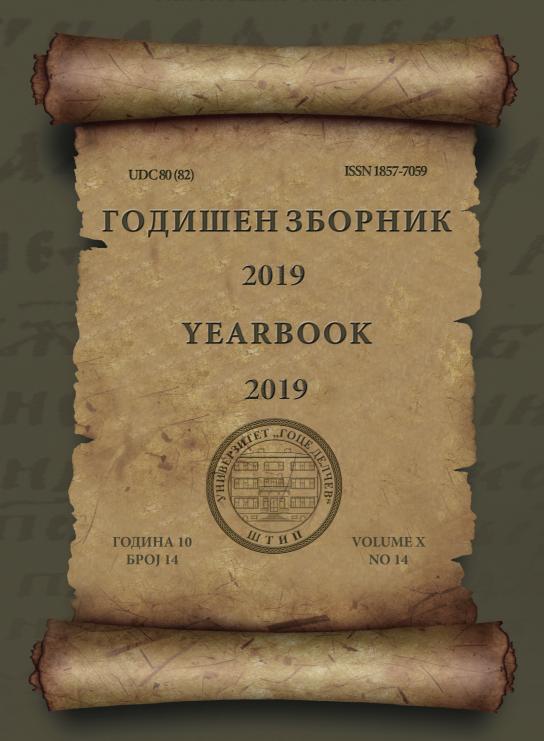
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GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY - STIP FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ "ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ" – ШТИП ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ



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THE ORIGINS OF THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

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Abstract: The concept of the seven deadly sins has been used in Catholic confessional practices through the usage of penitential manuals, but this concept has also been discussed by various philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon. Moreover, the concept was so popular that poets such as Dante Alighieri, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower and Christopher Marlowe, authors such as William Langland and theologians such as John Wycliffe among others have also used this concept, whether to enrich their works or shed light on the concept from their own perspective. This paper tracks the development of the concept from the "deserts of Egypt", through Hellenistic theology, Soul Journey, the Gnostics, aerial demons and the ascetics to the works of Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian to the standardization of the concept by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century.

Key words: seven deadly sins, Hellenistic theology, Soul Journey, the Gnostics, Pope Gregory the Great

Introduction

In his influential work "Seven deadly sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature", Morton W. Bloomfield posits in the very beginning that the notion of the seven deadly sins emerged in the deserts of Egypt in the 4th century as a syncretic phenomenon combining ideas and traditions from practically all the important races of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. More specifically, Bloomfield states that The Sins were "a product of Hellenism" (as the ideology and culture of the Hellenistic Age is called). The crossbreeding of Oriental and Hellenic and later Roman ideas following the conquest of Alexander formed the basis for the Christian and Mohammedan civilization. The chief center of this syncretism was Alexandria.

Hellenistic theology, Soul Journey, Gnostics, aerial demons and the ascetics

The Cardinal Sins, for they are called Cardinal till the 14th century, emerged as a by-product of the influence of Hellenism on virtually all spheres in the Christian and Islamic civilization: science, religion, art, mysticism, philosophy, ballads, folklore and superstition.

With regard to The Sins, Bloomfield searches their emergence more specifically in Hellenistic theology, quoting Reitzenstein who has postulated that the origin of Hellenistic religion lies in a proto-Gnostic religion. After the death of Augustus, an intellectual and moral crisis ensued, one of its manifestations being an increased belief in supernaturalism. Another basic element in the Hellenistic theology was astrology, which was considered as both a reliable science and a noble religion. Another strand of Hellenist theology was the belief in superstition and the related concepts of magic and demons. According to Bloomfield "evil demons were everywhere in the Hellenistic and medieval periods, and it was easy to think of the threatening Sins, as demons". To approach the issue of the seven cardinal (deadly sins), Bloomfield addresses the problem of evil, stating that the concept of sin was "a late one in human history". In his words primitive men dealt with the problem of physical ills, and even later with moral ills, which in fact are the two sides of the same objective principle. The first instance of sin resembling the one in Christian theology, according to Bloomfield, can be found in the Orphic mysteries. In order to elucidate the problem of evil further, Bloomfield calls to our attention Plato's theory of ideas which describes evil as a matter and good as a pure idea, by supposing that evil or matter was a mere reflection of the idea or the good and thus less real. It is in this gradation of the universe and the related Soul Journey that lies at the core of the cardinal sins. For Bloomfield, Plato opened the door for dualism, but these dualistic tendencies "were strengthened and made outright by the Gnostics". Building on earlier Greek and Persian dualistic conceptions and Oriental traditions that contributed to the Gnostic thought such as Zoroastrianism and Judaism, they considered "this world and its creator absolutely evil". The Gnostics saw the world as "absolutely wicked" and refused to deny the reality of evil. In their view a good god couldn't have created it, so it must have been a work of an evil demon. The aforementioned Soul Journey was one of the main tenants of the Gnostics, and in Bloomfield's view the "seven cardinal sins are a by-product of this eschatological journey", known as the Soul Journey which is a part of a vaster eschatological conception known as the Otherworld Journey. The concept of Otherworld Journey is present in Greek mythology in the Otherworld Journey of Orpheus and Eurydice, and of Prosepina, as well as in Greco-Roman culture, in Odyssey by Homer and in Aeneid by Virgil. It can also be found in the books, stories, legends, novels of Egypt, Babylon, Japan, China, Iran, India and in the tradition of the Native Americans. European medieval sources also deal with this concept, such as English and Scottish ballads, Bede's Historia ecclesiastica, Gregory's Dialogues and the Old Norse Solar Liod. Christian works that deal with this concept are the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and the Visio Pauli. In Islam, there is also a mention about the Otherworld Journey of Mohammad, the Isra or nocturnal journey (Koran xvii.1.) during which the prophet visited the infernal regions. In the Judaism, in the Talmud, "Moses is forced to pass by seven evil powers in a way reminiscent of the Gnostic belief in the seven rulers of the planets who were all of evil nature" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 19). The main characteristic of the Soul Journey (or Soul Drama) is "the individual soul issuing from God or from an upper world descends through seven or eight spheres of the planets, receiving from each some characteristic or characteristics, until it enters the earth in a newborn child. On death, the souls ascends, giving back these elements to their respective keepers until it attains the Ogdoad, above the seven spheres, where it units with God or lives in some happy abode." (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 16). The Ogdoad was the superficial region above the seven spheres, or in astronomical terms the sphere of the fixed stars. The seven heavens were a result of Babylonian astrology, the eight heaven was the region of the divine (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 23). In later Persian religion the star-gods degenerated into demons. Gnosticism accepted this change. Next, the evil gods are linked at each station to demonology, which in his view is closely related to the seven chief sins. The seven evil spirits are present among the Semitic peoples including Arabs and Syrians, but also in Egypt, and in Persia. The New Testament also has references to the evil spirits, an example being the driving out of the seven demons of Mary Magdalene by Jesus, but also in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. However, a direct link between the seven deadly sins and the seven evil spirits cannot be established, although the latter have influenced the former, for the Hermetic writers first spoke of demons when they were referring to sins. According to Bloomfield, "in Christianity the evil demons became the assistants of Satan, and the good angels demons became angels" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 28).

Important intellectual methods that are closely related to the creation of the concept of the seven deadly sins are the literary devices of symbolism and allegory. Thus, according to Bloomfield "owing to symbolism, it was possible to find in the Bible the justification of the seven deadly sins" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 34). To support his opinion Bloomfield notes the examples of Luke when he refers to the *seven other spirits* (xi. 26) or being trespassed *seven times a day (xii.4)* or *the seven devils* that were evicted of Mary Magdalene, or, citing the Proverbs, the *seven abominations* residing in the heart of a wicked man (xxvi.25). Regarding allegory, Bloomfield states that "the Sins were from their earliest appearance in Christian thought considered concrete devils or demons, and throughout the Middle ages they continued, at times, to be visualized" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 34).

An additional factor that contributed to the creation of the seven deadly sins is the "idea, found all over the world, that the number seven is sacred" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 38). According to Bloomfield this idea may stem form "Babylonian cosmology" or "Semitic division of time into moon-months of twenty eight days, which could be divided into sevens and fours". In Bloomfield's view, the number seven was also highly regarded by the Greeks who linked it to both Mars and Apollo.

Another important strand of the concept of the seven cardinal sins is the closely associated, and often confusing concept of the seven deadly sins. In Bloomfield's view the main culprit for this confusion is the "sacrament of penance". The reason for this is, that the confessors "needed a convenient and handy list in their work". In addition, the confessors "had to stimulate an awareness of guilt in the semi pagans with whom they first had to deal". It was only after the seven cardinal sins have become popular in literature and art, from the twelfth century onwards that the laymen tended to think of the cardinal sins as the deadly sins. Moreover, the seven deadly sins represent a native Judeo-Christian tradition, chiefly developed by Christianity and were never standardized. It is worth noting that "the earliest reference of the seven chief sins in any form is in the pseudo-epigraphical Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, Testament of Reuben" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 44). Seven spirits of deceit are mentioned, however the list does not correspond to Pope Gregory's standard version. This earliest reference bears a striking similarity with the work of Evagrius of Pontus (d. 400 AD), written around five centuries later. In his scheme of the cardinal sins, Evagrius names eight sins. For four of the sins Evagrius uses the same Koine words, one corresponds closely and for the remaining three, there are no parallels. In his Epistle to Maecenas (c. 20 BC), Horace mentions seven (or eight)1 mortal crimes, that are "almost complete correspondence with Church doctrine, especially with that of Gregory the Great" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 46).

The clearest evidence of the so-called astral origin of the sins, comes from Servius (end of fourth century), who associated the planets to characteristics using terminology, albeit not the exact wording, for describing the sins. In his exegesis of the Aenaid (VI.714), Servius links: Saturn to torpor, Mars to anger, Venus to lust and Mercury to the desire for

Bloomfield cites Zockler stating that *avaritia* and *cupido* were probably considered the same vice since in grammatical term they were referred as being one. (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 46)

gain. The two missing planets (the sun and the moon) "without violence to their powers or characteristics" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 49), according to Bloomfield, can be associated with the sins of gluttony and envy.

Another concept closely related to seven chiefly sins and the Soul Journey is the notion of the aerial demons. We can get a glimpse of this concept in the writings of Origen who wrote about the "aerial powers who could claim as their own the sinners of particular sins" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 51). Closely associated with the concept of aerial demons is the term *telonia*. originally meaning the office of the collector of taxes, but later acquired the meaning of demonic guardians of the gates of the spheres "who extracted their dues from the journeying souls" (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 52). One of the authors mentioning these guardians of the gates are Cyril of Alexandria, who regards sins as demons, which the soul has to traverse on it ascent to heaven. St, Macarius the Egyptian, also mentions the tax-collectors who do not let the souls that are not perfectly cleansed to meet their Lord, but are instead driven down by the devils of the air. Abba Isaias mentions five of the cardinal sins and connects them to demons. However, on the whole, according to Bloomsfield, the Coptic Gnostic and Christian literary remains available provide no direct reference to the seven chief sins" (Bloomfield, 1952, pp. 54-55).

The notion of the seven cardinal sins was also closely associated with the concept of the ascetics. This occurred in a monastic milieu mainly in Egypt, under the influence of Gnosticism who among other tenets held the flash and matter are evil. Notable ascetics include St Anthony, Pachomius who established a monastery in Upper Egypt, Evagrius of Pontus (d. around 400), the father of the seven cardinal sins. According to Evagrius the basic sinful drives against which a monk should fight were the Sins. He did not however link them to penance, as this happened in the course of the seventh and eight centuries by the Irish. Evagrius names the following sins: gula, luxuria, avaritia, tristitia, ira, acedia, vana Gloria, superbia. According to Bloomsfield, the history of the seven cardinal sins in the Middle Ages begins with John Cassian, a pupil of Evagrius. Cassian spent c. 20 years in Egypt and then moved to Marseilles in modern-day France in 415 or 416. Cassian links the Sins to the seven Canaanite tribes that the Israelites had to fight, plus adding Egypt as Israel's chief enemy, linking it to the sin of Gluttony (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 70).

Finally, we owe the current number and order and number of the seven deadly sins to Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 12 March 604). In his book Moralia, he joins Tristitia with Accedia, keeping the latter. Vana Gloria and Superbia are also merged under the latter's name. To arrive at the number seven, he adds Invidia (Envy). Gregory follows a different principle when it comes to the order of the sequence. He forms the sequence with regard to the amount of damage Man does to God by way of misusing the Love that is intended to go to God. Thus, Gregory's list becomes SIIAAGL (Bloomfield, 1952, p. 72) or: Superbia, Invidia, Ira, Accedia, Avaritia, Gula and Luxiuria. Richard Newhauser states that SIIAAGL was actualy "the most common work a day list of vices in the late Middle Ages that often served the needs of the confessors". ² The Gregorian sequence *siiaagl* or some variant of it was used later by major writers such as: Dante Alighieri, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower and by most of the medieval writers.

Concluding remarks

This paper has pointed out some of the more important factors in the development of the seven deadly sins as a concept such as: the evil demons, the Gnostics' Soul Journey

² - 'These Seven Devils': The Capital Vices on the Way to Modernity, Richard Newhauser, p.159 in Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins.

and seven evil spirits, the Babylonian astrology and the Semitic division of time into moonmonths of twenty-eight days, which could be divided into sevens and fours. These concepts facilitated and accompanied the formation of the concept of the seven deadly sins by John Cassian and Pope Gregory the Great.

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