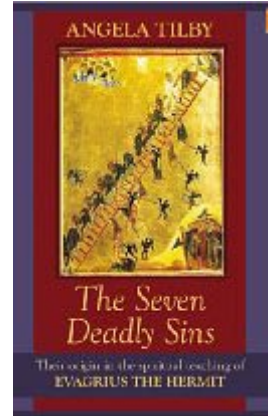


Angela Tilby – The Seven Deadly Sins: their origin in the teaching of Evagrius the Hermit

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This is a study of the teaching of the 4th century theologian and hermit Evagrius. For the boffins among you, it's about Evagrius' analysis of the 8 evil thoughts which undermine the spiritual life, and his advice on how to combat them. Evagrius was the first to identify what subsequently became known as the seven deadly sins, although his take on them was much more spiritual than moral, which is how they were eventually passed down to us via Cassian and Gregory the Great. Evagrius, sees each evil thought is a form of demonic affliction on the individual, which requires identification and resistance, and not as a moral failing calling for repentance – a releasing and encouraging approach. For the general reader this is a fascinating and astonishingly contemporary treatment of the things which cause us to stumble and prevent us from growing in Christlikeness. Angela Tilby manages to be both scholarly and accessible. For anyone interested in their own spiritual journey, and for everyone involved in the ministry of spiritual direction or counselling, this book is immensely helpful.



1. Symptoms

The deadly sins have been an important part of the Christian spiritual tradition since they were characterized by Pope Gregory the Great – but he was not the originator; he drew on Evagrius, writing 2 centuries earlier from the first experiments in radical Christian living in the desert. Evagrius lived from c. 345-399, and was the first Christian thinker to attempt to analyse the psychology of sin. He came from Turkey, lived as a theologian in Constantinople, fell in love with a married woman and moved to the desert. He did not speak of deadly sins but of evil thoughts; John Cassian, his pupil, wrote them up as deadly sins and failed to acknowledge his debt to Evagrius.

Relevance today – we tend to emphasize structural sin (our collective Western avarice, for example) – but you can't repent or be forgiven if it's collective. So we carry guilt which finds no relief. Evagrius saw sin as evil thoughts, sown by demons.

Classical roots

The notion of deadly sins begins with the Stoics, who believed humans are prone to 4 passions – grief, fear, craving, pleasure. Plato taught of a world of perfect forms which can be approached through asceticism and contemplation. Aristotle believed virtue was a rational choice directed towards human fulfilment. These classical antecedents were not codes of right/wrong so much as a quest for wisdom, helped through adopting certain practices and leading to fulfilment. Horace names the vices of avarice, covetousness, ambition, envy, anger, sloth, drunkenness and lewdness – and suggested they could be overcome by study and learning.

Early Christianity

10 Commandments. Wisdom literature. Paul's lists show both Jewish and classical roots.

Didache has a way of death and a way of life.

Mark – Jesus describes the 'evil thoughts' which come from the human heart: *dialogismoi*. Evagrius would use the word *logismoi*. Jesus' temptation – became a model for those a monk would experience in the desert.

Callistus, C3, argued the Church should see itself as an Ark, a refuge for all kinds of people, rather than as a gathering of the pure.

Evagrius described 'eight thoughts' – seen by Andrew Louth as '8 cracks in the heart'. They are:

1. Gluttony – a demonic assault on the attempt to live a disciplined life, inc fasting and abstinence
2. Lust – demonic erotic fantasies to discourage from chastity
3. Avarice – fear of poverty and old age
4. Sadness – rippling form o nostalgia which prevents a person from living in the present
5. Anger – obsessive habit leading to paranoia
6. Acedia – listless boredom which saps vitality and paralyses the will
7. Vainglory – encourages the virtuous to believe their virtues deserve admiration
8. Pride – demon which tempts the successful monk from turning away from God altogether

After Cassian came Augustine, writing in Latin, much more concrete in its forms of expression than Greek, which has a high capacity to convey abstract ideas. Augustine defined sin as something said/thought which is against divine law. Then Gregory, who placed pride as the source of the others. Gregory saw the spiritual life as involving unrelenting effort; we are responsible not just for conscious evil, but also for the spontaneous thoughts which arise within us. Gregory set the pattern of the W understanding of the cosmos as a gigantic moral machine built on the principle of God's retributive justice. Then to penitential manuals and confession manuals; and Aquinas. By now the deadly sins have become part of the landscape of the medieval imagination. Dante still understood sin in terms of motivation and attitude, though still within a forensic framework. The deadly sins appear in wall paintings (eg Hesse in Suffolk, C14th, S Leigh in Oxon).

In the Reformation age the 10 commandments functioned as the deadly sins had done previously.

If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly you will be a theologian – Evagrius.

Life

Evagrius b c.345 AD, son of bishop, moved in 379 to Constantinople, became archdeacon, had love affair, moved away to Jerusalem in 382, became monk, moved to desert.

He produced a collection of scripture sayings for use in combatting temptation – *Antirrhethikos* (Refutations). It offers scriptures to quell 487 dangerous/obsessive thoughts which the devil might inspire in struggling monks. They were organised into 8 categories representing 8 areas of temptation.

D aged 55 after restrictive diet of both food and even water.

He regarded self as orthodox, but from 553 was condemned as heretic (partly by association with Origen). This now thought to have been unnecessary. But he disappeared from view.

Spiritual teaching

Evagrius held that spiritual progress depends on close observation of thoughts as they arise in the mind. Thoughts are symptoms, not sins. They are due to demons who act as infestations seizing on a wound. They buzz around the monk looking for cracks in the heart – points of weakness/vulnerability. 4 stages in dealing with them:

1. Self defence begins with taking control of the passions
2. Learning to understand our place in the world, taking tranquil and non-possessive delight in creation
3. Learning to apprehend spiritual beings
4. Learning to contemplate the Trinity.

This teaching was taken over by his disciple John Cassian, who changed its emphasis. He turned the 8 thoughts into 8 vices, and made us responsible for holding them. Sin became a moral issue. Evagrius had believed that people are only partly responsible for sin; there is a dimension of evil which lies outside the human will. Cassian accepts the role of demons but suggests they are not merely external agents but that they observe us to find out the sin hidden in our hearts. This moves towards Augustine's position that sin is basic to our human nature. And Cassian did not acknowledge Evagrius, which is why his teaching has been lost.

For Evagrius demons are not visitors from a supernatural realm but part of the material universe much as biting gnats and howling winds are. The battle in the monk's heart was part of a wider battle taking place in the air, on the ground, in communities and households and palaces. The monk was a target for demonic activity because his prayer subverted the demons' destructive influence. The monk needs to observe his evil thoughts so that he understands their pattern, the way one leads to another; and then to bring them to Christ. The idea that one paves the way for another is what lies behind the progressive pattern of the 8 evil thoughts.

2. The Diagnostic Tool Kit

1. **The Thought of Gluttony** – gastromagia (madness of the stomach). Not overindulgence in food and drink so much as a temptation to give up the God centred life through fear of the consequences to one's health. Will the desert destroy my health? It is related not to greed but to anxiety. The practice of fasting goes back to Plato's teaching that the soul is in 3 parts: rational, irascible, concupiscible. The monk's job is to work for self control from the bottom upwards. Cassian presented gluttony not as a kind of hypochondria but as a slack of self control in eating or drinking. Gregory the Great, in taking over Cassian's teaching and Benedict's rule (influenced by it), had no awareness that Evagrius was the originator or that he'd seen what they called sins as disturbing thoughts rather than faults. But Evagrius' link between gluttony and fear is helpful – people may be afraid of physical hunger, or afraid of inner hunger and attempt to assuage it with food. The sensation of being filled up is a compensation which hides the craving of the soul. Gluttony can also take the form of fastidiousness, fear of what we eat and drink; we become gluttons for the perfect diet, organic, low fat, 5 a day, extra vits etc.
2. **The Thought of Lust** – 'porneia'. For Evagrius this too arises from the lowest, concupiscible, part of the soul, and follows on from overindulgence in food/drink. When a monk can think of a woman in his past without becoming sexually excited, he has overcome lust. Evagrius seems to have had no problem with the sexual body itself; and taught that fasting, scant sleep and mental discipline would transform the body into a site guarded against demonic attack. Christianity has perpetuated some dreadful sexual hang ups, coming from a sexual pessimism not present in Evagrius. Song of Songs reminds us that some have always dreamed of the possibility of deep personal fulfilment through sexual intimacy. People who feel attracted, drawn to or driven to seek intimacy with God are likely to long for intimacy with others – it's not surprising that many committed to a life of prayer have found themselves distracted by sexual thoughts and fantasies.
3. **The Thought of avarice** – philurgia, love of silver. Also a passion of the soul, also linked by Evagrius to anxieties and dreads which are all too common and ordinary. It's the opposite of trusting in God. Old age, infirmity, loss of income through retirement, disability – all provide fertile ground for concern about money. Avarice has emotional roots. Gregory adds envy, which Cassian and Evagrius don't include. Evagrius suggests we should deal with envious/jealous people with generosity, by not drawing attention to our own praise/success, and by including them. Avarice today – an affluent society creates marginalisation and the fear of having less, or from anxiety about one's material needs in the future. We also have a lack of trust in anything beyond material existence; avarice feeds on the assumption that this earthly life is important.
4. **The Thought of sadness** – lupe, or grief. Memory of past good things, no longer available. A particular problem for the desert monk. Sadness today. It's been said that all religious have idealised childhoods – they remember only the good bits, perhaps as a way of forgetting the actual reasons they took the vow. We all construct our life stories out of our memories; Evagrius is suggesting this is dangerous because it allows the past to be more solid than the present. It prevents us taking responsibility for now. Our faith requires us to live in the present and with an orientation to the future.
5. **The Thought of anger** – orge, or rage. A fundamental barrier to prayer which leaves the soul vulnerable to shipwreck. It can easily develop from sadness. Both belong in the irascible (emotional) part of the soul. He pictures it as boiling away like water in a pot. Or like a wound we constantly want to rub, caress, nurse. It's a habit which can grow until it becomes part of our personality. In the ancient world it was seen as a proper response to those who failed to respect another's opinions and loyalties; passive, unexpressed anger was condemned, the kind which assumes I'm not the equal of the other person and so do not have the right to call them to account. Cassian sees it as a poison which must be rooted out from our soul, but again sees it as part of our nature. Cassian's self begins to take on demonic aspects which for Evagrius remain external. Matt 5.22 says 'if you are angry with your brother without cause' – Cassian omitted the 'without cause', as do many modern translators. Evagrius reminds us that our sense of having been injured is not always based on fact; we can be

programmed by our past experiences to expect slight, and so become quick to take offence. 12 step programmes recognise this – often at the root of addictive behaviour is a sense of deep grievance against those who have frustrated us in the past. The addict sees himself as a victim; alcoholics often become abusive/violent when drunk, and the inhibition is released.

6. **The Thought of sloth** – acedia. The noonday demon of Ps 91. It manifests as midday boredom. It is effectively our attempt to avoid what we should be doing with our lives. Sloth becomes the pursuit of distraction, the frittering away of time in order to escape choice and commitment; keeping our options open. Spiritually the slothful person expects to achieve union with God without too much effort. It's more than laziness; as ever, later tradition takes the freshness and psychological acuteness of Evagrius' original description and schematizes it for mass consumption. Us – our belief that we are overworked gives us permission to seek leisure with a driven intensity. Getting drunk on Friday night is the rightful prize for 5 twelve hour days commuting to the office. We are encouraged to think of sloth as something we deserve, a rest, a chilling out. It's become a virtue! Perhaps this is partly to do with the moralism of the later tradition; and an instinct that human beings might be designed for something more relaxed and gracious than a spiritual regime of unrelenting penitence and self improvement. We also lack trust that there is any goodness held out to us at all. If we don't believe in God we have to make our own rewards. Slothfulness today shows as the fretful inability to inhabit our daily routine with any sense of purpose; an endless search for distraction, a perpetual adding to ones load of small scale tasks and responsibilities, which means we no longer have to work out what we are really meant to do with our lives.
7. **The Thought of vainglory** – lit, empty glory. A craving for recognition, admiration, fed by an inner conviction that one is more gifted, able, powerful or virtuous than others. As if after a person has come through the battle with sloth, he begins to sit back and admire what he has achieved. We see Paul fighting the temptation to appeal to the superiority of his own experience in both Galatians and 2 Corinthians. Jesus faces it in the temptation to throw himself down from the temple. For Evagrius vainglory is the most worldly of the temptations. It involves fantasizing about social encounters. The antidotes are laughter; and tears. The media poke fun at public figures prone to grandiosity. We take ourselves too seriously. Benedict talks about the ladder of humility – which we step down, not up, towards God. Today – we need to distinguish vainglory from the affirmation we all require for emotional and spiritual health. Humility is the appropriate response to such affirmation – a bow, a curtsy. We now see a punch in the air, a raised hand, the invitation for more. Vainglory is empty inside, a craving, an inability to face weakness, fallibility, incompetence.
8. **The Thought of pride** – the most serious of all the evil thoughts, and the outcome of failure to deal with the others. Pride is the temptation to deny God and fall into self sufficiency. Augustine saw pride as the original sin – which made sense in an age of increasing insecurity, when centuries of Roman civilisation and culture were collapsing. Cassian saw pride as the cause of the fall. But Evagrius didn't. Spontaneous thoughts are expressions of vulnerability, not sins. Today – proper pride comes with a sense of humility, eg pride in our children, our history. The wrong kind of pride is domineering, and grows from vainglory.

3. Towards a cure

Purpose of this study is to rehabilitate Evagrius and recover his forgotten insights. It was his intention to offer diagnosis and therapy for the harmful passions which have the potential to disturb us and turn us away from God. By curing them we are free to contemplate the wisdom of Christ in the universe and to participate in the life of the Trinity. Evagrius sees the human person as being in a state of continuous spiritual development. He had an integrated view of body and mind; he allows the body a life of its own, and recognises that what we do with our bodies affects how we think and feel. His demonology is a problem if we don't believe in demons, but it brings helpful insights which can lead us beyond our limited understanding of sin and temptation. We don't learn from our negative thoughts or ask Christ what they mean; we feel ashamed, and bury them. And so we created a compulsive and judgemental face to the world which is neither attractive nor charitable. The

Orthodox church does not hold the W view that the sin of Adam leaves each individual soul with a legacy of guilt; rather that the inheritance of Adam's sin is our mortality. Evagrius regarded sin not as inevitable but as a choice, a turning away from the gift of immortality in a wilful movement towards death and disintegration. The Orthodox church also makes provision for the confession of involuntary sin; the penitent does not attribute blame to himself but opens his heart and confesses what hurts, shames and wounds his relationship with God – including when that has its origin in the wickedness of others. The nearest we get in the W is to confess to sin through ignorance.

Extracts from *Antirrhetikos*

I write of the reasoning nature that fights beneath heaven:
first what it battles against;
second; what assists it in the battle;
and finally, what the fighter keeping valiant watch must confront. Those who fight are human beings;
those assisting them are the angels of God;
and those opposing them are the evil demons.

Gluttony

Lord Jesus, think on me, and purge away my sin; from earthbound passions set me free, and make me pure within. The thought of gluttony suggests to the monk that he ought to give up his ascetic discipline at once. It brings to mind the state of his stomach, his liver and his spleen, the diagnosis of a long illness, the lack of life's necessities, and finally the horror of his body, its tissues bloated with fluid, and no doctors near by to offer relief. These things are depicted vividly before his eyes. The thought reminds him of particular brothers who have suffered from such things. It frequently brings him to recall certain ones among the brethren who have fallen prey to such complaints. And at the same time the thought, occurs to those who do suffer from such illnesses to pay a visit and to catalogue their various ailments and describe how these are the consequences of their attempt at an ascetic life-style.

Lust

The demon of lust compels one to desire various bodies. It especially targets those who practise sexual abstinence, trying to make them give up in the belief that they are not achieving anything. This demon bends the soul down towards those sexual acts which defile it, making it say certain things and even hear certain words almost as if the reality were visible and present.

Avarice

Love of money (avarice) suggests a long old age, and the inevitable inability to earn one's keep with one's hands. On top of that, there will be famines, illnesses will visit us and the bitterness of poverty, and with all that the terrible shame of having to accept the necessities of life from others.

Sadness

Sadness tends to come up at times because of the deprivation of one's desires. On other occasions it accompanies anger. When it arises from the deprivation of desires it takes place in the following manner. Certain thoughts first drive the soul to the memory of house and parents, or else to that of one's former life. Now when these thoughts find that the soul offers no resistance but rather follows after them and pours itself out in pleasures that are still only mental in nature, they then seize her and drench her in sadness, with the result that those ideas she was just indulging in no longer remain. In fact, they cannot be had in reality either, because of her present way of life. So the miserable soul is now shrivelled up in her humiliation to the degree that she poured herself out upon these thoughts of hers.

Anger

The most fierce passion is anger. In fact it is defined as a boiling and stirring up of wrath against one who has given injury — or is thought to have done so. It constantly irritates the soul and above all at the time of prayer it seizes the mind and flashes the picture of the offensive person before one's eyes. Then there comes a time when it persists longer, is transformed into indignation, stirs up alarming experiences by night. This is succeeded by a general debility of the body,

malnutrition with its attendant pallor, and the illusion of being attacked by poisonous wild beasts. These four last mentioned consequences following upon indignation may be found to accompany many thoughts.

Sloth

The demon of acedia — also called the noonday demon — is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out of the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look now this way and that to see if perhaps. . . Then too he instils in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labour. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time and brings to the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no stone unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a sense of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.

Vainglory

The spirit of vain glory is most subtle and it readily grows up in the souls of those who practise virtue. It leads them to desire to make their struggles known publicly, to hunt after the praise of men. This in turn leads to their illusory healing of women, or to their hearing fancied sounds as the cries of the demons — crowds of people who touch their clothes. This demon predicts besides that they will attain to the priesthood. It has men knocking on the door seeking audience with them. If the monk does not willingly yield to their request, he is bound and led away. When in this way he is carried aloft by vain hope, the demon vanishes and the monk is left to be tempted by the demons of pride or of sadness who bring upon him thoughts opposed to his hopes. It also happens at times that a man who a short while before was a holy priest, is led off bound and handed to the demon of impurity to be sifted by him.

Pride

The demon of pride is the cause of the most damaging fall for the soul. For it induces the monk to deny that God is his helper and to consider that he himself is the cause of virtuous action. Further, he gets a swollen head in regard to the brethren, considering them stupid because they do not all have the same opinion of him. Anger and sadness come following on the heels of this demon, and, last of all, comes in its train the greatest of maladies — derangement of mind, associated with wild ravings and hallucinations of whole multitudes of demons in the sky.

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