal of the achievement of ideal, individual monks and his political goal of a separate and authoritative monasticism not subject to the whims of the Clergy.



## Contribution to the Field

This research is significant for several reasons. First, very little scholarship to my knowledge has been done on the conflicts between monastics and the institutional church in late antiquity.<sup>10</sup> The assumption in much of modern scholarship seems to be that monasticism was always part and parcel of the institutional Church. I plan to cast doubt upon that assumption. Second, if my thesis is correct, a truly separate monasticism might have become a separate institution, or at least a separate form of Christianity, rather than a mere subset of the existing Church, which it had become by the early Middle Ages. The possible effects of this split are too numerous to mention, but certainly deserve consideration. It would undoubtedly have changed the history of the Church, perhaps diminishing the Church's authority or even taking it in an entirely different theological and political direction. We can see this disagreement, for example, by comparing the *Life of Antony*, written by embattled and iconic bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, with Antony's own letters. In the *Life*, Athanasius paints a portrait of Antony, everyone's ideal monk in late antiquity, as a zealous heresy fighter, the result of his insights from years battling demons in solitude.<sup>11</sup> Antony's own letters, however, show the nominal father of

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<sup>10</sup> Of the few works that do focus on this conflict, the best, in my opinion, is Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist controversy: the cultural construction of an early Christian debate*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Athanasius. *Life of Antony*. Translated by Robert C. Gregg. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980. In regard to the clergy, Athanasius emphasizes that Antony "observed the rule of the Church most rigidly, and was willing that all the clergy should be honored above himself. For he was not ashamed to bow his head to bishops and presbyters." (67) Referring to the heresiological conflicts of the day, he claims that Antony "loathed the heresy of the Arians, and exhorted all neither to approach them nor to hold their erroneous belief. And once when certain

monasticism to be far more concerned with correct ascetic and contemplative practice in the service of spiritual perfection than correct belief as mandated by church authorities.<sup>12</sup> This clear difference in emphasis is characteristic of the differences between church officials' notions of a model monasticism and those of the desert monks, differences which Cassian highlights in the *Institutes* and *Conferences*.<sup>13</sup> Third, Cassian provides an interesting case study for Foucault's notions of the creation of the subject. Cassian's writings rhetorically attempt to create a specific form of monastic subjects, although he fails to accomplish in both East and West what I believe he ultimately sought: a higher level of authority for monks than for clergy.

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Arian came to him, when he had questioned them and learned their impiety, he drove them from the mountain, saying that their words were worse than the poison of serpents." (68)

<sup>12</sup> Rubenson, Samuel, *The letters of St. Antony: Origenist theology, monastic tradition and the making of a saint*, (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990). Examples of Antony's concern with ascetic practice and Origenist/Platonic theology include the following: "First the body is purified by much fasting, by many vigils and prayers, and by the service which makes a man to be straitened in body, cutting off from himself all the lusts of the flesh" from *Letter III*; and "In truth, my children, I tell you that every man who delights in his own will, and is subdued to his own thoughts, and takes up the things sown in his heart, and rejoices in them, and supposes in his heart that these are some great chosen mystery, and justifies himself in what he does – the soul of such a man is a lair of evil spirits," from *Letter V*.

<sup>13</sup>Cassian writes, for example, that "a monk ought to fly from women and bishops," (*Inst.*, 11.18). He also warns against the danger of becoming ordained and thus falling prey to vainglory, (*Inst.* 11.14). This seems to imply that clergy are often self-important and condescending, the opposite of the humility for which Cassian's ideal monk strives.

## Chapter Outline

**Introduction:** I begin with some background and historical context on Cassian and early Egyptian monasticism. Next, I include the later context in which Cassian writes the *Institutes* and *Conferences*. I then detail some of the conflicts between monastics and Church officials. Finally, I state my thesis: Cassian insisted on the maintenance of monasticism as a closed discursive system with the ultimate objective of achieving monastic autonomy, becoming separate from, rather than subject to, the institutional church. Furthermore, Cassian wanted monastics to replace the clergy as arbiters of Christianity for lay people. Following this, I give a brief chapter summary.

**Chapter One: *Cassian's Thought*:** The intent of this chapter is to establish the historical weight of Cassian's thought. He was not a singular innovator who could easily be ignored by Gallian monastics, but rather an example of a well-established philosophical/theological edifice. As such, his ideas had the potential to effect major change in the relations between monasticism and the larger Church.

Cassian's thought not only has antecedents but is also the product of one system of monastic thought found in Egypt. It is also contingent upon 4<sup>th</sup> century Church politics, the rise of heresies and economic vicissitudes in Egypt. Cassian's philosophy of mind can be seen in early Stoicism and makes use of Stoicism's notion of free will. This notion explains the value of solitude for the individual, since solitude limits sensory input to the mind, limiting it to things to which a monk should readily assent such as prayer and scripture. Cassian's theological anthropology is basically Platonic and/or Neoplatonic in that each human has a divided soul, one part of which is the image of God and the other which is informed by sin and thus a distortion of that image. His

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cosmology follows that of Origen. Evagrius Ponticus, as Cassian's teacher, was an Origenist, as were many contemporaries of Cassian from the *Sayings*, *Lausiac History*, and other contemporary writings.

**Chapter Two: *Cassian, Foucault and the Creation of Monastic Subjectivity*:** The aim of this chapter is to explain Foucault's theory on the creation of subjectivity and then to use this theory to establish how Cassian's creation of a specifically monastic subjectivity creates monks for whom monastic identity is necessarily separate from other roles within the institutional Church.

Explanation of Foucault's notions of governmentality and the creation of subjects. I have found Foucault's thinking to provide a fertile theoretical framework for thinking about Cassian's creation of monastic subjectivity. **His three modes of subjectification provide a useful lens for reading Cassian's attempts to form correct monastic subjects of his readers;** Explanation of Foucault's three modes of subjectification: First, modes of investigation create subjects as objects of knowledge; Second, practices and procedures divide subjects both from within, and from other subjects according to standards of norm and deviance; and third, practices and procedures of permit self-management, in which subjects transform themselves as subjects in order to meet a posited ideal; examples from Cassian's writings for each mode of Foucault's three modes of subjectification; first, Cassian's system in which each monk becomes object of knowledge and thus moves through prescribed levels toward perfection; second, monks are divided in that they work on themselves (one part of the soul working on the other) and are entirely separated from previous social ties; monks gradually become self-governing, such that in solitude they need no supervision.

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**Chapter Three: *Conflicts Between Monasticism and the Church*:** The purpose of this chapter is to establish that conflicts between the Church and monasteries were not simply figments of Cassian's imagination but rather matters of historical record which I argue would induce a type of monastic separatism in Cassian's writings.

The Origenist Controversy in which Cassian and others are expelled from Scete; frequent attempts by the Church to forcefully ordain monks, due to their overwhelming popularity among laypeople; extraordinary lengths to which monks go to avoid this (running away, self-mutilation, purposely ruining their own reputations, etc.); *Life of Antony* written by a bishop and portraying Antony as a heresy fighter vs. Antony's letters which portray him as a contemplative focused on practice rather than belief.

**Chapter Four: *Cassian's Monastic Tradition and Asceticism as Basis for Valid Authority*:**

This chapter will establish that Cassian differs pointedly from the Church's form of valid authority, thus establishing that he believes his monastic way – wherein authority is based on ascetic practice – to be correct and the Church's way incorrect. This will also establish the likelihood of Cassian's advocacy for a separate monastic institution.

According to Cassian and other monastics, real authority comes from asceticism; ascetics both transform themselves internally and give visible evidence through emaciated bodies, lack of sleep and few or no possessions, that they are the perfected ones; the church does not value or enforce asceticism strictly the way monks do and is therefore less authoritative for Cassian; examples in Cassian, Rousseau, *Sayings*, etc.

**Chapter Five: *Cassian Wants Distance between Monasticism and Church*:** This will verify that Cassian is advocating for a separation between monasticism and the Church.

Cassian writes that monks should “fly from women and bishops;” both are a temptation and

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distraction to the ascetic monk; Theophilus, bishop of the church of Alexandria, expelled Cassian and his fellow monks from their monastic paradise because of theological differences; Cassian encourages total dependence on the traditions and practices of his predecessors, excluding other Church fathers and theologians; monks should treat their ascetic way of life as the Christian norm; thus, only ascetics are truly living the Christian life; Cassian and monastic writings quote only two authoritative sources: Scripture and sayings/stories of other monks.

**Chapter Six: Conclusion:** Cassian, in service to his previous mentors and way of life in Egypt, sought to separate monastic life from the official life of the Church; Foucault's three means of the creation of subjects applied to monasticism collectively; Church finally coopted monasticism both in the East and the West; possible historical and theological implications had a split between Church and monasticism occurred.

### **Bibliographic Method**

I've drawn from both primary and secondary texts. The first and most important of my primary texts will be the works of John Cassian and those of Michel Foucault. Next will be the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, a collection of short stories and sayings attributed to Egyptian monks compiled in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. Other primary texts which are roughly contemporary with Cassian will be used as well to support Cassian's point of view.

Secondary texts include well-established scholarly works on Cassian and early monasticism and asceticism. Authors include Peter Brown, Philip Rousseau, David Brakke, and Elizabeth Clark, all of whom have written extensively on early monasticism and late antique Christianity. In addition, I am mining these and other scholars' bibliographies, both for primary and secondary texts.

In terms of searches, I've used both the Penrose Library at the University of Denver and

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the Taylor Library at the Iliff School of Theology. I've also used various databases, including Loeb Classical Library, ATLA, and Philosopher's Index.

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