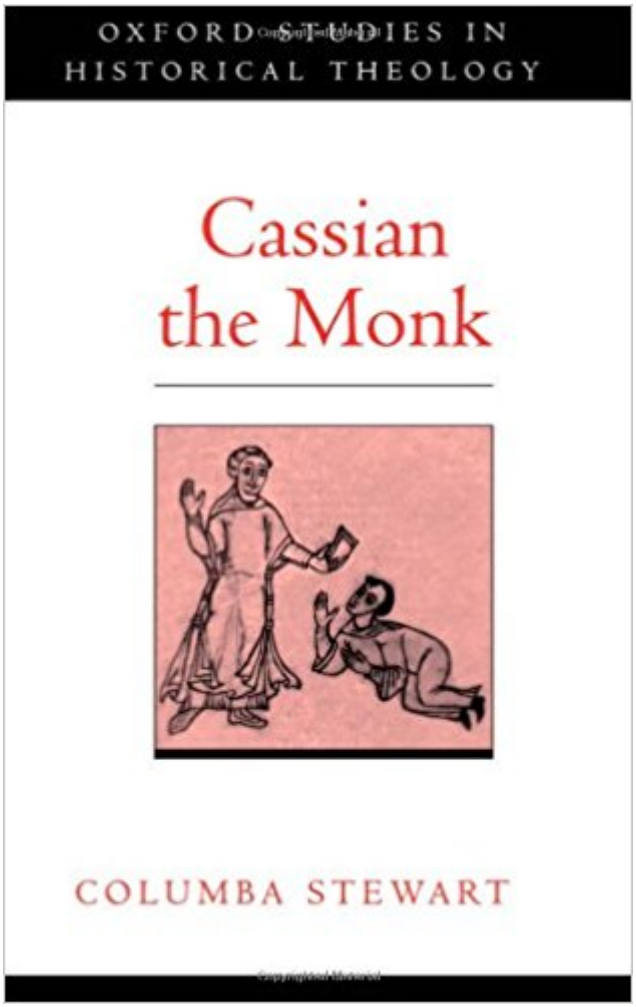
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Cassian The Monk (Oxford Studies In Historical Theology)



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Synopsis

This book is a study of the life, monastic writings, and spiritual theology of John Cassian (c., 360-435). His Institutes and Conferences are a remarkable synthesis of earlier monastic traditions, especially those of fourth-century Egypt, informed throughout by Cassian's awareness of the particular needs of the Latin monastic movement he was helping to shape. Sometimes portrayed as simply an advocate of the sophisticated spiritual theology of Evagrius of Ponticus (360-435), Cassian was actually a theologian of keen insight, realism, and creativity. His teaching on sexuality is unique in early monastic literature in both its breadth and its depth, and his integration of biblical interpretation with the ways of prayer and teaching on ecstatic prayer are of fundamental importance for the western monastic tradition. The only Latin writer included in the classic Greek collections of monastic sayings, Cassian was the major spiritual influence on both the Rule of the Master and the Rule of Benedict, as well as the source for Gregory the Great's teaching on capital sins and compunction. Columba Stewart's book is the first major study of Cassian to be published in twenty years. It begins by establishing Cassian's credibility as a teacher on the basis of his own experience as a monk and his familiarity with the fundamental literary sources. Stewart then turns to Cassian's spiritual theology, paying particular attention to Cassian's view of the monastic journey in eschatological perspective, his teaching on continence and chastity, the Christological basis of biblical interpretation and prayer, his method of unceasing prayer, and his integration of ecstatic experience with an Evagrian theology of prayer.

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Customer Reviews

"In addition to chastity, Stewart has good chapters on prayer and the use of the bible in Cassian. Although he cannot cover every aspect of Cassian's massive teaching, these three topics are probably the key ones. And Stewart has mastered them as completely as anyone I have read. This is a tour de force."--Terrence G. Kardong, O.S.B., THe Catholic Historical Review

Columba Andrew Stewart is at St John's University, Minnesota.

This book is quite well done, which I expected as it was reccommended to me by someone who did his doctoral work on Cassian at the Pontifical University of St. Anselm in Rome.The book starts with a background and history of Cassian, his life, his travels, etc. which serves to put the rest of his writings in context. From there, the book moves on to his works on chastity, Biblical interpretation, prayer, etc.The text is well researched, has ample citations throughout, and is well written. All in all, anyone looking to get insight into early monastic life in the Church, and also get a handle on early Church spirituality would do well to consider this text. We have a tendency in the Catholic Church to focus more on the spiritual traditions of the middle ages which, while beautiful themselves, are hardly representative of the totality of Church thought on the subject. We would do well to emulate our Orthodox brothers and sisters and go back and look at writings such as Cassian, etc. in the early Church as their richness and importance cannot be overstated.Eastern Christians (Orthodox or Catholic), Western Christians (Catholic or Orthodox), as well as people considering monastic spirituality as a Benedictine Oblate; or, those who may be considering a vocation as consecrated religious in the monastic Tradition; would probably get a great deal out of this text. It is quite readable, but still very scholarly.

This book needs to be read slowly in order to appreciate it. If you take a small amount, follow the suggested references, and absorb the footnotes, the study becomes a meditation, and the fruit of this is outstanding. Columba Stewart is an excellent teacher. HE is committed to his subjects (He also has written an article on Cassian's abba, Evagrius Ponticus), and has integrated their teachings into his own life. Such is the highest recommendation for a teacher, one who demonstrates in his own life the stuff he's teaching. One example occurs in his note on how Cassian's works are cited in the text; he provides the example, 'Conferences' 16.3.1. Now, what's that text? The words are given

by Cassian to Abba Joseph: "Among all of these there is one kind of love that is indestructible and that is founded not on a good reputation or on the greatness of one's title or one's gifts or on some business obligation or on natural need but on likeness of virtue alone. This, I say, can never be cut off for any reason: Not only are distance and time unable to undo and destroy it, but even death itself does not sunder it.' Cassian, through the abba, is situating the teaching of Evagrius into the monastic cenobitic context of fifth century Gaul. Evagrius' teaching is: "There was a time when evil did not exist, and there will be a time when it no longer exists; but there was never a time when virtue did not exist and there will never be a time when it does not exist; for the seeds of virtue are indestructible." (Letter 59) This is no simple Plotonian elision from the third century, this is mature Christian monastic stuff. Stewart's Cassian, and Stewart himself are fully alive to many such tendrils of connection that monastic authors intend. The task is to be alive to the contemporary situation. For Stewart, for Cassian, for me and you, the connections have a predominantly personal aspect. Columba Stewart's book is a substantial and masterful work, its helps us to engage and enflesh the teaching of that master of monastic asceticism and theology, John Cassian.

Stewart's study of the spiritual and theological writings of St John Cassian attempts to provide for students and monastics alike a framework for appreciating Cassian's significance -- and it succeeds brilliantly in doing so. Stewart's presentation is noteworthy, inter alia, for his revision of traditional categories too often (mis)applied to Cassian's theology. Thus, his consideration of the "Semi-Pelagian" Conference XIII takes up the dissatisfaction expressed by R A Markus in his End of Ancient Christianity, who called for a reading of Cassian's theology of grace in situ, rather than through the prism of Prosper's hardline Augustinian critique. Stewart does so with the great clarity and succinctness characteristic of the work as a whole. His style is highly approachable, even fluid, and his notes (which run to a length roughly equal to that of the text itself) are remarkably thorough. This study will be highly valued by scholars and enthusiasts alike.

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