Orthodoxy, Heresy, or the Grey in Between? John Cassian and Early Medieval Theology

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Our modern society has a need to define and categorize. The dawn of modernity in the sixteenth century saw scientists striving to place every living thing in its own category, creating an elaborate system of taxonomy. Everything and everyone has a label so that it may be filed properly in our minds: foods are healthy or unhealthy; countries are first, second, or third world; whole societies are labelled as primitive; people are dyslexic, homosexual, anorexic, black, religious, and so on. These labels help us to order our world, but they also allow us to dismiss whole categories of things and especially people at once.

In the study of history, we must be aware of how our modern worldviews colour our interpretation of the past. Our desire to categorize does not always line up with the way earlier peoples saw their world. Early medieval heresy is a good example of this. Some beliefs, such as Pelagianism, Nestorianism, and Donatism, were considered heretical by the Catholic Church and formally condemned; others, such as the idea of apostolic poverty, were ignored or tolerated at certain times and in certain measures; and still others, such as was the case with St. John Cassian's theology of grace, were tacitly accepted by the Church. Thus, the early Catholic Church accepted a grey area in theology, an area which fell between orthodoxy and heresy.

John Cassian was an early fifth-century ascetic monk and author who had settled in southern Gaul, probably Marseille. He was a defender of orthodoxy, commissioned to write a treatise against the Nestorian heresy by the future Pope Leo I. He also wrote two extremely popular works concerning spirituality and the monastic life. In one of these works, called the *Conferences*, Cassian outlined his view of grace and human agency. Cassian argued that the introduction of sin in the Garden of Eden had corrupted human will so that it is now unable to will any good without an infusion of God's grace. In some cases, however, the human will can make a small, pre-emptive step toward conversion; however, it is impossible to obtain salvation without God's grace then bringing the person the rest of the way. Conversion, then, is impossible without God's grace. After conversion, however, Cassian believed the human will capable of choosing the good, although God's grace was still necessary to bring the good about. It was this view which prepared the ground for accusations of heresy.

His accuser was Prosper of Aquitaine, now living in Marseille, a layman and a devoted admirer of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in Africa. The aged Augustine had published several treatises concerning his own doctrine of grace, as well as many other works, some against other condemned heresies, particularly Donatism. Augustine, like Cassian, believed that sin had fully corrupted the human will, but denied that conversion had any effect on its ability to choose what is good. God's grace was the only agent in all good works; Augustine thereby denied human agency and adopted a doctrine of strict predestination. God chose the elect to be saved, and he predestined every good work. Prosper was disturbed by the conflicting theology he heard bandied about in Marseille and other parts of Gaul, noting the differences between it and what Augustine espoused. He branded it heresy, and unleashed a torrent of virulent writings against it.

Later, early modern historians, with their need to categorize, labelled this heterodox view of grace 'the semi-Pelagian heresy', and historiography has looked through this lens ever since (see Backus and Goudriaan, 'Semipelagianism'). The use of the term 'semi-Pelagianism' has recently been questioned by several scholars, but it is the label of heresy I wish to address in this paper. If heresy is considered to be the opposite of orthodoxy, that is, a belief that is at variance to the established beliefs of the church, then Cassian's theology does not fit the bill. Rather, despite its being stamped as heresy by Prosper, Cassian's theology in the debate on grace was widely accepted within the church, yet it was not formally declared as orthodox. It seems to have fallen into a grey area between orthodoxy and heresy, an area, perhaps, with which the early medieval church was more comfortable than we are today.

Augustine's doctrine of extreme predestination did not find popularity in Gaul; many thought it to be no more than fatalism. His critics argued that Augustine's doctrine meant that Christ only died for the elect, and not for all people, and therefore contradicted I Tim. II.4: '[God] will have all men saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth.' Instead, it was Cassian's more moderate view which was the prevailing belief. Prosper himself demonstrates this when he writes to Augustine, declaring that the heresy had spread from Marseille to other parts of Gaul (see Augustine, *Epistola* CCXXV.7, in *PL* 33:1106). He even says that bishops subscribed to the heresy as well. The best evidence, perhaps, for the widespread acceptance of Cassian's view is the great approval with which his books were read. We have manuscripts from all over western Europe, as far away as England, from before the twelfth century; this distribution is remarkable and indicative of his reputation. Furthermore, many medieval authors who were renowned in their own right used Cassian extensively in their writings: Pope Gregory the Great and Bishop Caesarius of Arles are good examples (Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to*

Gregory the Great, 163-4 and 83, respectively). Ensuring Cassian's reputation for the centuries to come, St. Benedict recommended the reading of Cassian's *Conferences* in his *Rule of Benedict* which was used throughout western Europe as the basis for Benedictine monastic organization (Benedict, *Rule of Saint Benedict*, LXXIII.5). All these influential and respected (and orthodox) people did not seem to be bothered by Cassian's theology, or any accusation of heresy. Gennadius of Marseille, Cassian's biographer, sums it up for us when he tells us that, though Prosper disagrees, 'the church of God finds [Cassian's works] salutary' (Gennadius, *De illustribus viris*, LXXXV).

In fact, not many people were interested in fighting alongside Prosper. Besides the evidence from Prosper's letters of dissent throughout Gaul, we know that several other writers wrote in support of Cassian's view. Vincent, abbot of Lérins, an island monastery off the coast of modern Cannes, and Bishop Faustus of Riez both wrote books espousing free will against predestination, and there were several pamphlets circulated, whose texts are preserved in Prosper's works. There is also an anonymous work, sometimes attributed to Arnobius the Younger, in which the author refutes Augustine's doctrine whilst claiming that the orthodox Augustine could not possibly espouse such an extreme doctrine of predestination; this allowed him to side-step attacking Augustine directly (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, 863-4). What we do not have is much evidence of other people attacking Cassian's theology until 519, nearly a century after Cassian's death. At this time, a group of monks (known as the 'Scythian monks') in Constantinople agitated against Faustus of Riez's book *On Grace*, demanding it be formally condemned by the pope (Markus, 'The Legacy of Pelagius', in *The Making of Orthodoxy*, 223-4). The intervening decades, though, did not see a sustained controversy on the nature of grace and human agency.

Prosper had done his best to discredit Cassian's theology. He wrote to Augustine, requesting his help in the dispute (see Augustine, *Epistola* CCXXV.7, in *PL* 33:1106); Augustine answered by sending two new treatises, *On the Gift of Perseverance* and *On the Predestination of the Saints*, expanding upon his theology of predestination and grace. Prosper himself also wrote a book against Cassian, entitled *Against the Conferencer*, in which he attempted to destroy the 'heretical' theology he found in the *Conferences* and hold up Augustine's doctrine as truth. He even went to Rome to pay a visit to Pope Celestine, describing the situation in Gaul, and requesting the pope's intervention. This, however, did not have quite the effect he had hoped it would. Instead of condemning the 'heresy', Celestine wrote to the bishops of Gaul, censuring them for not keeping their priests in order (Celestine I, *Epistola XXI* in *PL* 50:528-30). No further action was taken. Prosper's campaign did not get a friendly reception.

Though Cassian's theology of grace was not formally condemned, neither was it formally declared to be orthodox. Though it took ten years from the time the Scythian monks declared Faustus of Riez's *On Grace* to contain heresy, the work was finally examined at the Council of Orange in 529. It was not condemned. Furthermore, another issue at stake at the same council demonstrated a similar reluctance to draw a line between the heretical and the orthodox on the matter of grace. Caesarius, Bishop of Arles, an enthusiast of both Cassian and Augustine, was accused of being a Predestinarian, someone who took the doctrine of predestination to unorthodox extremes. The accusation, spurred on by political conflict more than anything else, held no water as Caesarius was able to show himself to be a true follower of Augustine; Predestinarianism, he demonstrated, was a corruption of Augustine's doctrine. Thus, it was Augustine's doctrine which was upheld as truth. It was to his teachings that Caesarius appealed, and, ultimately, his adherence to them was what vindicated him.

If Augustine's teachings were endorsed, we would expect Cassian's variant doctrine to have been condemned. Yet this did not happen. In fact, the decrees from the council tell a surprising story of syncretism (Leyser, 'Semipelagianism', in *Augustine through the Ages*, 765). The first decrees underscore the absolute necessity of God's grace and the complete inability of the human will to will any righteousness – a statement of which Augustine would be proud. Further down the list of decrees, however, we find the concession that baptism sanctifies the will enough to make steps towards the good, with the help of God's grace – an assertion more in line with Cassian's theology of grace. On the issue of predestination, sticky as it was, the council was silent. Thus, instead of Cassian's theology being condemned, it was ultimately partially upheld, though it was still held in tension with Augustine's. This arrangement seemed pleasing, and the matter was not brought up again until several centuries later in the ninth century.

Hence, we find that the Gallic church was comfortable to live without defining the issue. Where we see a glaring contradiction, they were quite happy to endorse both sides as true. Augustine was certainly a theological powerhouse who could not be dismissed, regardless of the extremity of his theology. Cassian, however, was a local holy man, renowned for his ascetic virtue, carrying Gallic authority in his own right, a kind of authority that the African bishop across the Mediterranean did not have. Both men were highly respected, and the Gallic church saw value in both of their theologies, despite being opposed to one another.

Our desire to categorize, define, and draw decisive boundaries between things is a modern obsession. This becomes apparent in the discussion of the early medieval church and the debate on the nature of grace and human agency as played out in Gaul in the early fifth century. Some beliefs fell into the camp of orthodoxy, some into the camp of heresy, but, in this case, the distinction was not so clear. The grey area between demonstrates that the boundary between orthodoxy and heresy was not clear cut. Therefore, Prosper's label of 'heresy' for Cassian's theology cannot be the impetus for us to dismiss it as such. John Cassian's theology, while never endorsed and also never condemned, was widely believed, despite being in conflict with the Augustinian belief formally upheld by the church. This unwillingness to put Cassian's theology in either the 'orthodox' or 'heretical' box is hard for us to understand. We must try, however, for we can only hope to learn from the people of the past if we refuse to make them conform to our ways of thinking, and let them speak for themselves.

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