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# Book Review: Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*

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## The Journal of Religion

Gregory's thought and the basic ideas underlying his perception of both historical events and his own position in making history. First and foremost there is the *integritas animi*, that is, Gregory's unique and influential skill of blending the active and contemplative lives into a *vita mixta*. Next there is his basic sense of the nearing end, the eschatological perspective of history. Within this perspective Gregory's historical activities can be properly assessed. In him we witness a man whose frantic efforts to maintain a minimum of order in the midst of decline and violence are marked by a sense of the ending. Very wisely Markus discusses Gregory's famous *Dialogi* within this context of "the world in its old age." It is the holy man—figuring so prominently in the *Dialogi*—who represents the continuity of the divine within the disorder and darkness of worldly events.

Both the successful mixture of action and contemplation and the eschatological perspective are held together by Gregory's scriptural understanding. Ultimately, it is his reading of signs—exemplified in the reading of Scripture—that sets him apart from the complexities of Augustine's hermeneutics and turns him into the predecessor of medieval scribes and scholars. Markus's characterization of Gregory's position is fine and to the point: "Augustine's sense of the solidity of signs and the irretrievably sign-bound nature of human living has no equivalent in Gregory; for him the signified was much more directly accessible. What is absent from Gregory's mind is Augustine's haunting sense of the opacity of signs" (pp. 49–50).

This book makes instructive and entertaining reading. If there is one flaw in this elegant account of "Gregory and his world" it is the fact that Gregory's mind set as analyzed in the first four chapters is more or less absent from the rest of the book. What we are left with is history accessible and simple, more "world," less "Gregory."

BURCHT PRANGER, *University of Amsterdam*.

STEWART, COLUMBA. *Cassian the Monk*. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. xviii + 286 pp. \$60.00 (cloth).

Part of the distinguished series in historical theology published by Oxford University Press, this book is an elegantly and crisply written (note even the spare title), very well-researched interpretation of the life and teachings of the fourth- and fifth-century monk and Latin writer John Cassian. Written by a Benedictine monk and historian of theology, the book is informative and a delight to read. Its arguments are on the whole quite persuasive, and its scope is comprehensive. The grasp of the primary sources pertinent to Cassian and his times and to the history of monasticism and asceticism—in particular, late ancient expressions of piety and spirituality in general—is quite evident and impressive.

The book is organized into seven chapters. Chapters 1–3 focus on three different aspects of Cassian's life—as monk (chap. 1), as writer (chap. 2), and as theologian (chap. 3). Chapters 4–7 focus on selected themes in Cassian's teachings—regarding sexual continence (chap. 4), regarding biblical interpretation and the role of the Bible in spiritual formation (chap. 5), and regarding the cultivation and experience of the life of prayer (chaps. 6 and 7). A very useful appendix that details Cassian's writings on late ancient monastic Egypt is included. The notes are extensive and the bibliography (with the reader friendly separation of primary and secondary sources) is comprehensive. In fact, both notes and bibliography are so comprehensive and carefully done that the reader easily experiences the book as a re-presentation of the life and teachings of Cassian in a wonderfully

spun biographical narrative (covering chaps. 1–3) and as an interesting, if fairly noncontroversial, discursive-historical-theological argumentative seam (covering chaps. 4–7).

Stewart's interpretive stance is reflected in the very first line of the preface—the book was written as “a monk about a monk.” As such, the book is provocative and intriguing. It seems to promise the reader not only honest, up-front arguments about the author's special interests, investments, and prejudices but also suggests that the author's commitments will provide some special insights and challenges regarding the subject matter. In some respects—especially regarding certain forms and meanings of certain spiritual exercises associated with Cassian and notwithstanding the differences across time and in cultural boundaries—it does appear that Stewart's own identity as a monk is a tremendous asset in helping the reader to understand the complex motivations and purposes of a certain representation of the monastic life. Here there is no doubt that readers are guided by a very knowledgeable insider who is nonetheless consistently judicious in his treatment of sources and balanced in his presentation of arguments. But in other respects—especially regarding the origins, meanings, and import of Cassian's life within the larger historical and comparative framework of the origins, meaning(s), and import of the ascetic life in general—Stewart seems at times oddly silent about—though, according to the bibliography, not altogether unconversant with—some important and fairly recently published theoretical works on asceticism and renunciation in general and on monasticism in particular regarding their relationships to cultural and psychosocial formation. Perhaps engaging such literature would not have provided all the answers to questions that need to be raised, but they surely would have helped with the problematization of Cassian as a complex historical figure in his own right as well as the larger and equally complex phenomenon of religious asceticism, which still remains elusive. Sensitivity to such issues would have had rewards for studies in late antiquity or in any other culture or period in history. Such issues would also have helped the author address and problematize the issue of motivation—his own as well as Cassian's—on bases other than Stewart's personal identification with the spiritual quest associated with his subject. They might also have helped him to determine more sharply the appropriateness and limitation of the historical-theological categories he used to interpret Cassian.

The absence of introductory and concluding chapters perhaps provides insight into the agenda and method of this book. The absence of framing material seems to represent a kind of refusal on the part of the author. That is, in largely limiting himself to the world of categories, rubrics, and methods associated with historical theology and by refusing to subject himself and his historical subject to open-ended and multidisciplinary types of scrutiny—psychosocial, anthropological, phenomenological-comparative, ideological- and rhetorical-critical, just to name a few—the author has unduly circumscribed his own declared interest in grappling with what it may mean to “write as a monk about a monk.”

VINCENT L. WIMBUSH, *Union Theological Seminary—New York*.

RYAN, JOHN J. *The Apostolic Conciliarism of Jean Gerson*. American Academy of Religion: The Religions. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998. 96 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris from 1395 until his death in 1429, has in recent years received new attention not only as a defender of con-