

The Early History of Greed

The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval
Thought and Literature

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>.
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Adobe Garamond 11.5/14pt [C E]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Newhauser, Richard, 1947–

The early history of greed: the sin of avarice in early medieval thought
and literature / Richard Newhauser.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in medieval literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 38522 9 (hardback)

1. Avarice – History. 2. Christian ethics – History – Middle Ages, 600–1500.

I. Title. II. Series.

BJ1535.A8N48 2000

241'.3–dc21 99-25922 CIP

ISBN 0 521 38522 9 hardback

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Alms and ascetes, round stones and masons: avarice in the early church

THE DEADLY SIN TRADITION: AVARICE AND THE WANING OF ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS

The third vision in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written in Rome for the young Christian community there during the early part of the second century, is an allegory of the ideal construction of the church, and it may serve as a guide in examining the responses to greed in early Christian literature. Hermas is shown angels erecting a tower of stones which fit together perfectly; these stones, he is later told by a woman who is herself another personified image of the church, are the ecclesiastical officials, martyrs, the righteous, and recent converts who form the solid core of the building. He also observes other stones found unsuitable for the masonry, though not rejected outright, and they include round, white rocks. To his ingenuous request for their allegoresis, Lady Church responds: they are the wealthy whose commerce interferes with their faith when persecution threatens. They will remain unfit for construction until they have been squared off, until their excess wealth has been hewn away. The situation presented by this allegory is in a number of ways an important point of departure for the history of avarice: first, it is decidedly not the possession of money in itself to which the lady objects, but to a spiritual danger, apostasy, which may be its result. Second, by describing the requirement to cut away needless riches, *Hermas* is not demanding that the church enforce poverty as a prerequisite for being numbered among the faithful; for the author of this allegory, only self-sufficiency can both counter greed and still leave the Christian with enough possessions to be able to aid the poor.¹

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The *Shepherd of Hermas* is typical of one type of Christian reception of the Jewish apocalypse in propagating moral instruction through the protagonist's visions, and as Lady Church patiently explains to Hermas, every evil desire, especially that greed which abandons eschatological goods for worldly profits, results in death and captivity. This may be an explicit reference to avarice's place among the Deadly Sins, a somewhat diffuse phenomenon the origins of which have been identified in Jewish and Christian traditions reaching back in written form at least to the rabbinical literature of the first century B.C.E. In this tradition, the sins are considered lethal because they lead to the death of the soul. Unlike the Capital Vices to be examined here later, the number and ordering of evils in the list of Deadly Sins was never fixed.² Avarice, however, was frequently included in lists of such evils in early Christian literature – both in descriptive catalogues and in those with a parenetic function³ – or at least understood under the aegis of Deadly Sin. It is the first important intellectual context in which the sin is found in Christian culture.

The Deadly Sins are an expression of an authoritative and institutionalized morality; in early Christianity they were characteristically formulated on the basis of the commands and prohibitions handed down in the Decalogue, the distillation of the Law which was still retained and systematized by the early church. A foundation in the Ten Commandments is not made explicit in every discussion of avarice in this tradition, but it can be illustrated clearly among the writings of the “apostolic fathers” in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (first half of the second century). Part of this work, as part of the *Shepherd of Hermas* as well, is concerned directly with the most schematic representation of scriptural morality: the two-ways teaching, that is to say, the concept that there is a path of righteousness leading to heavenly bliss and another mode of behavior culminating in eternal torment. Among other criteria, *Barnabas* defines the Way of Light by adherence to the ethical principles of the Commandments: not to be desirous of more possessions (not to be *pleonektes* [πλεονέκτης]) is presented as a way of further specifying “Thou shalt not covet what is your neighbor's.”⁴

The virulence of avarice for the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* was due to its worldliness, for that was directly opposed to Christianity's eschatological concerns. This orientation had been announced by Jesus'

call to store up riches where no moth and no rust destroy them (Matt. 6:19–21), words which also later served as the groundwork for Christianity's ethical rejection of worldly wealth as deceptive or false and in need of replacement by the true wealth of heaven. This relativizing of the value of material goods was an important step in reorienting Christian consciousness to an ideology dominated by otherworldly rewards; the process of this reorientation was reinforced homiletically by a consciousness of death's imminence. The rich man in the parable in Luke who decided to enlarge his grain silos is said to be foolish because God's judgment makes a permanent mockery of his futile attempt to guarantee his life with perishing wealth.⁵ But even beyond this, avarice was one of the evils which themselves were made accountable for the approaching day of wrath. In a characteristic use of the Decalogue which combined the sixth and tenth Commandments interpreted on the basis of the injunction against idolatry, the Colossians are warned to put away the worldliness inherent in *pleonexia* (πλεονεξία – the desire to have more), because it ignites God's anger, and elsewhere the *philargyroi* (φιλάργυροι – the greedy) are depicted as representative of humankind's moral degeneration in the last age.⁶ The depth of the vice's opposition to eschatological rewards is further demonstrated by its equation with idolatry, for in scriptural terms the servant of idols has renounced all hopes connected with the coming of the divinity.⁷ The avaricious have given themselves up to another, a demonic, power and have thus cut themselves off completely from God and the spiritual ideals of His worshipers.

Hermas, too, must be warned not to give up the good things which are to come, for by the second century that expectation of an imminent eschatological moment which was held by the earliest Christian communities had begun to wane, and the attack on avarice came to be supplemented by a more philosophically founded ethic.⁸ The influence of popular philosophy on the Christian concept of the vice can be detected most obviously in the varied uses of a gnome which in its circulation in Antiquity was attributed to an astonishing plethora of writers and which, as documented by the *Oracula Sibyllina*, had a firm place in Hellenistic thought as well.⁹ Most important for the Christian understanding of the sin is the form of this proverbial wisdom in 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the root of all evils is *philargyria* (φιλαργυρία –

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avarice),” and then in parallel statements by Polycarp, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.¹⁰ In its myriad forms, the gnome did inexhaustible service as the most common scriptural foundation for Christian authors’ invectives against avarice; it neatly summed up the centrality of the vice in their view of immorality. The malleability of the proverb is clearly seen in the words of a fifth-century poet who, with encyclopedic fervor, warned his audience that:

Because the minds of many have been tainted by this disease,
Avarice is the root, the cause, the head, the fount, and the origin
of evil.¹¹

But the productivity of the gnome went even further: it served as a model for reflections on the nature of the sin itself and, eventually, on that of virtues opposed to the sin. Hence, one has *The Sentences of Sextus* (composed c. 180–210 C.E.): “A yearning to possess is the origin of greed” (*pleonexia*), and Lactantius’ consideration that a desire for heaven which leads one to disdain others’ earthbound longings is the mother of continence.¹² These inventive uses of proverbial wisdom can be observed again and again in commentaries on the vice of avarice throughout the Middle Ages.

In 1 Timothy 6:10, as in the *Shepherd of Hermas* as well, the sinfulness of avarice is opposed to a virtuous self-sufficiency, a satisfaction with fulfilling simple wishes.¹³ Yet, in its connection with the vice in early Christian literature, this *autarkeia* is anything but a revolutionary concept: it is neither an all-encompassing end in itself, nor the motivation for rigorous asceticism it was to become. It has, rather, an essentially conservative character as an ideologically normative attribute to be cultivated by the individual so that he can ward off dangerous excesses of desire and be content with his present state.¹⁴ Its ideal representative is not the Christian who is totally indigent, but the one who is content with modest prosperity.

AVARICE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Of course, in the early literature of the Christian era, the problem of avarice was not only defined in terms of the individual’s spirituality. In the section of *Hermas* devoted to similitudes, the shepherd explains the

parable of the elm and vine to the protagonist as an image of the harmony of social classes: a vine bears fruit by climbing up a tree which itself is without fruit, just as the wealthy (here not members of a nobility, but rather Christian freedmen, part of the “middle class” of Roman tradesmen) support society’s indigent in a theocentric compromise. The rich give from their surplus to those who are in need, and the poor pray for their benefactors.¹⁵ The image here is essentially a static one; what it depicts is, of course, not the institutionalized redistribution of wealth, but a functional class balance on the order of the estates theory of the Middle Ages: the organic universe of the parable remains productive only when each entity fulfills its preordained function, thereby retaining its distinctive essence. The wealthy and the indigent continue in harmonious symbiosis insofar as they keep their place as elms and vines. The *Shepherd of Hermas* is not alone in recognizing the sin of avarice as a threat to the existing social order, nor in prescribing alms as its cure. In these social dimensions, the desire for more was seen to express itself most destructively in the exploitation and deception of one’s brethren, a point which had been made specifically in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 in an injunction against defrauding one’s fellow human beings in legal or business affairs.¹⁶ As will be seen, it was the social implications of the concept of avarice, more than any other factor, which account for the longevity of interest in the vice in intellectual history.

Among the lay groups which showed the practical consequences of avarice most clearly, merchants were singled out with particular frequency. Even bankers were exempt from such stern reproach, though one must also remember that the merchant in Late Antiquity was not the irreplaceable agent of trade he was to become, but frequently only a dealer in luxury goods.¹⁷ The author of *Hermas* understood the problem of wealth primarily as an issue for the mercantile class. For Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220 C.E.), as well, greed seemed to be implicated in most acts of commerce. “Moreover,” he noted, “if cupidity is done away with, what is the reason for acquiring? When the reason for acquiring is gone, there will be no necessity for doing business.”¹⁸ But along with this seeming radicalism, he also pointed out that there may be just businesses and that his arguments would not make all commerce impossible for Christians, though he does not refer to these

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justifications of trade at great length or with the clarity one might wish.¹⁹ Merchants as an undifferentiated class, in any case, were to be linked firmly to the evil effects of the vice until the Carolingians heralded a decisive change in this attitude.

If it was important for the entire congregation of the saintly to be free of avarice,²⁰ this was all the more true for those among their number who had positions of authority. Some of the earliest references to an avarice of the perversion of authority are to teachers of the faith, or those passing themselves off as such, who in their covetousness exploited their followers.²¹ Apparently, even Paul himself was not spared such accusations, at least not at the hands of the Corinthians, as he implies when he writes to them on the subject of his collection for the Jerusalem community.²² Polycarp (110–156 C.E.), like the author of *Hermas*, focused on the importance of controlling one's desires in presenting this aspect of the vice. Of Valens, a fallen presbyter, Polycarp wrote: "For how can he who cannot control himself tell another to do so?"²³ It was essential, in other words, that those exercising spiritual leadership not be guilty of the base worldliness which the early church saw in avarice, for the purity of its social life on earth could only be guaranteed by that of its authorities. It is, thus, no surprise that the beginnings of conciliar legislation on the problem of cupidity, to be found later in the acts of the Council of Nicea (325), were directed at the clergy.

THE TERMINOLOGY OF GREED AND MALLEABILITY IN THE LIMITS TO POSSESSIONS

Although the first centuries of Christian thought are fundamental for the future development of the history of avarice, they do not as yet provide one with any systematic analyses of the vice. As will be seen, this lack was felt most keenly among the Cappadocians. It is apparent not only in the brevity of discussions of the sin, but also in the want of a firm *terminus technicus*. *Philargyria* and *pleonexia* (and their derivatives), though they are not the only designations one comes across, are the two most common.²⁴ They were, at times, used interchangeably as designations for the vice, but they are also indicative of the different tendencies inherent in the concept of avarice in early Christian

literature. *Philargyria* is, of course, the more narrowly defined, depicting a literal love of money as the most material of worldly goods. *Pleonexia*, however, implies a broader sense of the vice. The “desire to have more” which can be identified in its etymology is somewhat open-ended, for while the majority of the word’s uses is directed at the effort expended for material possessions alone, other occurrences place it in the context of fulfilling unclean desires of various kinds, including sensual ones. Yet, whether for this reason *pleonexia* and its derivatives can also be understood as referring to a sexual sin in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 and other passages, as later exegetes – most notably Jerome – have argued, is questionable.²⁵ Such a reading is not supported by other, non-Christian, texts in which avarice, whatever its designation, is found in an environment similar to that of 1 Thessalonians and where it is nevertheless clear that the object of avarice’s desire is distinguished from that of sexual longing.²⁶ As it appears, “*pleonexia*” was used by early Christian authors to name a passion which was only similar to lust, related to it in that both were seen as types of uncleanness and both were used in a combination of the sixth and tenth Commandments (forbidding, respectively, adulterous lust and covetousness) characteristic of early Christianity’s use of the Decalogue. But without a systematic discussion to guide them, later Christian interpreters were able to take the word’s textual proximity to terms for sexual excess as part of the concept’s essence.

If avarice was defined as the desire for more material wealth, the question still remained at what point “more” began. There was no authoritative answer to this problem. Jesus had called upon his followers, or those among them who desired to be perfect, to give up their possessions, and as long as the coming of God’s kingdom was still considered to be imminent, the thorough lack of care for possessions implied in this injunction seems to have been taken literally at Jerusalem and in Paul’s mission.²⁷ When eschatological expectations became less immediate, total indifference no longer always characterized the Christian attitude towards acquisitions. Jesus, too, had described the heavenly kingdom in terms any person involved in business could easily grasp: “A merchant looking out for fine pearls found one of very special value; so he went and sold everything he had, and bought it.”²⁸

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Among the earlier literary contexts of avarice, as in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, “more” did not come to imply the mere fact of private ownership. The rejection of private property altogether by some Gnostics, voiced for example in the second century by Epiphanes as reported in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata*, may highlight by contrast the common orthodox, Christian attitude. Epiphanes argues that the law of the divinity requires a justice which amounts to communal equality in material possessions (and, in fact, in all other things, and women, as well). To prove his point, he draws on a number of *topoi* which will be found later in the orthodox Christian use of the mythology of the Golden Age and its decline: natural elements, in this case sunshine in particular, are given equally to all; nourishment is provided for the entire animal kingdom, according to its species, in communal harmony; but humanity’s law, the legislation which regulates property, has partially destroyed the communism demanded by the divinity.²⁹

Orthodox theologians use many of these same commonplaces in their reflections on the Golden Age, but while they treat the *aurea saecula* as a lost era and find it necessary to come to terms with the post-lapsarian system of private ownership evinced in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Epiphanes writes as if the conditions of the Golden Age were fundamentally still in force and could be reasserted merely by doing away with the law which governs individual property holdings. The *Sentences of Sextus*, too, is clearly more rigorous than other orthodox views, though it echoes 1 Timothy 6:8 in exhorting the Christian not to possess more than what is required for the needs of the body.³⁰ This injunction seems clear enough, but the vagueness which was later built into most appeals to mere propriety in ownership may be indicated in a gloss to the Latin translation of Irenaeus’ *Adversus haereses*. Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200 C.E.), Bishop of Lyons, was countering the pagan polemic which argued that several gods are mentioned in Christianity’s spiritual literature. When Jesus referred to *Mammonas*, Irenaeus notes, he made use of a word which does not signify a deity, but only “the covetous man” (rendered here in Latin as *cupidus*). It is at this point that the Latin translator, in an attempt to clarify the meaning of Irenaeus’ *πλεονέκτης* (*pleonektes*), adds his own definition of the *cupidus* as one “desiring to possess more than what is fitting.”³¹ Irenaeus himself had no illusions about the difficulty of avoiding the sin. Later in

the same work he used the language of asceticism to note that Christians' possessions are the result of their avarice before conversion or the goods procured through injustice by parents, relatives, or friends and given them as gifts. And even after baptism Christians continue to acquire, for who sells and does not want to make a profit from the buyer? It was, in fact, impossible for them to reject commercial occupations altogether, and for Irenaeus this amounts to conceding that some degree of avarice will always be found among Christians, too, though this unavoidable evil can be offset by almsgiving.³² In any case, the Latin gloss, which raises the question of propriety, also solves this question by necessarily introducing a subjective and supple element into the analysis of greed: what went beyond what is fitting for one person might be thoroughly appropriate for another. Much depended on one's social rank and the expectations which it legitimately allowed. Thus, the seeds for a future justification of wealth were contained already in the early condemnation of greed.

Nevertheless, criticism of the avarice of the rich remained frequent and severe, especially so in the Ebionitic tradition represented in apocalyptic literature (and perhaps also in the Epistle of James) which depicted in frightening detail the torments of the rich in hell.³³ Yet, as the shepherd's interpretation of the elm and vine shows, more room was allowed for the wealthy than what might appear at first sight. Tertullian asserted that God hates the rich, and yet he also had to admit that their wealth could be used to perform many deeds of justice.³⁴ Injunctions against avarice which understood it as the desire for more were not yet directed towards the very rich, but rather towards those, below them in social standing, who wished to become so. The rich were generally identified with that aspect of the sin which attempted to retain what it already had, which refused to share to whatever degree with others, in particular by withholding alms. Still, the urge to acquire was the expression of avarice which was potentially the most subversive to maintaining the institutions of society as they were and it remained in the foreground of earlier Christian invectives against the vice. Where miserliness is mentioned at all, it is generally condemned only in its relation to greedy acquisition, a phenomenon which once again points up the lack of a systematic distinction between these two aspects of avarice.³⁵

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CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA'S JUSTIFICATION OF THE RICH

By the third century, a spectrum of attitudes towards the rich and their possessions had developed within Christian thought, a variety which is reflected in the changing appearances of avarice. That members of the upper classes became a larger factor in the conception of the vice is hardly surprising, for there was an increasing number of them to be found in Christian communities. The later part of the second and early third century saw these congregations gradually incorporate all levels of society, including the senatorial class itself.³⁶ The situation in North Africa is typical for this period; four major writers who originated here will serve to illustrate the responses to greed and the rich at this point in the development of Christianity: from a moderate acceptance of the affluent in the community of the church to an ascetic rejection of them, from the pastoral emphasis on curing greed through alms to the beginnings of a "historical" analysis of the vice.

In particular at Alexandria, perhaps the wealthiest and most important city in the eastern Mediterranean, the rich were a vital force in the Christian social order. It is also here that one finds the first theologically argued moderation of the idea of avarice in the works of Clement of Alexandria, in his day the city's most famous Christian teacher and a member of its social elite. Clement's moderateness marks somewhat of a caesura in the history of the vice. This becomes all the clearer when his justification of private property found in *Quis dives salvetur?*, his apology for Alexandria's wealthy Christians, is compared to what Irenaeus had to say on the same topic. Though he knew of Irenaeus' work, Clement contends that a Christian's wealth is legitimate if he was born into a rich family or if he worked for his wealth before conversion and, through thrift, acquired a modest amount of possessions. Such thrifty earnings are precisely what Irenaeus had earlier qualified as the wages of avarice.³⁷

Riches themselves are neutral, a tool only, as Clement noted further in *Quis dives salvetur?*³⁸ And in the same work he criticizes literal exegetes typical of the Ebionitic tradition who found in Jesus' words to the rich youth ("Sell your possessions . . .") a command to renounce everything that one owned. In keeping with his justification of the wealthy, Clement saw in this passage not primarily a call to action; he

understood it figuratively (and Stoically, one might add) as a summons to free the soul from the passionate love of possessions.³⁹ But beyond this, for Clement the question of riches, and with them avarice, also revolved necessarily around the use of one's goods. In theological terms, his justification of possessions was based ultimately on their utilization for the offices of *caritas*. In the *Paedagogus* he termed the vice, in keeping with the gnomic wisdom of 1 Timothy 6:10, a "citadel (*akropolis*) of evil" and then identified this phrase not with wealth itself but wealth that is not governed well, which is to say, not put to the use of one's neighbor.⁴⁰

Clement identified in avarice a pathological movement of the soul which rejected both support for the poor and, more importantly, moderation for itself. The Christian might cure this sinful condition by fully recognizing the distinction between real and false wealth. True riches are the spiritual values which alone must serve as his ultimate goal, and from this eschatological perspective the false wealth of this world should be seen as worth no more than excrement (cf. Phil. 3:8).⁴¹ Nevertheless, despite this verbal radicalism, Clement is not advocating anything more socially revolutionary than the *Shepherd of Hermas*, for, as he further notes, the material response to the knowledge of false wealth was not to give away everything, but rather to give alms. All of creation had been made for the use of all humanity, but the individual could still legitimately possess things for himself alone, though only if he did so in moderation. Clement reserves his criticism for the extravagant excesses of vast wealth, where he echoes Haggai 1:6, likening the vain behavior of those who want more than what is sufficient for their needs to the foolish desire to store things in a bag with holes in it.⁴²

If in Clement's analysis the affluent were not sinful merely because of their riches, then neither was poverty in itself a virtue. Were indigence praiseworthy in its own right, he noted, one would have to count every shabby beggar among the happiest and most Christian of human beings, and consider that simply because the poor possess nothing on earth, they deserve the bliss of heaven.⁴³ Like his exegesis of the words to the rich youth, Clement's interpretation of the beatitude of the poor (Matt. 5:3) underscores the legitimacy of the wealthy as members of the Christian community by remaining for the most part in the realm of figurative hermeneutics: for him Jesus' blessing refers only to those who

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are poor in the desire for wealth, and while Clement does not ignore poverty in material terms, he carefully points out that its moral value can only be measured by the motivation leading up to it.⁴⁴ To have no possessions is only worthwhile when this state is chosen for the sake of eternal life, for before Jesus many people gave up all their wealth and did so for what Clement considers morally repugnant reasons: to have time for philosophy or merely because of vainglory – people such as Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Crates. In other words, for Clement’s implied audience, poverty would have been a matter of choice, not inheritance. The lower classes were not at the focal point of Clement’s thought, and this becomes all the clearer in his observation in *Quis dives salvetur?* that humanity’s ideal state is not poverty, regardless of its motivation, but rather that moderate prosperity envisioned by earlier Christian writers in which one possesses enough goods both to cover one’s own needs and to help the poor. Indeed, if everyone rejected wealth completely, he asked, who would be left to give alms? Such sentiments had the effect of justifying the existing gulf between rich and poor, and of devaluing social change; ultimately, they amount not only to a theological idealization and legitimization of wealth in the church, but of poverty as well.⁴⁵

Clement developed, in effect, a nascent psychology of the sin which reveals his debt to Stoic philosophy, for he saw in the morbid condition of avarice a state of unfulfilled passion which sets the sinner on fire with yearning and, even worse, destroys his rational understanding of the need for moderation. To treat this illness of the soul by removing from the sinner all the material goods which, at least potentially, might be useful to him is only to aggravate his condition. Without reason to guide him and in his state of physical need, the sinner has not rid himself of what is truly contemptible, that is, the *desire* for wealth; he has merely “ignited his inborn raw material of evil through the want of external goods.”⁴⁶

ORIGEN: ASCETICISM, PSYCHOLOGY, AND THE PROBLEM OF AVARICE IN THE CHURCH

The moderateness of Clement’s thinking on the vice stands in contrast not only to the writers before him, but also to those who were his

immediate successors. The next generation produced another famous teacher at Alexandria (though much of his career was spent in Caesarea), one who seems to have been taught only briefly by Clement himself, but whose rigorous asceticism was almost proverbial in his own day. Only an interest in the psychology of the sin connects Origen's thought with Clement's viewpoint, though even here one can describe Origen's stance as more radical than that of the earlier writer. For Origen, avarice was not merely a morbid condition of the soul, it was the soul's worst weakness or feebleness.⁴⁷ He is, furthermore, clear about the cause of avarice, for the germ of this debility is to be identified in the devil himself. Satan, of course, has no real interest in money or material goods. What he desires are *philargyroi*, people inclined to worldly things. He perverts a legitimate love, implanted in the soul by the Creator, using the same methods which had proven successful with Judas: after wounding the potential sinner with a fiery dart – at which point there is presumably an initial succumbing to temptation – either Satan or subordinate demons enter into him.⁴⁸ To guard against this encroachment was no easy matter. Origen's image for the task is drawn from Deuteronomy 7:1, where the Jews' battle against the seven nations for the possession of Israel is related.⁴⁹ As will be seen, with this demonology of avarice and the view of warfare against evil intruders into the soul, one is already in the intellectual environment which shaped early monastic thought on the vice.

Origen is uncompromising in demanding complete, material poverty as a prerequisite for avoiding the sin and achieving perfection, nor is he willing to make any metaphorical compromises in his hermeneutics on behalf of the wealthy. Such radicalism did little to help his standing among these classes, which would later find his writings theologically suspect. His understanding of scriptural passages was frequently enough allegorical, but in his exegesis of the words to the rich youth, Origen provides an example of the type of interpretation Clement had criticized earlier. "Sell your possessions . . ." could only have been meant literally, Origen argues, and those who give away their worldly property and store up treasure in heaven have taken a necessary step towards this perfection. One should never believe that the rich can be found in this group: "For who among the rich has given up the love of wealth, which I might also call the love of this world?"⁵⁰ Origen's

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examples of those who were virtuous enough to choose to live in poverty is instructive, for by including Crates here he again took a position which is diametrically opposed to Clement's viewpoint, and by referring to the apostolic community in the same light, he once more anticipates a favorite argument used later by the monastic communities of the Egyptian desert.⁵¹

With particular emphasis Origen points to the social disruption caused by the vice. During times of famine, he noted while commenting on Matthew 24:7–8, people are easily provoked to avarice and wars against those who do not have to suffer as great a lack as they do; and the sins of vainglory, greed, and avarice in corrupt leaders also frequently result in violent social upheaval.⁵² In the community of the church Origen warned against hypocritical teachers who may instruct in Christian doctrine, but are only interested in the money they can earn from their students.⁵³ He also echoed earlier sentiments by complaining of deacons and bishops who misused the funds under their control and of presbyters who hung onto earthly goods.⁵⁴ But his most severe words of reproach are reserved for the affluent, in spite of his obvious dependence on wealthy patrons at the school in Alexandria and elsewhere. Clement had attempted to provide theological support for including the rich in the community of the faithful. Origen, on the other hand, argues that he who values money, admires wealth, believes that it is a good, who gives to the rich the rank of gods and scorns the poor for not having this divine character – this person makes a god of money and as such must be expelled from the church.⁵⁵

COMPROMISE IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION: CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE ON PRECEPTS, COUNSELS, AND THE MISER

Clement's moderation and Origen's ascetic rejection mark the poles in the spectrum of attitudes towards the presence of the wealthy in the community. They do not, however, exhaust all the possibilities. In the western church, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, took a position on this issue based on the distinction between the precepts and counsels to be extrapolated from Jesus' words. To give alms was a command meant for every Christian; to give up everything was advice to those who desired to achieve spiritual perfection.⁵⁶ Cyprian, thus, insisted that the

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wealthy give at least some degree of help to the poor, but on the other hand by referring to the episode of the rich youth in its most conditional version, found in Matthew 19:21 (“*If you would be perfect, go, sell your possessions . . .*”), he suggested that if the wealthy were willing to follow Jesus’ statement here, they could become like the apostles.⁵⁷ There is little doubt which course of action he preferred from his congregation: going beyond his Episcopal duty of hospitality for the poor, Cyprian himself is said to have given almost all his possessions to the needy and the church.⁵⁸ But he was prudent enough ultimately not to demand this degree of selflessness from everyone, a conciliatory attitude which may have been a result of his duties as bishop.

Almsgiving was a necessity for Cyprian because it solved at a stroke two pressing problems for the third-century church: the exhaustion of its treasury following the financial drain of persecution, apostasy by the rich, and the eroded economic situation of the community; and, second, the penitential requirements for those who had deserted the church during the waves of persecution but were now seeking re-entry to it. Cyprian emphasized again and again the duty of almsgiving for the Christian community, and it is in the context of this pastoral intent that he frequently made reference to avarice. The vice must be overcome because it is the evil which blocks someone from fulfilling the social precept of exercising justice by giving freely to the poor from those goods which God has seen fit to give him.⁵⁹ Cyprian, like Origen, saw the task of surmounting avarice as a battle, though not one of typological significance. He was a practical thinker, and his imagery situated the Christian soul in a real environment with which his community was all too familiar: in a stadium, as a gladiator or a runner in a race against evil.⁶⁰ Those who lose the contest – wanting to store up treasure on earth rather than in heaven, caring blindly for their inheritance here and not for their patrimony there – are led away in the leg-irons and chains of riches as slaves to their own money.⁶¹ Obviously, some of the motivation for developing this imagery stemmed from the need to support the members of his own persecuted community: no matter how much the good Christians under his care are tormented by Roman officials, he implies, the sinner’s lot is infinitely worse.

Cyprian found arguments everywhere to help humanity arm itself

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for the struggle against the vice. The plague of mortality is useful for this purpose, he noted, for it allows us to see if the rapacious will extinguish the insatiable ardor of their avarice at least through the fear of death.⁶² Even the moneylender's occupation could be put to use. In a florilegium of eight quotations assembled from biblical sources, he referred to almsgiving (as had Clement before him) in terms taken from Proverbs 19:17.⁶³ Alms, in this view, are a way of lending to God on interest; repayment will come when He sits in judgment. For the rich, to give Jesus a share of their profits by aiding others in need (see Matt. 25:31–46) will result in a just exchange: in return they will receive a share in the heavenly kingdom. In their separate ways, both Cyprian and Clement orient themselves towards the needs of those with possessions: they emphasize almsgiving in particular not because it is a mechanism of social equity, but because it has redemptive value for the donor. Moreover, Cyprian's emphasis on financial support for the indigent also colored his view of Christianity's origins. For him, the apostolic community was not an example of virtuous poverty, but of liberality, where people sold their houses and fields and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute as alms.⁶⁴

The anti-eleemosynary impulse seen in the vice culminated in one central expression of evil: the miser, found for the first time in detailed form in a Christian setting in Cyprian's work. The important figure of the miser, who threatened to upset the carefully worked-out ideological balance in Christian society between a moderate possession of wealth and moderate almsgiving, is described here through a series of external signs which all point up his fear and anxiety at the thought of giving up some of the immeasurable wealth which he thought would bring him security. The *avarus* quakes with dread lest a robber come, a murderer attack, or the envy of a yet richer person start lawsuits against him. He cannot eat or sleep in quiet, he sighs at the table and lies awake all night tossing and turning in his soft bed. Above all, he will not separate himself from the heaps of money he has piled up around him or buried in the earth, which for Cyprian is synonymous with a refusal to give alms.⁶⁵ These external signs were later to be supplemented by other observations of the miser's behavior, but also by a concentration on his internal life: roughly a century after Cyprian's work, Hilary of Poitiers drew the first meticulous portrait of the miser's emotional state in Latin

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Christendom. After his soul is captured by avarice and made a slave to this mistress, Hilary commented:

the *avarus* is afraid only of losing money, though he is on the brink of losing himself; he is full of busyness, sad, anxious, always held back restlessly by a fear of loss; he is unmindful of honesty, pays no attention to friendship, flees human kindness, does not acknowledge religion, hates goodness altogether.⁶⁶

In this combination of external and internal indications of the vice one can make out the character sketch of the miser which was to be a commonplace throughout the Middle Ages.

The limited focus on the miser's own unsettled state is not an indication that Cyprian ignored the social component of the sin. His work also shows that the charge of acquisitiveness in avarice was now being leveled against those in the higher ranks of Roman society who, as landowners, are accused of adding field to field (see Isaiah 5:8), expelling the poor from their borders and stretching out their property endlessly, and of attempting to justify their incessant accumulation of wealth on the grounds of care for their children and provision for their inheritance.⁶⁷ Cyprian is drawing here on a corpus of activities already developed in classical Antiquity as indications of greed's uncontrollable urge to acquire. In a Christian context many of these activities were neatly catalogued about a generation after Cyprian by another African writer, Arnobius the Elder, in his depiction of the souls who might not have loved possessions while they were with God, but whose behavior on earth is a completely different matter. Here, their avarice is seen in a series of proto-capitalist ventures: the restless excavation of mountains, the mining of the earth's hidden treasures, long and dangerous journeys undertaken for the sake of merchandise, constant attention to price fluctuations, usurious money-lending practices, and innumerable litigations against friends and relatives alike for even the smallest material rewards.⁶⁸ To his own list of activities typical of avarice, Cyprian further observed that measured against the standards set by the apostolic community, the Christian society of his own day was too often characterized by its *ardor cupiditatis*. Such insatiable greediness among the rich may have been a response to the repeated Roman persecutions (to which Cyprian himself eventually fell victim) and

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worsening economic situation of the third-century empire. But Cyprian put the responsibility for these disasters at least partially on the shoulders of the congregation: when even bishops desire money in superfluity while the brethren go thirsty, no Christian need be surprised at the persecutions his religion is forced to suffer.⁶⁹

LACTANTIUS: MYTHOLOGY AND THE BEGINNINGS OF SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS

The social disruption caused by avarice was not only a contemporary problem, but – looked at from the vantage point of a Christianity which was developing into the dominant religion of the Roman empire and from an environment which allowed for leisurely and academic contemplation – the vice could also be seen as having a historical dimension. In the work of Lactantius, rhetorician and teacher of the emperor Constantine's son, cupidity was given a firm place in the Christian mythology of the Golden Age. Reflections on a former "utopian" state of humanity and the process of its degeneration had, of course, long been common in Antiquity. Avarice had frequently served in such considerations as an indicator of the progress of this deterioration, but in Lactantius' thought, in particular his reception of Seneca, the vice plays a much more active role in bringing the *aurea tempora* to an end.⁷⁰ Lactantius' remarks on this issue are, in essence, those of a theological apologist; they occur in the context of his attempt to convince the pagan reader of the moral inferiority of polytheism.⁷¹ Historically prior to the Greco-Roman pantheon was an idyllic era characterized by the worship of the one, true God. In this age, the just gave of their reserves generously. No *avaritia* took for itself goods which had been bestowed on all by the divinity, no greed caused hunger and thirst to plague humankind. All things were in abundance for all equally, since the haves gave freely and copiously to the have-nots. Lactantius does not refer explicitly to this period in terms of the biblical account of Eden, but it is clear enough that he has this in mind, along with the Golden Age of the poets. He is, in fact, the first patristic author to unite these two conceptions.⁷²

Monotheism made personal generosity, largess, and above all justice possible among human beings. With the transition to polytheism this

situation changed radically, for social relations came gradually under the influence of avarice as humanity gave no more thought to God. Those who possessed something in surfeit not only kept it for themselves, but also seized things from others for their own treasure. What formerly each individual had put at the disposal of the community was now hoarded up in the homes of a few. This select group claimed the gifts of heaven for themselves, not out of philanthropy, but in order to collect all the instruments of greed and avarice so they could enslave the rest of humanity. For this purpose they also created unjust laws in the name of a perverted justice, put themselves in positions of authority over all others, and set about establishing the machinery of oppression to maintain their power. In Lactantius' mythical history of humanity, the tyranny of this overweening individualism, which he describes at one point as a *superba et tumida inaequalitas* and which might be defined in terms of the sin of pride itself, is seen as a direct result of avarice.⁷³ Personal egotism led in turn to an elitist injustice in society, but behind them both stands an initial act of "rabid and furious *avaritia*."⁷⁴

The Golden Age was not destroyed once and for all by polytheism. With the resurgence of monotheism, by which Lactantius refers to the genesis of Christianity, at least a *species illius aurei temporis* returned to the earth.⁷⁵ This idea of a resurrection of the Golden Age would not have surprised his pagan audience; Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* and the *Oracula Sibyllina*, both of which Lactantius refers to directly elsewhere, had posited much the same.⁷⁶ But by insisting on the ethical function of Christianity as an image of the idyllic time to come, he goes a large step beyond his predecessors. This, of course, has everything to do with his apologetic intention of bringing his audience to an acceptance of the contemporary Christian community, with its inherited social disparity, as nevertheless a model, a type, for millenarian society. Thus, he argues that only through the *iustitia* of Christianity can the social injustice of avarice be undone. Were all of humanity to worship the one God, there would be no more wars, dissensions, treachery, frauds, and pillaging; rather, a "pious and religious assembly of those with possessions would support those without them."⁷⁷ For Lactantius, in other words, the defeat of avarice is necessarily a simple matter of conversion.

The clear distinction he made in his account of the decline of the

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Golden Age between two major expressions of the vice – on the one hand a desire to retain goods for oneself alone, on the other a yearning to acquire from others – is part of what Lactantius had inherited from the analyses of the concept in Antiquity. The rudiments of his own methodical presentation of avarice are easily made out elsewhere. He was the first to begin developing an extended series of concretely defined evil actions stemming from the sin. In his epitome of the *Divine Institutions* he remarked that from the insatiable desire for wealth burst forth poisonings, deceptions, false wills, and all types of fraud, though in his major work itself this list includes only “frauds, robberies, and all types of evils.”⁷⁸

But above all, his reflections on the nature of avarice reveal that he represents the position of Christian Platonism in what was a continuing debate on the intrinsicity of greed in human beings. Lactantius considered the desire to possess in itself simply a part of human nature, given by God for a reasonable end, namely to help humanity maintain its life by gathering together what is necessary for that purpose.⁷⁹ Only through abuse can this morally acceptable function become sinful, when, going beyond their limits, human beings no longer yearn for heavenly matters ultimately, but for that which is earthbound. A Stoic might say that an act of will is necessary “to follow justice, God, eternal life, the perpetual light, and all those things God promises humanity,” but, Lactantius notes, merely to want these things is too little.⁸⁰ With the first minor bodily discomfort, the will evaporates and the only thing which remains, if these virtuous qualities are truly to be achieved, is the *cupiditas* for them. *Ira* and *libido*, too, had been implanted in humanity by God for virtuous ends.⁸¹ But as sins, they joined *avaritia* (at this point, Lactantius uses “cupidity” and “avarice” as interchangeable designations for the vice) in a triad of evil, perversions of the three parts of the soul, which must be resisted above all others and torn out so that the corresponding virtues may grow in their place. So deadly was the triumvirate of wrath, lust, and avarice that Lactantius credited it with being the source of all other sins and referred to these three as the Furies spoken of by the poets.⁸² The natural and God-given impulses which lay behind them, however, could be neither eradicated, as the Stoics felt they should, nor tempered, as the Peripatetics argued. In Lactantius’ view they could not be removed, since they had been bestowed on

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humanity by the Creator for a purpose; nor could they be tempered, for if they became vices, one had to avoid them altogether, and as virtues, one should encourage them completely.⁸³

The early centuries of Christian literature provide nothing more systematic on avarice than what is seen in rudimentary form in Lactantius, nor do they show the more orthodox positions on greed and the affluent affirmed by all writers on these issues. The seeds of a radical “possessionlessness” propagated as a cure for the vice by the hermit communities of the fourth century can already be found in Origen’s thought. Nevertheless, for the majority of church thinkers, riches and the impulses which amounted to avarice only by distortion were not rejected outright; rather, an attempt was made to find a place in the community for those who were already rich by describing the function they were to be encouraged to fulfill as almsgivers. As in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the round stones symbolizing the wealthy were not thrown into the pit, but neither were the masons invested with police powers to force their reshaping. Yet, the further chapters here will reveal to what degree developments in the history of avarice are always to be measured against the Christian ideal of ascetic concepts of a limit to the desire for possessions in a life of purity.