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Présentation de la fiche

Coteb022_f0505

SourceBoite_022-14-chem | Cassien

LangueFrançais

TypePhotocopie

RelationNumérisation d'un manuscrit original consultable à la BnF, département des Manuscrits, cote NAF 28730

Références éditoriales

Éditeuréquipe FFL (projet ANR *Fiches de lecture de Michel Foucault*) ; projet EMAN (Thalim, CNRS-ENS-Sorbonne nouvelle).

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Notice créée par [équipe FFL](#) Notice créée le 21/10/2020 Dernière modification le 23/04/2021

CASSIAN, CONTEMPLATION AND THE COENOBITIC LIFE

theological ideal, and describe a different type of contemplation that may properly be called ascetic and practical.¹ Here, even in the *Conferences*, it is precisely the active and continuous quality of contemplation that strikes one most.² The would-be contemplative in this less ideal sense becomes involved in an intense schooling of the mind. The abbot Moses himself had realised this: 'mentem quidem non interpellari cogitationibus impossibile est, suscipere vero eas sive respicere omni studenti possibile est'.³ Abbot Theodore shares this insight, when he says that the human mind, far from being passive like wax, should be like an 'adamantinum signatorium', so that 'universa quae incurrerint sibi' may be transformed by the mind itself 'ad qualitatem sui status'.⁴ The ascetic should try, in other words, to establish within himself a certain dynamic stability; and some clue to Cassian's meaning here is given in a later passage: 'Unde neque illi inmutabilis naturae esse putandi sunt, qui in illa qua creati sunt beatitudine perseverant, eo quod in contrariam partem non fuerint similiter depravati. Aliud namque est inmutabilis naturae esse, aliud virtutis industria bonique custodia per inmutabilis dei gratiam non mutari'.⁵ This attitude to mind is in no way quietist, nor is the interpretation of virtue one of stoical indifference. For fickle human nature, virtue and goodness involve a state of continuous tension; and the unwavering focus of the mind that Cassian desires is the fruit of sustained vigilance and unremitting labour.

This variety, the different layers of meaning attached to the word contemplation, can be detected in single passages; passages where, at first sight, the emphasis lies on a more exalted reference. Even the abbot Moses, quoted above, can strike a balance. Referring, like Theonas, to the gospel contrast between Martha and Mary, he makes a straightforward point: 'Videtis ergo principale bonum in theoria sola, id est in contemplatione divina dominum posuisse. Unde ceteras virtutes, licet necessarias et utiles bonasque pronuntiemus, secundo tamen gradu censendas esse decernimus, quia universae huius unius patrantur obtentu'. Man's highest good resides, he says, not in activity but in a contemplation of Christ, that is 'vere simplex et una'.⁶ Yet there is in this passage an emphasis on gradual ascent, on what one might call a contemplative progress, a reminder that contemplation has more than one meaning; and Moses goes on to give a description of contemplation that implies a striving, and growth in the company of others. The ultimate hope is that the ascetic will graduate to the 'unum . . . dei solius intuitum', when the soul 'solius dei iam pulchritudine scientiaque pascatur'; but this is a state reserved for

¹ Chadwick describes a move away from an 'eschatological society' to a 'sanctifying and educating society' as part of the background to monasticism in this period: *John Cassian*, 1st ed., 77-8.

² Chadwick, 1st ed., 88; 2nd ed., 93.

³ *Con.*, i. 17.

⁴ *Con.*, vi. 12.

⁵ *Con.*, vi. 16.

⁶ *Con.*, i. 8.



