

**The Value of the Spirituality of John Cassian (c365-435)
for Contemporary Christian Communities**

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research project to the memory of

Fr Sepp Josef Anthofer OMI (Prashant)

12 April 1933 – 14 March 2009

DECLARATION

I, Simon John Mark Cashmore,

declare that

*The Value of the Spirituality of John Cassian (c365 - 435) for Contemporary
Christian Communities*

is my own work

and that all the sources that I have used or quoted

have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

SIGNED:

DATE:

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SUMMARY AND KEY TERMS

Summary

Most recent studies of Cassian and his writings have examined the monk's historical contexts, the theology expressed in his texts or his role in the development of monasticism. This dissertation examines the spirituality of Cassian and assesses its value to contemporary Christian communities. By applying a hermeneutical approach to the study of Cassian's texts, the investigation distinguishes between the spirituality of Cassian, the historical person; the spirituality Cassian conveys in his writings; and Cassian's spirituality as lived experience. The dissertation argues that Cassian's spirituality as lived experience, as elicited by Gadamer's hermeneutical model of conversation between text and interpreter, is valuable to contemporary Christian communities. It offers a spiritual 'route map' that can inspire, encourage and guide members of such communities on a spiritual journey that leads to greater intimacy with, and faithfulness to, Christ. The hermeneutical process necessary to appropriate the spirituality of Cassian as lived experience has the potential to dismantle prejudgements and attitudes of superiority and triumphalism often displayed by Christian communities and encourage fresh engagement with the history, traditions and Scriptures of the Church.

Key terms

Spirituality; John Cassian; Conferences; Institutes; contemporary Christian communities; hermeneutical investigation; Hans-Georg Gadamer; meditation; prayer of fire; mysticism.

PREFACE

The academic study of spirituality inevitably implicates the person conducting the research (Schneiders 2005c:58-59). The researcher determines the object of the research, its subject matter and the method applied to the investigation. A research project that requires an examination of historical data further magnifies the role of the person pursuing the investigation. A historian is 'necessarily selective' in using and interpreting information (Carr 2001:6). The application of a hermeneutical approach to the study of spirituality further involves the researcher. Gadamer's hermeneutical model of 'conversation' between texts and the person engaging with them, specifically requires disclosure of the 'claims of attention' that attracted the interpreter to the documents as well as the identification of prejudgements brought to the investigation (Gadamer 1979:261; Tracy 1984:170). It also calls for reflection on the effects of the hermeneutical process on the interpreter (Gadamer 1979:261). Downey (1997:127) recognises the transforming potential of the study of spiritual experiences and traditions.

Gadamer's hermeneutical model is applied to the texts of Cassian to gain understanding of Cassian's spirituality as contemporary lived experience. This understanding of Cassian's spirituality is distinct from the spirituality of Cassian himself as well as the teaching about spirituality conveyed in his texts. Once an understanding of Cassian's spirituality as contemporary lived experience is obtained it can then be assessed to determine its value to contemporary Christian communities. Applying Gadamer's hermeneutical approach required me to recognise the claims of attention that attracted me to Cassian and his texts and to identify and examine the prejudgements and biases I brought to the research project. Towards the end of the investigation I was required to reflect on how I had been affected by the research project. Such self-examination is unavoidably subjective and incomplete. However, it is a necessary part of the hermeneutical process and provides information that is useful in assessing the content and findings of the investigation.

I first encountered Cassian through the teaching of the World Community of Christian Mediation (WCCM). Founded in 1991 to further the teaching of Benedictine monk John Main, the WCCM promotes a form of Christian meditation that advocates the repetition of a mantra as a way to still the body and mind and to be attentive to the presence of God. Main's method of Christian meditation is rooted in Cassian's teaching of the repetition of a simple prayer formula described in the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:379 Conference 10.; Freeman 1986:6). I adopted this form of meditation and have practiced it for more than ten years. I continue to find the simplicity of this form of prayer, its grounding in ancient Christian practice and its accommodation of other religious traditions very appealing.

While studying Cassian's writings on prayer in the *Conferences* I discovered the author's descriptions of an apparently mystical form of prayer he terms the 'prayer of fire' (Cassian 1997:345 Conference 9.). This, according to Cassian, is the highest form of prayer. It is 'ineffable' and 'inexplicable' (Cassian 1997:450 Conference 12.). Several years earlier I had undergone a powerful

mystical experience that accompanied an occasion of great grief. This was the catalyst for my conversion to Christianity and subsequent ordination to the Anglican priesthood. I embarked on an academic study of Cassian, and in particular his spirituality, to gain greater insight into Christian meditation and its relationship with mystical experience. I sought such knowledge not only for personal enlightenment but also to help me teach and encourage the practice of Christian meditation in the parish in which I worked. After working as a parish priest in Johannesburg for seven years I resigned and moved to a small rural community in the Klein Karoo to establish a place of retreat and prayer. The writings of Cassian and the spirituality they convey continue to guide me as I try to live a life shaped by meditation, work and study.

The writings of Cassian claimed my attention in other ways. The amount of academic research conducted on these documents is modest compared with investigations of the writings of Cassian's contemporaries such as Augustine, Jerome and Basil. The suspicions of heresy that long tainted Cassian and the candid discussions of sexuality in some of the texts appear to have deterred scholars within the Church from studying his writings. The opportunity to overcome these barriers and examine the texts in light of contemporary perspectives added to their appeal.

Attempts to identify the prejudgements I bring to the investigation of Cassian's spirituality are unavoidably incomplete and biased. The task is best performed by describing how I perceive my own spirituality. The spirituality of the researcher and the spirituality of Cassian, the object of the investigation, can then be compared and contrasted. I understand my spirituality to be religious, Christian and ecclesiastical. It is a spirituality that incorporates the spiritual disciplines of meditation and contemplation as well as engagement with the Christian Scriptures and liturgical worship. Strongly influenced by the Christian monastic tradition it is a spirituality that pursues self-transcendence and union with God through the practice of spiritual disciplines. It also encourages engagement with the divine presence in the people and in the environment I encounter. It is a spirituality that is no longer defined by my former status within an ecclesiastical hierarchy, or the roles I previously performed within parochial ministry, but seeks expression beyond the bounds of the Church. Nonetheless, it remains ecclesiastical. I continue to be a priest within the Anglican Church. I regard the place of retreat and prayer that I am establishing as a ministry parallel rather than alternative to the Church.

I possess some similarities with Cassian the historical person. I am a male, born in Europe, well educated and widely travelled who has spent most of my life far away from my homeland. I, like Cassian, am a Christian priest looking for new expressions of religious practice. I am also a writer familiar with the discipline of conveying an argument in written text. Both Cassian and I have enjoyed substantial privilege within the societies we have lived. In contrast with Cassian, I am married and I am a parent. I am not a monk nor do I enjoy high ecclesiastical influence or status. My devotion to the Christian faith and my religious vocation is modest compared with that of Cassian. English, not Latin or Greek, is my home language. My skill and originality as a writer fall far short of that of the author of the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*.

This research project has changed the way I view Cassian, his writings and his spirituality. While the instruction about meditation and mystical engagement with Christ contained in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* still draws me to the texts, they are no longer their primary attraction. Cassian's writings, and the spirituality they convey, provide insight into a pattern of life, which comprises spiritual disciplines and rigorous self-examination, intended to encourage greater obedience to Christ. The spiritual 'route maps' provided by Cassian's monastic texts were devised amid considerable political, social and religious upheaval and provide encouragement and direction to a follower of Christ in a world marked by increasing change and uncertainty. The application of a hermeneutical method to study Cassian's texts has altered significantly the ways in which I engage with these documents. I no longer see them as stores of concealed information that must be excavated to recover their treasures. Instead, I recognise them as sources of spiritual wisdom that can be accessed by carefully engaging with the texts. This engagement involves close reading of the texts, reflection on the meanings they yield and a hermeneutical process that recognises the contexts of the texts, as well as my own context, and elicits new understandings. I no longer seek to direct and control the process of engagement but instead submit to the texts and attempt to be attentive to them. This shift is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the need for humility in the appropriation of wisdom.¹ The challenges posed by the research project as well as the assistance, support and encouragement received during the investigation, have also humbled me greatly.

¹ Walter Brueggemann (1997:460) credits Paul Ricoeur with the insight that the act of listening to a text is a recognition that one is not "self-made and autonomous" but "derivative and inherently connected" to that which is speaking.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Formulating the research problem

Fifth century Christian monk John Cassian travelled throughout the Roman Empire and its former territories at a time of enormous social, political and religious change. He lived in monastic communities and settlements in Palestine and Egypt and was an influential cleric in Constantinople and Rome. During his travels Cassian was tutored by many of the great desert abbas who pioneered Christian monasticism in the remote regions of Egypt. He also forged close ties with John Chrysostom (c347-407), the widely renowned Bishop of Constantinople, and Archdeacon (later Pope) Leo of Rome (d461). Cassian encountered Pope Innocent I (d417) and may have met other Christian luminaries during his journeys such as Jerome (c342-420), Evagrius Ponticus (346-399), Palladius (c365-425) and Pelagius (c354-420).² Towards the end of his life Cassian settled in Gaul and became a senior figure in the Church in that region.³

While in Gaul, Cassian wrote two guides to monastic life, *The Institutes of the Cenobia and the Remedies for the Eight Principal Vices (Institutes)* and *The Conferences of the Fathers (Conferences)*, which purport to present the teachings and practices of the monks he observed in Egypt. Cassian also composed a treatise, *On the Incarnation of the Lord against Nestorius (On the Incarnation)* that condemns as heresies teachings attributed to Nestorius Bishop of Constantinople (d c451). The *Institutes* and *Conferences* were highly influential in shaping the emerging monastic movement in Gaul. The influence of these documents, however, spread far beyond Cassian's original horizons. The *Institutes* and *Conferences* did much to define monasticism throughout the Western Church.

Among the monastic orders most influenced by Cassian's writings were those inspired by Benedict of Nursia (480-550).⁴ In his Rule, Benedict urged his monks to read both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* (Ramsey 1997:7).⁵ Cassiodorus (c485 – c580) recommended reading the *Institutes* to the monks at his Vivarium monastery in Rome (Ramsey 1997:7). Others who owe a debt to the writings of

² Evidence for Cassian's possible encounters with Jerome, Evagrius, Palladius and Pelagius is circumstantial. It appears likely that he was in Bethlehem, near Nitria, in Constantinople and in Rome at the same time as these prominent members of the Church. However, Cassian makes no reference in his texts to having met any of them.

³ Estimates of the span of Cassian's life vary. Ramsey (2000:3) suggests that Cassian was born about 360 and died in the early 430s; Chadwick, O (1985:1) writes that Cassian was born about 365 and died about 435; McGinn (2005b:218,227) suggests about 360 to "a few years after Augustine's death in 430); Schneiders (2000:15); Chadwick, H (1993:302) Casiday (2006:9); and Cross & Livingstone (1983:246) point to c360-435. The estimate of c365 to 435, adopted by this research, encompasses Cassian's lifetime as precisely as possible.

⁴ Stewart (1998:25) argues that Cassian's work was a strong influence on the anonymous *Rule of the Master* and suggests that Benedict drew on this work as well as on Cassian's writings.

⁵ The Rule of St Benedict prescribes the reading of the *Conferences* in Chapter 42 and both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* in Chapter 73 (Ramsey 1997:7).

Cassian, but often do not acknowledge him or his works by name, include the missionary monk Columba (c521-597) (Chadwick 1985:32) and pope Gregory the Great (540-604) (Ramsey 1997:7) as well as the abbot and scholar Alcuin (c735-804), his pupil the theologian Rhabanus Maurus (776 or 784-856), the monk and academic Rupert of Deutz (c1075-1129) and the great Dominican theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (c1225-1274) (Ramsey 1997:7).

Thomas Merton (1915-1968), one of the foremost thinkers and writers about Christian spirituality in the 20th century, was greatly influenced by Cassian's writings (Merton 1990:283).⁶ The Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue and practice, lauded Cassian's contribution to monasticism (Griffiths 1964:25). Fellow Benedictine John Main (1926-1982) drew on Cassian's teaching to promote a popular form of Christian meditation that is practiced throughout much of the world (Freeman 1986:5).

While the writings of Cassian have been held in high esteem by monastic writers for centuries they have long been neglected outside monastic orders.⁷ In recent years they have begun to draw interest from scholars within and outside religious communities. Boniface Ramsey OP, Columba Stewart OSB, John Carmody SJ and the Oratorian Jerome Bertram have produced translations and studies of Cassian's writings and secular historians Owen Chadwick, Peter Munz, Philip Rousseau and, more recently, Bernard McGinn, Richard Goodrich, Augustine Casiday and Steven Driver, among others, have examined the monk's life and teaching.⁸

Prominent postmodern theorist Michel Foucault (1926-84) used the writings of Cassian in the 1980s as part of several examinations of what he termed 'technologies of the self' that explored the processes of self-discovery and self-definition (Miller 1993:321,324). Foucault's interest in Cassian is part of a wider tradition among French academics of research into the writings of the monk who has long been associated with the city of Marseilles. French scholars who have investigated the writings of Cassian include Henri Irénée Marrou, Pierre Miquel Adalbert de Vogue and Jean-Claude Guy.

Most recent studies of Cassian and his writings have either re-examined the monk's historical contexts, reviewed the theology expressed in his writings or newly assessed his role in the development of monasticism. A few have addressed the teaching about spirituality contained in Cassian's writings.

⁶ In a 1965 letter to Nora Chadwick Merton writes: "Certainly I agree with you about Cassian. Ever since I had him as a Lenten book in the novitiate, I have kept close to him, and of course use him constantly in the novitiate" (1990:283).

⁷ Much of this neglect is due to the stigma of heresy, unfairly attached to Cassian's texts because they deviate from Augustine's understanding of grace, that has long bedevilled the monk and his writings.

⁸ Until Boniface Ramsey's translations of the *Conferences* (1997) and the *Institutes* (2000) there were only partial English translations of Cassian's monastic writings. Edgar Gibson translated most of the *Institutes* and *Conferences*, as well as Cassian's treatise *On the Incarnation*, for the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (1894) series. Book six of the *Institutes* and conferences twelve and twenty-two of the *Conferences* were excluded from the series. Owen Chadwick included translations of some of the *Conferences* (conferences one, nine, ten, eleven, fifteen, eighteen and nineteen) in his anthology *Western Asceticism* (1958) and Colm Luibheid produced a partial translation of the *Conferences* (1985) for the Classics of Western Spirituality series (conferences one, two, three, nine, ten, eleven, fourteen, fifteen and eighteen).

Some of these works also sought to apply such teaching to needs of a contemporary audience.⁹ Little attention, however, has been given to the spirituality of the person of Cassian and how knowledge of such spirituality might be of value to contemporary Christian communities.

1.2 Aim of the research

The aim of this research is to determine the value of the spirituality of John Cassian for contemporary Christian communities.

To conduct the research it is necessary to define, identify, examine and assess the spirituality of Cassian. The project must address the questions: *What is the spirituality of Cassian? How can it be examined? What features of this spirituality are of value to contemporary Christian communities? Why are these features of value?*

1.3 Research method

A hermeneutical method has been selected for this investigation of the spirituality of Cassian. It is a method that is largely descriptive, analytical, critical, constructive and synthetic (Schneiders 1989:695).

A hermeneutical method was chosen because it enables us to draw from a variety of academic disciplines the tools and data required to best examine, analyse and interpret the subject matter of the investigation.¹⁰ Such a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary method is necessary to address the complexities of the investigation. These complexities arise because Cassian lived more than 1 500 years ago in a cultural context vastly different from our contemporary environment and most of the data available for the investigation is bound in literary texts that can be considered remote because of their age, language, form, purpose and origin.

The subject matter, the spirituality of Cassian, cannot be accessed directly. The texts available are merely ‘expressions’ of the spirituality of Cassian (Kinerk 1981:5). We are therefore distanced from the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, the texts convey information, both overtly and covertly, that is shaped by the prejudices and biases of the author and his context. The examination and assessment of such information is also influenced by the prejudgements of the person conducting the research and the environment within which the investigation takes place.

The hermeneutical method draws upon many academic disciplines, such as church history, literature studies, biblical studies, theology, philosophy and spirituality, to examine the spirituality of Cassian. It recognises the influence of bias inherent in the experience of spirituality as well as in the communication and reception of information about the phenomenon and in the activity of researching the subject (Schneiders 2005c:58-59). It also acknowledges the transformative potential of the study of spirituality (Schneiders 2005c:58-59). Attempts to attain genuine understanding of the meanings,

⁹ The most notable of these studies is John Levko’s *Cassian’s prayer for the 21st Century* (2005).

¹⁰ Schneiders (2005b:7) argues that the academic study of spirituality is intrinsically and irreducibly multi-disciplinary.

purposes and values of another person, from the perspective and context of that person, can transform the person performing the research (Downey 1997:127).¹¹

The investigation into the spirituality of Cassian adopts the two-tiered inter-disciplinary model advocated by Schneiders (2005b:7) for the academic study of spirituality. This model comprises two ‘constitutive’ disciplines, which Schneiders (2005b:7) considers essential for an academic study of Christian spirituality, because they supply the ‘positive data of Christian religious experience’ as well as its ‘norm and hermeneutical context’, and several ‘problematic’ disciplines that are determined by the specific topic and approach of the research. This investigation incorporates history of Christianity and biblical studies, the two constitutive disciplines identified by Schneiders (2005b:7), as well as problematic disciplines such as theology, philosophy and literature studies.

The lead discipline in the investigation is history of Christianity because of its substantial contribution of both data and method to the research project. The research accommodates a historical-critical approach, as developed by the academic discipline of history, in its study of Cassian’s spirituality. This approach recognises historical artefacts, be they texts, archaeological remains or spoken words, as data that do not provide direct access to the past but only relate to it (Nineham 1983:255). Such data, therefore, must be critically interrogated to uncover what they can yield about the past.¹² A historical-critical approach is applied primarily to identify and understand the contexts of the subject matter of the investigation. These contexts include the historical and geographical environments within which Cassian lived as well as the settings in which his writings were composed and received. An understanding of such contexts recognises the many forces at work in the experience, comprehension, expression, evaluation, recording and communication of a particular spirituality (Sheldrake 1995:18-20).

The application of a historical-critical approach to examine Cassian’s spirituality is guided by recent developments within the academic discipline of history that are broadly termed ‘New History’. They encourage the use of other academic subjects, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, philosophy, linguistics and literature studies, alongside history within an inter-disciplinary matrix to recover much of the actual historic experience of the past (Pallares-Burke 2002:163).¹³ New History recognises social, political and cultural agendas at work in society and in the traditional practice of history. It seeks to uncover marginalised peoples, perspectives and personalities to obtain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the people, place and period under review (Sheldrake 1995:26).¹⁴

¹¹ Douglas Burton-Christie (2005:106) labels the combination of critical reflection and self-implication in the study of spirituality as a “critical-participative approach.”

¹² The findings of such an interrogation are inevitably incomplete and provisional (Nineham 1983:256).

¹³ New History’s use of multiple disciplines to source a variety of academic tools, as well as data, parallels closely the inter-disciplinary practice of the study of spirituality.

¹⁴ Burke (2001:2-6) describes New History as history written in deliberate reaction against the traditional paradigm of historical studies.

Investigations into Christian spirituality that address historical data must recognise the presence and influence of two powerful value-systems or paradigms (Sheldrake 1995:8). The first is the influence of the institution of the Church (Sheldrake 1995:67). The Church has skewed the history of Christian spirituality because it determined what aspects of the religious experience of its members were significant and correct (Sheldrake 1995:19).¹⁵ The second value-system prominent in a historical study of Christian spirituality is the pervasive and powerful Western cultural and political worldview (Sheldrake 1995:77).¹⁶ Most of the historiographical material available to researchers investigating the history of Christian spirituality is subject to these influential and extensive value-systems (Sheldrake 1995:20).

The application of a historical-critical approach to the study of the spirituality of Cassian is further influenced by another recent development within the academic discipline of history. Studies of the historical period and geographic regions within which Cassian lived have undergone a considerable shift in recent years. The long tradition of studies, prevalent in Europe and the USA, that attempted to identify the symptoms and causes of the ‘decline and fall’ of the Roman Empire and the beginnings of the nation states in the West has largely given way to research that endeavours to take a broader and less partisan perspective (Brown 2003:1-3; Cameron 2010). Research into the historical period now frequently termed ‘Late Antiquity’ often addresses not just the Western territories of the Roman Empire or their counterparts in the East that developed into the Byzantine Empire.¹⁷ It increasingly examines the Persian Empire and communities in Arabia and Asia (Cameron 2010). Africa is also receiving long overdue attention (Oden 2007:143). Traditional approaches to the study of Late Antiquity, which often focused on establishing ‘chronological bookends’ and signs of military, political or social decline, have been complemented by new research methods and perspectives (Cameron 2010). The historical-critical approach to Cassian’s texts adopts the broader outlook of recent research into Late Antiquity. It recognises the value of multiple methods and perspectives of investigation. This approach accommodates well the many and varied geographical, cultural and ecclesiastical contexts which influenced the spirituality of Cassian.

The interrogation of historical texts, central to the investigation of Cassian’s spirituality, applies a literary-critical approach to the study of the writings of Cassian. Such criticism enables the researcher to better determine and understand the purpose, origin and audience of these texts as well as glean insight into the person who composed them.

¹⁵ Most historical accounts of Christian spirituality are elitist because they usually favour dominant groups and concern themselves with sophisticated ideas and issues and thereby ignore the religious life of most Christians of that time (Sheldrake 1995:19).

¹⁶ The Western Church was instrumental in propagating this value-system throughout Medieval Europe and then, several centuries later, through European expansion into the Americas, Africa and Asia. It was reinforced through the rise of secular humanism in 17th and 18th century Europe and North America.

¹⁷ Cameron (2001:21) delineates the historical period of Late Antiquity from the late third century to at least the sixth century. Brown (1998:1) identifies it as the period between the reigns of the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and Justinian (527-563).

The process of uncovering meaning from Cassian's texts and interpreting such information to attain an understanding of the author's spirituality and its value to contemporary Christian communities draws on the academic discipline of philosophy. The investigation applies a synthetic and constructivist hermeneutical approach based on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. It engages the sources of data using Gadamer's heuristic model of 'the game of conversation' between text and reader (Gadamer 1979:330). This model recognises that the available texts do not simply point back to a possible meaning of the phenomenon under investigation. Valid meanings can also be discovered within the texts themselves and, furthermore, can be generated by these texts in interaction with the reader or interpreter (Gadamer 1989:462).

The investigation addresses the spirituality of Cassian not just as a historical phenomenon bound in the life of Cassian, but also as an entity conveyed 'within' and 'in front of' his extant texts (Tracy 1984:159-160). These texts are treated not as depositories of the remnants of past existence but rather as bearers of a living tradition which, through the application of memory, becomes part of the world of the researcher (Gadamer 1979:352). The hermeneutical process proposed by Gadamer identifies the biases present in both the texts and the interpreter (Gadamer 1979:258). By incorporating several critical approaches, the investigation into the spirituality of Cassian includes a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' within the 'hermeneutic of retrieval' advocated by Gadamer (Tracy 1984:161).

1.4 Area of research

The survey of relevant literature for this research includes an examination and critical analysis of the primary texts attributed to Cassian as well as an extensive review of secondary sources. The primary sources widely believed to have been written by Cassian are: *The Institutes of the Cenobia and the Remedies for the Eight Principal Vices (Institutes)*; *The Conferences of the Fathers (Conferences)* and *On the Incarnation of the Lord against Nestorius (On the Incarnation)*. Secondary sources reviewed include texts attributed to Cassian's contemporaries or near-contemporaries as well as later documents that provide information about the author and his writings. Furthermore, an extensive range of literature was consulted, drawn from academic disciplines such as spirituality, history, biblical studies, theology, philosophy and literature studies, to identify appropriate tools and methods to apply to the investigation as well as to obtain necessary data.

The survey of relevant literature confines itself to documents written in English. The primary texts, together with many of the documents composed by Cassian's contemporaries, were written in Latin and were therefore studied in translation.¹⁸ Some academic texts written in languages other than

¹⁸ The English translations of Cassian's works used in this research project are Boniface Ramsey's translations, with annotations, of the *Conferences* (1997) and the *Institutes* (2000), produced for the *Ancient Christian Writers* series, together with Owen Chadwick's selected translations of the *Conferences* in *Western Asceticism* (1958) and Colm Luibheid's translation and annotation of a selection of the *Conferences* (1985) written for *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. The English version of Cassian's *On the Incarnation* is sourced from the internet website of the Christian Classic Ethereal Library <http://www.ccel.org>.

English were reviewed where English versions were available. Such a limitation inevitably restricts the breadth of the investigation. Nonetheless, the high quality of the translations of the primary texts together with the extensive range of secondary documents available in English is more than sufficient to enable a thorough investigation of the research subject.

1.5 Demarcation of work

This research is demarcated into six chapters. The present chapter is followed by an examination of primary and secondary texts used in the investigation (chapter two). The historical context of the spirituality of Cassian is then studied (chapter three) and Cassian's teaching about spirituality examined (chapter four). This examination leads to an evaluation of Cassian's spirituality and an assessment of its value for contemporary Christian communities (chapter five). This chapter includes a hermeneutical study of Cassian's texts that provides understanding of Cassian's spirituality as lived contemporary experience. The final chapter of the research project (chapter six) is a conclusion that presents the findings of the investigation.

1.6 Definition of key terms

1.6.1 Spirituality

The word 'spirituality' has a broad, diverse and often confusing range of contemporary meanings. Even within the academy there is no widely accepted definition of the term (Kourie 2006:22). Such is the breadth and diversity of understandings about spirituality that a generally acceptable description of the subject may never be attained (McGinn 2005a:34).

Schneiders (2003:166), who has done much to establish spirituality as an independent academic discipline, defines spirituality as 'the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives'.¹⁹ The academic study of spirituality, according to Schneiders (1993:12), is primarily concerned with gaining an understanding, theoretically and practically, of this experience.²⁰ It is this experience that is the subject of investigation for an academic study of spirituality rather than 'an abstract idea, a theory, an ideology, or a movement of some kind' (Schneiders 2003:166). This investigation employs Schneiders' definition of spirituality, with its emphasis on experience as an essential criterion for understanding the subject matter, in its study of the spirituality of Cassian.

¹⁹ This definition of spirituality embraces spirituality that is not Christian or even religious (such as Marxist, feminist or eco-spirituality).

²⁰ Sandra Schneiders (1993:12) distinguishes between a formative and a research approach to the study of spirituality. A formative or catechetical approach is primarily concerned with the spiritual formation of students within a specific religious tradition while an academic or research approach is concerned with gaining an understanding of the "lived experience" of God.

Schneiders' definition recognises spirituality as a fundamental dimension of the human person that affects all facets of a person's life (2003:167). Furthermore, spirituality, as described by Schneiders (2003:167), is not an 'accidental experience' or 'episodic event' but rather 'an ongoing' and 'coherent approach to life.' It is an endeavour that is 'consciously pursued' and 'ongoing' and is intended to lead a person beyond the self and towards what they perceive to be ultimate value (Schneiders 2003:167).

The use of the word 'experience' in the context of the study of spirituality implies that the subject of the investigation is somehow 'rooted' or 'grounded' in the life of a person or group of people (Schneiders 2003:166). The term 'experience' embraces human action and behaviour but also the thoughts, feelings, emotions and beliefs that might be associated with such action and behaviour. Pretorius (2008:148) points out that experience produces some form of knowledge as a result of a person's engagement with what they perceive to be reality.²¹ Such knowledge might range from physical sensation to intellectual insight.

An investigation of spirituality as 'lived experience' must consider the external contexts of the phenomenon, such as its historical, cultural and social setting, that might define and specify the experience under investigation (Schneiders 2005c:52). It should also consider internal forces, such as thoughts, feelings, emotions and beliefs as well as influences on the unconscious dimension of a person, that may shape the experience of spirituality.

It is a matter of contention whether lived experience goes beyond external and internal dimensions of perceived reality to incorporate a further transpersonal, or spiritual, realm. A physicalist perspective maintains that the extant universe comprises 'a multiplicity of complex material processes' (Jacobs 2009: iv). All experience, according to such a stance, occurs within, and is a product of, a physical universe. Inner experiences, as well as experiences that some might describe as spiritual, are attributed to physical processes within the human brain. An essentialist perspective, in contrast to a physicalist viewpoint, maintains that there are 'non-physical properties inherent to all forms and functions of physicality' (Jacobs 2009:iv). Thus the human person, for example, has a dimension or component that goes beyond the physical. Such a dimension or component might be termed mind, self, spirit or soul. These terms are by no means interchangeable and there is wide divergence in the understanding of such descriptions. Furthermore, an essentialist perspective recognises non-physical properties external to the human person. Such non-physical properties might include phenomena variously termed Spirit, God, Divine or One. Again, these terms are not interchangeable and there is considerable divergence in their meaning.

Religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are essentialist in their understanding of the extant universe. They recognise that the human person comprises a dimension

²¹ Drawing from the works of Rahner and Vorgrimler (1965); Spilka, Hood and Gorsuch (1985); and Wolman (1989); Pretorius defines experience as 'a form of knowledge, accompanied by emotions and feelings, that is obtained as a result of direct reception of an impression of reality (internal or external), which lies outside our control, that has an impact on our reaction or consciousness and being' (2008:148).

or component that is not physical. Furthermore, the human person, such traditions claim, can also engage with a dimension or component of the universe external to them that is also non-physical. Within Christianity, the religion practiced by Cassian, there is an understanding of the human person as comprising body, mind and spirit or soul.²² The spirit, or soul, is widely thought to be able to engage with the Divine that is both within and beyond the human person. The understanding of the nature and extent of such engagement varies considerably within the Christian tradition.²³ Nonetheless, such engagement constitutes experience. It can be broadly termed spiritual experience.²⁴

Spiritual experience is distinct from religious experience. The meanings of the terms can overlap but they are not the same.²⁵ The term ‘spiritual experience’ can be used to refer to an experience that is recognised by the participant or an observer as influential to a person’s spirituality. Such experiences are typically very personal and involve some form of transcendence of physical reality; engagement with the ‘sacred’ or ultimate reality; and transformation of the person who undergoes such experience (Pretorius 2008:151).

The term ‘religious experience’ refers to an experience that occurs within a religious context. Such a context might include participation in religious rites and rituals, membership of a particular community of religious adherents, or a specific belief system defined and sustained by a set of religious precepts (Pretorius 2008:151).

Spiritual experience often occurs outside the parameters of religion and can be undergone by people who eschew any religious affiliation.²⁶ However, when a spiritual experience is undergone by a person who subscribes to a particular religious belief system this system invariably provides the frame of reference for the experience, its interpretation and its communication.

While it is impossible for the researcher to verify spiritual experience conclusively, there is no doubt that Cassian recognises the existence of such experience and accords it great importance. It is the

²² The distinction between body, mind and spirit (or soul) is made by Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke he calls on his followers to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your strength and all your mind” (Lk 10:27) while in the Gospel of Matthew he tells the Pharisees to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37).

²³ Expressions of such engagement range from “baptism in the Holy Spirit” which is a prominent feature of Pentecostal Christianity, to ‘*theosis*’, union with the divine, that forms the heart of the mysticism of the Orthodox Church.

²⁴ The essentialist perspective is not restricted to adherents to the major religions. Pioneers of consciousness studies, such as Ken Wilber (2001:128), argue that there is a broad spectrum of consciousness that includes and transcends the human person.

²⁵ The word spirituality is often a popular substitute for what used to be termed religion. Such substitution, however, is not accurate nor is it helpful. In contexts where the word spirituality is substituted for the term religion it is often used to describe what is perceived to be good about religion. This would include the experience of the transcendent and the recognition of value, meaning, belonging, freedom and vitality within human life. That which is perceived to be bad, such as excessive or inappropriate authority, control and power, often continues to be attached to the word religion (Smith 2001:255).

²⁶ The religious influence on a specific culture within which a person undergoes a spiritual experience can provide that person with a mental or spiritual framework, of which they may be conscious or unconscious, for the experience and reflection of such an experience.

subject of much of his writing. This investigation does not attempt to validate the spiritual experience recorded by Cassian but rather recognises its influence on his life and spirituality. Cassian's spirituality can further be described as religious, and more specifically Christian, for it is perceived and expressed by Cassian within a Christian religious tradition. 'Ultimate value' for Cassian was the triune godhead revealed in the Christian Scriptures and worshipped and served within the context of the Church. It is in relation to this understanding of the divine that Cassian lived out his 'project of life-integration through self-transcendence' (Schneiders 2003:166).

This investigation does not limit its understanding of the spirituality of Cassian to the spirituality experienced by Cassian within the historical parameters of his own life. Nor does it simply address the teaching about spirituality contained within his texts. Cassian's writings continue to convey his teaching on spirituality, together with insights into the spirituality of the person Cassian, to new audiences nearly sixteen centuries after the death of their author. The spirituality of Cassian encompasses the lived experience of the historical person of Cassian, the teaching contained in his writings about spirituality, as well as the experiences of people who subsequently engage with his texts as part of their own 'project of life-integration'. This latter aspect of Cassian's spirituality is termed by the investigation 'Cassian's spirituality as lived contemporary experience.'

1.6.2 Contemporary Christian communities

This investigation's use of the term 'Christian communities', rather than Christian 'congregations' or 'churches', is intended to avoid potential limitations or bias that could occur if either of the latter two descriptions were employed.²⁷ The word 'community' was also chosen because it possesses similar meaning to the Greek *ekklesia*, or gathering, that is frequently used in the New Testament to describe groups of followers of Christ.

This use of the word 'community' refers to a body of people drawn and held together by what they hold in common. A Christian community, therefore, is a body of people drawn and held together by a common perception, understanding or experience of the person the Christian tradition describes as the Christ or Messiah. There is considerable diversity of understanding and expression of this relationship within and outside Christianity. Most of these understandings and expressions, however, incorporate in some way the historical person Jesus of Nazareth who was recognised by his early followers as the Christ and whose life and teaching is revealed in the writings of such followers. Many of these writings were given the status of sacred Scripture by the Church during the second to fourth centuries (Cross & Livingstone 1983:232).

This investigation understands a Christian community to be a body of people drawn and held together by their common desire to emulate the way of life modelled by Jesus of Nazareth and to follow

²⁷ The term "congregation" is often favoured by many Protestant Christians while the word "church" is usually preferred by Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox denominations.

his teaching. This description accommodates most members of Christian churches, regardless of institutional denomination or theological affiliation, as well as the large number of people outside formal religious organisations that find inspiration and sustenance in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.²⁸ It is an understanding of Christian community that is applicable in most parts of the world.

The prefix ‘contemporary’ is applied to distinguish Christian communities that are active, and comprise people who are currently drawn and held together by a common relationship to the Christ, from those that existed only in the past.

1.7 Summary

By examining not only the spirituality Cassian taught in his writings but also the spirituality he himself experienced, as well as that experienced by contemporary readers of his texts, the investigation is able to assess the value of such spirituality to contemporary Christian communities. The potential of the spirituality of Cassian to encourage followers of Christ to better emulate his teaching and example is the yardstick against which its value for Christian communities is determined. It particularly focuses on the potential of this spirituality to facilitate mystical engagement with the divine and thereby promote transformation of such communities, and their members, into greater Christlikeness.

²⁸ Such a definition would embrace communities that reject formal religion and sometimes describe themselves “post-Christian.”

CHAPTER TWO

Examination of primary and secondary texts

2.1 Introduction

The primary available sources are the texts attributed to Cassian. An examination of these documents provides information about Cassian, the historical person, and gives insight into his spirituality as lived experience. It also enables us to distinguish this *experience* of spirituality from the information about spirituality contained in Cassian's documents and the lived experience of the people who engage with author's texts. All of these aspects of the spirituality of Cassian must be examined to assess its value for contemporary Christian communities.

By consulting secondary sources further information is obtained about Cassian, his spirituality and his teaching about spirituality. These secondary sources comprise texts written by his contemporaries or near-contemporaries about Cassian or his writings. Access to these sources enables us to better detect information Cassian excluded from his texts as well as identify potential bias within his writings.

2.2 Description of primary texts

The extant texts attributed to Cassian comprise the *Institutes*, the *Conferences* and *On the Incarnation*. There is no evidence that Cassian wrote any significant texts other than these three documents. All of the texts attributed to Cassian are written in Latin. They frequently contain Greek words and quotations in their original form as well as in translation or transliteration (Stewart 1998:35).

The *Institutes* comprises a preface and twelve books that consist of two distinct sections. The first four books, which make up the first section, examine the institutes, or instructions, that governed the conduct and behaviour of the monks Cassian claims to have encountered in Egypt.²⁹ The first three of these books address the form and meaning of the clothing and liturgical prayers used in the monastic communities. The fourth book incorporates a discourse attributed to Abba Pinufius that contains of a brief study of monastic spirituality and the importance of renunciation, mortification, humility, patience and perfection (Cassian 2000:96-102 Institute 4.). This discourse is very similar in form and content to the *Conferences*.

In the second section of the *Institutes* Cassian identifies the obstacles that hinder monastic practice. In each of the eight books, that comprise this section, Cassian examines one of the eight principal vices he believes hinders the attainment of purity of heart, or perfection, and provides

²⁹ The Latin *institutum* can be rendered as "teaching," "instruction" or "guiding principle" (Ramsey 2000:4).

remedies for such obstacles. The eight vices Cassian identifies and addresses are the spirits of gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory and pride.

In the *Conferences* Cassian greatly expands the study of monastic life that appears in the *Institutes*.³⁰ The *Conferences* comprises twenty-four books each of which are in the form of a dialogue between Cassian and his companion Germanus and one of the holy desert fathers, or abbas, in Egypt.³¹ While structured as a dialogue, Cassian and Germanus (predominantly the latter) do little more than prompt or question the great teachers and most of the text comprises the insights and instructions of the desert abbas.³² Topics discussed include the purpose of being a monk, the importance of discretion, desires of the flesh and the spirit, prayer, perfection, chastity, divine gifts, friendship, repentance and reparation, sinlessness and mortification.

The *Conferences* comprises three distinct sections – conferences one to ten, eleven to seventeen and eighteen to twenty-four – each of which begins with a preface written by Cassian. Cassian may have originally intended the work to comprise just the first ten conferences but later extended it by a further seven conferences and then once more by another seven conferences (Ramsey 1997:27; Driver 1994:2). The *Institutes* and the first ten books of the *Conferences* appear to have been simultaneously planned and were probably meant to be complementary texts (Ramsey 1997:27).

The last of Cassian's texts, *On the Incarnation*, is a theological treatise that condemns as heresy the Christological teachings attributed to Nestorius Bishop of Constantinople. It comprises seven books. The first book condemns Nestorius as one of a long line of heretics that have attempted to confound the true faith of the Church and rebuts his Christology by comparing it with the heresy of Pelagianism. The next book argues in favour of the term *Theotokos* (God-bearer) and the full divinity and humanity of Christ. Cassian's insistence on the full divinity and humanity of Christ is continued in the third book and backed with extensive references from Scripture. In the fourth book he reasserts that Christ possessed only one nature, which is both divine and human, although Scripture uses many names to describe him. He also emphasises Christ's pre-existence as God before his human birth. The fifth book of *On the Incarnation* again condemns the heresies of both Pelagius and Nestorius and reiterates Christ's pre-existence by drawing on extensive references from Scripture. The penultimate book describes the divine power of Christ, as presented in the Gospels, and points to the creed of Antioch as the proclamation of the orthodox belief of the united Catholic Church. Cassian rebukes Nestorius for deviating from the faith of the Catholic Church into which he was baptised and for becoming an apostate. The final book of *On the Incarnation* repeats Cassian's

³⁰ Stewart (1998:29) believes that the germ of the *Conferences* is to be found in the *Institutes*.

³¹ The Latin *conlatio* means a "gathering together" of objects or people and is used by Cassian to describe, among other things, a gathering of monks for consultation or discussion (Stewart 1998:30).

³² These dialogues are presented in the classical Greek question-and-answer style known as *erotapokriseis* (Stewart 1998:30).

earlier arguments against Nestorius and condemns the tactics and techniques used by heretics to pervert the orthodox belief of the Catholic Church. He backs his stance against Nestorius by drawing on the works of prominent Western and Eastern theologians.

The *Institutes* and the *Conferences* differ significantly from *On the Incarnation*. The first two works are instructive or pedagogical. They are intended to introduce senior members of the Church in Gaul to the ascetic teachings Cassian claims to have encountered in the Egyptian deserts and to help them establish and run monastic communities in their homeland (Cassian 2000:63 Institute 3.; 1997:640 Conference 18.). *On the Incarnation* is a theological treatise and was composed to demonstrate the error of the Christology of Nestorius. The *Institutes* and the *Conferences* address directly the subject of spirituality. They are concerned with the ‘project of life-integration through self-transcendence towards a perceived ultimate value’ (Schneiders 2003:166). They comprise Cassian’s teaching about spirituality while also providing insight into the spirituality of their author and their original audience. These ‘monastic texts’ are the source of most of the data examined by the investigation. *On the Incarnation* provides us with some information about Cassian, his historical and geographic contexts, and his theology.

Portions of the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* appear in manuscripts dated between the fifth and eighth century (Chadwick 1968:40). No manuscript before the ninth century, however, contains all twelve books of the *Institutes* or all twenty-four books of the *Conferences* (Chadwick 1968:40). It is possible that these collected works were first compiled by editors in the ninth century who brought together writings of Cassian that had previously circulated separately (Chadwick 1968:40). Such collections continued to circulate after the ninth century (Chadwick 1968:40). The earliest copy of *On the Incarnation* is contained in a tenth or eleventh century manuscript that comprises several other dogmatic treatises (Chadwick 1968:39).

The writings of Cassian may have been amended before they emerged in their extant form in the ninth to eleventh centuries. Chadwick (1968:41) suggests that additions have been made to the last paragraphs of the tenth book of the *Institutes* and the third group of writings in the *Conferences*. He points out that there is a shift in content in the later part of the fifth book of the *Institutes* which indicates tampering and interpolation (1968:43). Chadwick (1968:76) also suggests a possible interpolation in chapters four, five, and six of the third book of the *Institutes*. Goodrich (2007:236) supports this view and suggests that chapter eight is also a probable addition to the third book of the *Institutes*. According to Chadwick (1968:49-50) there is incoherence within some sections of the *Conferences* (conferences eighteen, twenty-one and twenty-four). Chadwick (1968:48-49) adds that the account of Cassian’s encounter with Abba Pinufius at Bethlehem that occurs in conference twenty (Cassian 1997:693-695 Conference 20.) appears to be a interpolation of the passage that describes the same event in the fourth book of the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:94-96 Institute 4.).

The introduction of some additions as well as alterations to the texts of Cassian's writings before they were compiled in their present form appears probable (Chadwick 1968:41). However, such alterations are likely to be minor in scale and significance and will have little effect on an investigation of the spirituality of Cassian.

2.3 Biographical information in primary texts

Biographical information within Cassian's writings is scarce. Nonetheless, an historical-critical approach to Cassian's texts provides some insight into Cassian and the contexts he inhabited.³³

An examination of the content of the texts attributed to Cassian reveals that the author is a male who used the name *Iohannes* (John) when referring to himself (Cassian 2000:137 Institute 5, 1997:512 Conference 14.).³⁴ In the *Conferences* Cassian discloses that he was raised within a family that possessed substantial wealth and considerable 'ancestral property' (Cassian 1997:825 Conference 24.). He mentions in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:247 Institute 11.) that he had a sister but does not disclose the existence of other siblings or reveal details of his parents or forebears.

Cassian's texts mention that he was well educated, especially in classical literature (Cassian 1997:516-517 Conference 14.) and widely travelled (Cassian 1997:42 Conference 1.). The *Institutes* and the *Conferences* contain details of Cassian's visit to Palestine, sojourn in Egypt, and probable residence in Gaul. *On the Incarnation* indicates that Cassian also lived in Constantinople and Rome. The motive for much of Cassian's travel appears to have been a desire to increase his knowledge and experience of the Christian religion (Cassian 1997:41 Conference 1.). The documents attributed to Cassian reveal their author to be a fervent adherent of Christianity and a champion of the monastic expression of this religion (Cassian 1997:43 Conference 1.).

2.3.1 Place of origin

Cassian's name provides no indication of his place of origin as it, together with variants 'Cassianus' and 'Cassius', was a common nomenclature in the Roman Empire (Stewart 1998:4). Cassian discloses in the *Conferences* that his family's lands were 'pleasant and delightful', included forests and produced food (Cassian 1997:825 Conference 24.). In the *Conferences* Abba Abraham warns Cassian and Germanus that they may not be able to adopt some of the Egyptian monastic practices in their native land because of the cold in that region (Cassian 1997:831 Conference 24.). This might be a reference to the spiritual climate of the land rather than its geography. Abba Abraham notes later in the *Conferences* that Cassian's homeland was constrained by 'the great chill of unbelief'

³³ Information authors reveal about themselves within their writings is not always accurate. But unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary it will be assumed that what Cassian discloses about himself in his texts can be trusted.

³⁴ Cassian only mentions the name *Iohannes* (John) twice. It occurs once in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:137 Institute 5.) and once in the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:512 Conference 14.).

(Cassian 1997:831 Conference 24.). Cassian confirms that it was ‘impossible or at least highly unusual’ to find a monk in his homeland (Cassian 1997:840 Conference 24.).³⁵

Cassian’s homeland appears to have been far from Egypt. The Egyptian abbas Moses and Paphnutius remark in their dialogues that Cassian and Germanus travelled ‘through many foreign parts’ (Cassian 1997:42 Conference 1.) and ‘many different provinces’ (Cassian 1997:120 Conference 3.) to find the teaching they sought. In his preface to the *Institutes* Cassian describes himself as a ‘foreigner’ and compares his composition of this text to the work of Hiram of Tyre who in the Old Testament (3 Kings 7:13-14) helped King Solomon build the Temple in Jerusalem even though he was not a Jew (Cassian 2000:11 *Institutes* Preface.). This allusion suggests that Cassian was not a native of Gaul where the text appears to have been composed (Stewart 1998:5).

On the Incarnation indicates that Cassian might have originated in Constantinople. Cassian calls the Church community in this city his ‘fellow citizens through love of the homeland’ (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 7.). However, this terminology could simply be an indication of Cassian’s fondness for the ecclesiastical community in that city rather than a reference to his place of origin (Stewart 1998:5). Throughout the last book of this text Cassian displays great admiration for Constantinople and its former bishop John Chrysostom (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 7.). Similarly, Cassian’s praise of Antioch in the same text (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 6.) is likely to have been intended to shame his opponent Nestorius, a native of that city, rather than indicate his own association with the place (Stewart 1998:15).

2.3.2 Places of residence

The only matters of geography that are clear from the contents of the primary texts are that Cassian and Germanus journeyed from an undisclosed location to Bethlehem in Palestine where they joined a monastery near the site of the Nativity of Christ (Cassian 2000:96 *Institute* 4.).³⁶ Inspired by a meeting with Abba Pinufius they continued their journey to the famed but inhospitable regions of the Egyptian desert in the hope of attaining spiritual wisdom from the ancient teachers who resided there (Cassian 2000:96 *Institute* 4.).³⁷ It is not known how long Cassian and Germanus stayed among the monks in the Egyptian desert. It appears that after about seven years Cassian and Germanus revisited the monastery in Bethlehem, to fulfil a commitment to return made to leaders of the community, but soon ventured back to the deserts of Egypt (Cassian 1997:612 Conference 17.).³⁸

³⁵ Cassian’s references to his childhood in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* are noted by Stewart (1998:4).

³⁶ Cassian occasionally refers to his monastery in Syria (Conference 11. 1997:409). Palestine was encompassed by the Roman administrative region of Syria and these statements are references to the Bethlehem monastery (Ramsey 1997:425).

³⁷ Cassian devotes the 20th conference in the *Conferences* to a dialogue with Abba Pinufius that occurred when he and Germanus visited him in Egypt (Conference 20. 1997:693-704).

³⁸ Chadwick (1968:17) warns that the last two paragraphs of conference seventeen, which contain the reference to the length of Cassian’s first stay in Egypt, could be a later addition to the text. He suggests that

The length of their second stay is not disclosed. Cassian reveals no details in his texts of his journeys between Palestine and Egypt. He states in the *Conferences* that he and Germanus arrived at the town of Thennesus and then travelled to the city of Panephyis (Cassian 1997:409-410 Conference 11.). They also visited the Egyptian monastic settlements of Skete (Cassian 1997:41 Conference 1.), Cellae (Cassian 1997:217 Conference 6.) and Dioclos (Cassian 1997:635 Conference 18.).

Cassian appears to have altered the chronology of his Egyptian sojourn when constructing the *Conferences*. His trips to Skete and Cellae, the settings for the first part of the *Conferences*, took place during his second stay in Egypt. The journeys to Thennesus and Diolcos and Panephyis, the settings for the second and third sections of the *Conferences*, appear to have occurred during his first visit to the region (Ramsey 1997:8).³⁹

Thennesus, presently known as Tell Tennis, is situated on the shore of Lake Thennesus (Ramsey 1997:425). Cassian remarks that the town was ‘surrounded by the sea and salt swamps’ (Cassian 1997:409 Conference 11.) Panephyis, now known as Aschmoun er Ruman, butts onto the same lake (Ramsey 1997: 280). Skete, also known as Scete or Scetis, is a name applied in early monastic literature to both a specific monastic settlement and a broader desert region that encompasses this settlement as well as the nearby community of Nitria (Chitty 1966:12). Cellae, also known as Cellia, Kellia or the Cells, was close to the monastic settlement of Nitria (Ramsey 1997:238).⁴⁰ Surprisingly, the prominent monastic community of Nitria is not mentioned in Cassian’s texts (Stewart 1998:11). The town of Dioclos, which Cassian records in the eighteenth conference (Cassian 1997:629 Conference 18.) lay in the Nile Delta on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea (Ramsey 1997:629). Its precise location is not known (Stewart 1998:145). All of the monastic sites visited by Cassian were not far from the great port city of Alexandria and the delta of the Nile River (Ramsey 1997:7).

In the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:409 Conference 11.) Cassian states his intention to travel to the remote desert of the Thebaid that lay near the upper reaches of the Nile. However, there is no indication in his texts that he accomplished this goal (Stewart 1998:140). Cassian, in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:37 Institute 2.), does refer to the practices of monks living in the Thebaid but there is no evidence within his texts that he obtained this knowledge at first-hand. He also describes monastic

later readers of the document might have wanted to temper Abba Joseph’s recommendation that it is acceptable to break a promise in some circumstances.

³⁹ Nine of the first ten books of the *Conferences* are located in Skete and the exception, conference six, is situated in nearby Cellae. The following set of seven conferences are sited in the vicinity of Thennesus and the first three conferences of the final section, conferences eighteen to twenty, are set near Diolcos and Panephyis. The location of the last four conferences (conferences twenty-one to twenty-four) is unclear (Chadwick 1968:14-15).

⁴⁰ Cellae derived its name from its many monastic cells (Ramsey 1997:238).

practices in Mesopotamia but it is highly unlikely he observed these for himself (Cassian 2000:14 *Institutes Preface*).⁴¹

2.3.3 Historical context

In the *Conferences* Cassian describes witnessing an event that can be located within a broader historical context and thereby indicate the author's location at that time.⁴² He records the arrival in the monastic community of Skete of a 'solemn letter' from Theophilus (d412) Bishop of Alexandria (Cassian 1997:371 Conference 10.). The letter was a customary notice, sent on the day of the Epiphany to the churches and monasteries throughout Egypt, to set out the dates of Lent and Easter (Cassian 1997:371 Conference 10.; Ramsey 1997:389). On this occasion the letter also contained a denunciation by Theophilus of what Cassian describes as 'the foolish heresy of the anthropomorphites' (Cassian 1997:371 Conference 10.). The anthropomorphites believed that God possessed human features (Chadwick 1968:24). Many of the monks in the region of Skete were anthropomorphites and Theophilus' letter sparked outrage among these communities (Cassian 1997:371-372 Conference 10.). Cassian describes how Abba Paphnutius, the priest of the Skete community in which he was staying, supported Theophilus' stance and allowed the 'incomprehensible and invisible majesty' of God to be explained to its residents (Cassian 1997:372 Conference 10.). However, Paphnutius was alone among the leaders of the Skete communities to accept Theophilus' declaration (Cassian 1997:372 Conference 10.). The priests who presided over the other three churches in Skete refused to allow the letter to be read, either publicly or privately, to their communities (Cassian 1997:372 Conference 10.).

Theophilus was Bishop of Alexandria from 385 until his death in 412 (Ramsey 1997:389). His letter condemning anthropomorphism, which no longer exists, is widely calculated to have been despatched in 399 (Ramsey 1997:390). It seems likely that Cassian was in Skete at this time.

The dedications in the prologues of Cassian's texts to various clerics, alive at the time of writing, date the composition of the works between 420 and 431 (Chadwick 1968:37-39). They reveal that Cassian first wrote the *Institutes*, then the *Conferences* and lastly *On the Incarnation*. The contents of the prologues indicate that the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* were written for senior clerics in Gaul while *On the Incarnation* was intended for a wider audience. The *Institutes* and the first section of the *Conferences* are dedicated to the Gallic bishops Castor and Leontius (Cassian

⁴¹ The region of Mesopotamia was situated northeast of Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Ramsey 1997:108).

⁴² Cassian records another apparently historical event in the *Conferences*. He describes how he and Germanus heard that a group of pious monks living near the village of Tekoa, in Palestine, had been slaughtered by roving Saracen bandits (Cassian 1997:217 Conference 6.). Ramsey (1997:238) remarks that such an incident is recorded in the *Acta Sanctorum* but no date is provided for the event. Cassian's *Conferences* may have been the source of this entry.

2000:11 *Institutes* Preface., 1997:29 *Conferences* Preface 1.). The ‘holy brothers’ Honoratus and Eucherius, to whom Cassian dedicates the second preface of the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:399 *Conferences* Preface 2.) were also prominent figures in the Church in Gaul. Honoratus was the founder and abbot of the famous monastery formed on the island of Lérins, near Marseilles, in 410 (Ramsey 1997:402). Eucherius was a monk at Lérins and in 434 became Bishop of Lyons (Ramsey 1997:402).⁴³ Helladius, Leontius, Honoratus and Eucherius are again mentioned by Cassian in the third preface in the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:625 *Conferences* Preface 3.) together with the ‘holy brothers’ Jovinianus, Minervus, another Leontius and Theodore (Cassian 1997:625 *Conferences* Preface 3.). Theodore succeeded the first Leontius as Bishop of Forum Julii (Ramsey 1997:627). Little else is known about these four men other than that, according to Cassian, they encouraged monasticism in Gaul and Theodore founded monasteries in the region (Cassian 1997:625 *Conferences* Preface 3.). Bishop Castor of Apta Julia in Gaul was clearly alive when Cassian dedicated the *Institutes* to him (Cassian 2000:11 *Institutes* Preface.) but was dead by the time the first ten books of the *Conferences* were complete (Cassian 1997:29 *Conferences* Preface 1.). Castor died in 426 (Ramsey 2000:16). It appears likely that Cassian was living in Gaul and writing the *Conferences* at this date.

Cassian remarks in the preface to *On the Incarnation* that after completing the *Conferences* he intended ‘taking refuge in silence’ but was compelled by the bidding of Leo, archdeacon of Rome, to undertake the ‘greater task’ of addressing the subject of the Incarnation and ‘raising his hand’ against ‘a fresh heresy and a new enemy of the faith’ (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* Preface.). Cassian’s declaration of friendship with Leo suggests that he spent some time in Rome with the archdeacon. Cassian addresses the archdeacon as ‘my dear Leo’ and describes him as his ‘esteemed and highly regarded friend’ (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* Preface). Cassian describes Nestorius in *On the Incarnation* as the ‘Bishop of Constantinople’ (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 6). Nestorius was deposed as Bishop of Constantinople at the Council of Ephesus in 431 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:962). This suggests that Cassian had completed the *Conferences* and then composed *On the Incarnation* before the council took place.

2.3.4 Personal relations

An examination of the content of the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* reveals Cassian to have experienced a strong friendship with his travelling companion Germanus as well as great admiration for the many desert abbas they consulted in Egypt. Cassian appears to have also had a close affinity with the clerics in Gaul to whom he dedicated the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* as well as the archdeacon Leo who commissioned *On the Incarnation*. He also enjoyed close ties with John

⁴³ Eucherius was the author of two monastic texts, *De laude heremi* (Praise of the wilderness) and *De contemptu mundi et saecularis philosophiae* (Contempt of the world and secular philosophy) (Ramsey 1997:402).

Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, whom he frequently lauds in *On the Incarnation*.⁴⁴ In this text Cassian reveals that Chrysostom admitted him into the ‘sacred ministry’ and offered him to God (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 7.). The remark in the *Institutes* that he could not ‘escape the bishop’s hand’ (Cassian 2000:247 Institute 11.) and his comment that another brother was ‘burdened with the rank of my order’ (Cassian 2000:265 Institute 12.) also indicate that he held an ordained office within the Church.

Cassian’s close ties with senior members of the Church hierarchy, and his extensive travels, suggest that he was a mature adult when he wrote his texts in Gaul. He was probably a young man when he embarked on his journey to Palestine and Egypt. Cassian remarks in the *Institutes* that while in the monastery in Bethlehem he was still in the ‘infancy of religion’ and ‘tender and unweaned’ by the grace of Jesus Christ (Cassian 2000:62 Institute 3.).

2.3.5 Literary ability

A study of the literary style and structure of Cassian’s texts provides further information about the author and his contexts. The Latin Cassian used to compose his texts is fluent, grammatically correct and contains a vivid vocabulary (Stewart 1998:35). The Greek words and quotations inserted in the texts are usually well chosen and accurate (Stewart 1998:35). The author appears to have been fluent in both Latin and Greek (Chadwick 1968:10).

Cassian was extremely well versed in the Christian Scriptures. All three of his works are full of biblical quotations, images and allusions.⁴⁵ Cassian uses biblical references and citations not only to support theological statements but also in his use of imagery and metaphor. Biblical references to ‘fire’ and ‘light’, for example, are common in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* (Stewart 1998:118). Cassian appears to have drawn upon both Greek and Latin biblical texts, as well as some of the books of the Apocrypha, when quoting or interpreting Scripture (Stewart 1998:35).⁴⁶

In addition to a comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures, Cassian displays in his texts a familiarity with the writings of a wide range of Christian authors. In the *Institutes* he praises Basil and Jerome (Cassian 2000:13 *Institutes* Preface.). There is evidence of Cassian’s knowledge of these

⁴⁴ Chrysostom was Bishop of Constantinople from 398 to 404 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:286).

⁴⁵ The *Institutes* contains 415 biblical citations and allusions of which 164 are drawn from the Old Testament and 251 from the New Testament (Ramsey 2000:281-287). The most popular sources of these biblical references are the Psalms (66) and the Gospel of Matthew (45). The *Conferences* contains 1 773 biblical citations and allusions of which 840 originate in the Old Testament and 933 come from the New Testament (Ramsey 1997:861-882). Once again the Psalms are Cassian’s most popular source of biblical reference (252 occurrences) followed by the Gospel of Matthew (228 occurrences). *On the Incarnation* contains 2 038 biblical citations and allusions of which 942 come from the Old Testament and 1 096 from the New Testament. The Psalms once more are Cassian’s most frequent source of biblical reference (318 occurrences) again followed by the Gospel of Matthew (215 occurrences).

⁴⁶The *Institutes* includes citations from the Apocryphal text Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) as does the *Conferences* which also incorporates references from Wisdom, Baruch and Maccabees. *On the Incarnation* contains Apocryphal references from Wisdom, Baruch, Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus (Sirach).

two prominent writers within the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* as well as quotations from the anonymous *Shepherd of Hermas* and possible traces of the works of Irenaeus (c130-c200), Tertullian (c 160–c 225), Cyprian (d 258), Eusebius (d c342), Palladius (c365-425) and Sulpicius Severus (c360-c420) (Stewart 1998:36). Both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* are strongly influenced by the theology of Evagrius Ponticus (346-399) and his mentor Origen (c185-c254) (Munz 1960:1). Cassian is far more overt in his use of the texts of other Christian writers in *On the Incarnation*. He cites several Greek and Latin writers, notably John Chrysostom, Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus as well as Ambrose, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, Augustine and Rufinus, to support and demonstrate his case against the Christology of Nestorius (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 7.). Cassian's classical education is displayed in the *Institutes* when he alludes to the Latin writer Cicero (Cassian 2000:265 *Institute* 12.). Furthermore, Cassian's exploration of friendship in the *Conferences* (*Conference* 16) resembles a similarly titled treatise by Cicero (Stewart 1998:36).

The style of writing employed by Cassian is sometimes verbose, repetitious and pedantic. Often, however, his prose is precise, direct and contains powerful and beautiful imagery. His descriptions in the *Conferences* of searching the soul (Cassian 1997:63 *Conference* 1.) and receiving instruction from the desert abbas (Cassian 1997:311-312 *Conference* 8.) are particularly poignant. Cassian's skill as a writer is further revealed by an examination of the literary structure of the *Institutes*, the *Conferences* and *On the Incarnation*. In all three of these texts Cassian frequently digresses from the subject under discussion and at times appears to wander from one topic to another. He often returns to subjects that have already been addressed and seems to add little to his argument when he comes back to these topics. However, behind Cassian's apparent rambling there is a literary structure that is intended to guide the reader, or receiver, of the text towards the author's goal. It enables Cassian to re-examine and re-present key aspects of the discourse to his audience, address them from different perspectives and emphasise particular viewpoints, to achieve his objective (Stewart 1998:37).⁴⁷ Cassian displays considerable literary talent in his ability to synthesise and organise the information he wishes to convey to his audience (Merton 2005:99).

The *Institutes* and the *Conferences* are far more ambitious and sophisticated than *On the Incarnation*. They are also much more effective. The structure of Cassian's argument in his treatise against Nestorius is often laboured and unconvincing and the content of the treatise is also far from persuasive (Chadwick 1996:147; Stewart 1998:23; Rousseau 1995:84).⁴⁸ The *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, however, successfully convey not only information about the monastic life Cassian encountered in Egypt but also invite participation in its practices and experience of the spirituality

⁴⁷ Vogüé (1984:103-104) posits a highly complex literary structure for the *Conferences*. While there is a strong underlying unity that connects the various conferences and the themes they address, the level of complexity that Vogüé suggests may well be beyond the intention of the author.

⁴⁸ Casiday (2006:252) defends the text and argues that it provides substantial insight into Cassian's Christology and the whole *corpus* of his writing.

advocated by the desert abbas (Cassian 1997:31 Conferences Preface 1.). The *Institutes* is the forerunner of the *Conferences* and lacks the scale and complexity of its successor (Ramsey 2000:7).

It is clear that the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* do not simply present a record of the teaching about monasticism Cassian received from the various desert abbas he met during his visits to Egypt. Cassian acknowledges in the *Institutes* that his understanding of some of what he encountered may be insufficient to render it accurately and his memory of these events and discussions may also be deficient (Cassian 2000:12 *Institutes* Preface.). He adds that the wisdom or ‘reason behind’ what was conveyed to him was transmitted not through ‘leisurely meditation or verbal teaching’ but rather by means of ‘experience and practice’ (Cassian 2000:12 *Institutes* Preface.). Cassian further acknowledges that in presenting the teaching of the desert abbas he sometimes moderates their instructions to suite the needs of his audience in Gaul (Cassian 2000:14 *Institutes* Preface.). The extent of Cassian’s editing of what he encountered in the deserts of Egypt cannot be gauged accurately. However, the uniformity of the language and theology of the *Institutes* and *Conferences* suggests that Cassian’s tailoring of his experiences was substantial.

The author of the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* appears to have recalled experiences and conversations that occurred among the desert abbas many years earlier, selected material most suitable for his audience and purposes, and presented it in a manner that would most effectively achieve his aims.⁴⁹ The success with which Cassian accomplishes this process is an indication not only of his skill as a writer but also his acumen in presenting a past and foreign form of Christian practice in a manner that meets the needs of a new audience in the church in Gaul (Luibheid 1985:xiv).

2.3.6 Spirituality

In the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* Cassian is unequivocal in his belief in the validity and importance of monastic life as an expression of Christian conviction (Cassian 2000:11 *Institutes* Preface.). He is also unwavering in his confidence that the correct expression of this form of Christian asceticism is that which has its roots in the deserts of Egypt (Cassian 2000:14 *Institutes* Preface.). In both the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:63 Institute 3.) and the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:640 Conference 18.), Cassian speaks critically of the fledgling monastic movement in Gaul and argues for the adoption of the ancient practices of Egypt (Stewart 1998:17-18). The teachings and practices of the desert abbas are, in Cassian’s opinion, the only valid expression of monastic life (Cassian 2000:14 *Institutes* Preface.).

Cassian’s confidence in his convictions about monastic life is grounded not in the merits of scholarship, which he downplays despite displaying a high degree of education and erudition, but

⁴⁹ The influence of Cassian on the content of these texts would have been further heightened by the process of translating knowledge that had been communicated to him orally in Coptic, or perhaps Greek, into written Latin.

rather in his own observation and experience of the methods and practices he proposes (Cassian 2000:12 Institutes Preface.). The recourse to experience is a frequent refrain in Cassian's monastic writings (Luibheid 1985:xiii).

Cassian's strong conviction and assurance are complemented by a deep understanding of human psychology and spirituality as well as great compassion for those who embark on the journey of monastic life (Ramsey 1997:21). His teaching on friendship in the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997: 558-559 Conference 16.) and guidance on overcoming the eight principal vices in both the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:183-204 Conference 5.) and the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:117-274 Institutes 5 – 12.) reveal a profound insight into the nature of the human person (Merton 2005:176; Ramsey 1997:22-23).

2.4 Biographical information in secondary texts

References to Cassian, or his writings, in documents composed by contemporaries or near-contemporaries are rare. However, there are a handful of extant texts that supplement the information provided by Cassian's own writings. These texts are the continuation to Jerome's *On illustrious Men* (*De Viris Inlustribus*) by Gennadius of Marseilles (d496); the *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* (*Dialogus de vita Iohannis Chrysostomi*) by Palladius; and two letters written by Pope Innocent I (d417) bishop of Rome. One is addressed to John Chrysostom bishop of Constantinople and the other to Chrysostom's clergy.

2.4.1 Place of origin

Gennadius' *On Illustrious Men*, written around 480, indicates that Cassian was born in the Roman territory of Scythia Minor.

Cassianus, Scythian by race, ordained deacon by bishop John the Great, at Constantinople, and a presbyter at Marseilles, founded two monasteries, that is to say one for men and one for women, which are still standing (De Vir LXII).⁵⁰

Scythia Minor, situated between the Danube River and the Black Sea in what is now Romania, was colonised by the Greeks and Dacians before being conquered and populated by the Romans at the beginning of the first century (Pacurariu 2007:187). When the Romans abandoned territories across the Danube in 297 Scythia Minor became a frontier province of the empire (Pacurariu 2007:186). During the fourth century, when Cassian was born, Greek and Latin were widely spoken in Scythia Minor (Stewart 1998:6) and the region appears to have possessed a significant Christian population and some ecclesiastical infrastructure (Pacurariu 2007:188).⁵¹

⁵⁰ All three secondary sources use the nomenclature Cassianus to refer to Cassian.

⁵¹ The apostle Andrew, brother of Peter, is traditionally credited with introducing Christianity to the region. This is attested by Hippolytus (c170-c236), Origen (c185-c254) and Eusebius (c236-c340). Several residents

However, several scholars have posited alternative locations for Cassian's place of birth. They interpret the 'Scythian' reference in Gennadius' text as a misrepresentation of the author's intention to link Cassian with his monastic homeland in Skete in the Egyptian desert (Chadwick 1968:9). Many of these scholars argue that Cassian began as well as ended his life in Gaul (Stewart 1998:142).⁵² Other nominees for Cassian's birth place include Greece, Palestine and Kurdistan (Stewart 1998:5).

Scythia Minor is the most likely site of Cassian's birth. Cassian's description of himself as a 'foreigner' while writing in Gaul weighs against suggestions that he was born in the region. It is reasonable to assume that Gennadius, who was writing in Gaul less than 50 years after Cassian's death, intended to identify Cassian's birthplace as Scythia Minor and that he was correct in doing so.

2.4.2 Places of residence

Palladius' *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* provides more information about Cassian's presence in Constantinople and Rome.⁵³

Palladius records how both Cassian and his companion Germanus were involved in the dispute between John Chrysostom (c347-407) bishop of Constantinople and Theophilus bishop of Alexandria at the turn of the fifth century. The dispute came to a head at the Synod of the Oak in July 403 and resulted in Chrysostom's fall from power and his death in exile (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1024). Convened at the behest of the Eastern Roman Emperor Arcadius (370-408) at Chalcedon on the outskirts of Constantinople, the Synod of the Oak was attended by bishops who were mostly supporters of Theophilus and antagonistic towards Chrysostom (Cross & Livingstone 1983:987). It condemned Chrysostom for a variety of transgressions (Elm 2012:74-75). The main accusation against Chrysostom was his alleged support for clerics and monks who were labelled by the bishop's foes as Origenists (Elm 2012:75).⁵⁴

Theophilus had earlier taken an Origenist stance. He issued a 'festal letter' to the Alexandrian churches in 399 condemning anthropomorphism (the belief that God has human characteristics) and supporting the spiritual, or allegorical, interpretation of the Bible favoured by

were martyred during the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian (224-313). Delegates from the region attended the ecumenical councils in Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) (Pacurariu 2007:186).

⁵² Such scholars include Michael Petschenig, Edgar Gibson, and Karl Suso Frank (Stewart 1998:142).

⁵³ Palladius, probably a native of Galatia, lived among the monks in the Egyptian desert for several years towards the end of the fourth century. During that time he was a pupil of Evagrius Ponticus. Palladius wrote his *Lausiac History of the Friends of God*, so named because it is dedicated to Lausus the chamberlain of the emperor Theodosius II, around 419. It is one of the most important sources of information about early Egyptian monasticism (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1024).

⁵⁴ Strongly influenced by the writings of Origen, the Origenists taught that prayer should exclude images of God or concepts of God's location (Chadwick 1993:184-185). While Origen was widely recognised during his life as one of the great theologians of the Church, his teaching came under increasing suspicion during the fourth century. Origen's teaching was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 553 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1010).

the Origenists (Stewart 1998:87). Cassian indicates in the *Conferences* that he was present when this letter arrived at a monastic community in Skete (Cassian 1997:371 Conference 10.). Prompted, perhaps, by fierce opposition to this declaration, Theophilus changed his views and later that year turned on the Origenist monks in the region (Chadwick 1968:28-29).⁵⁵ Many of them fled Egypt between 399 and 400 (Chadwick 1968:28-29). A large number of Origenists, including Palladius who had spent several years living with the desert abbas in Egypt, travelled to Constantinople to plead their case at the court of the emperor and petition Chrysostom the new bishop of that city (Chadwick 1993:186; Cross & Livingstone 1983:1024). Much to Theophilus' chagrin Chrysostom provided them with support and protection (Elm 2012: 81).

Chrysostom refused to appear before the Synod of the Oak (Chadwick 1993:189). Palladius, a close ally of the bishop of Constantinople, records that Chrysostom sent a message to the synod defending himself and questioning the authority of the gathering. This message, writes Palladius, was delivered by a group of Chrysostom's supporters that included 'the presbyter Germanus' (Dial 8). This appears to be a reference to Germanus the companion of Cassian mentioned in the *Conferences* (Stewart 1998:14).

Chrysostom's response did little to change the attitude of his detractors. The synod found Chrysostom guilty and stripped him of his bishopric. At the urging of the synod, the emperor Arcadius sentenced Chrysostom to exile in Bithynia (Cross & Livingstone 1983:987). Rioting by supporters of Chrysostom in Constantinople and an earthquake widely perceived as a sign of divine disapproval prompted Arcadius to rethink. He recalled Chrysostom only a few days after he was banished (Cross & Livingstone 1983:987). Chrysostom's return to Constantinople was short-lived. He continued to antagonise his enemies and was soon charged with illegally reoccupying his episcopal throne before any synod of bishops had annulled the decision of the Synod of the Oak (Chadwick 1993:190). Chrysostom was exiled once again by Arcadius, first to a location near Antioch, then to Pontus (Cross & Livingstone 1983:2876) and finally force-marched to Comana in Armenia where he died in 407 (Chadwick 1993:190; Kannengiesser 2000:75).

Soon after embarking on his second exile, Chrysostom wrote to Pope Innocent I, bishop of Rome, questioning the legitimacy and authority of the Synod of the Oak and petitioning him to come to his defence (Elm 2012:77). Chrysostom's supporters also wrote to Innocent urging him to intervene on behalf of their beleaguered bishop. Palladius records in the *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* that both Cassian and Germanus were among a group of clerics who travelled from Constantinople to Rome to deliver these appeals to Innocent.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ In a synodal letter to the bishops of Palestine and Cyprus composed in 400 and extant in a translation by Jerome, Theophilus argues that he expelled the Origenists because these "foreign monks" threatened to split the monastic community of Nitria and, once their teaching was condemned by a local synod, brought violence and sedition into Alexandria (Elm 2012:79).

⁵⁶ The main travel route between Constantinople and Rome was along the prominent *Via Egnatia* and *Via Appia* commercial highways. The *Via Egnatia* stretched from Constantinople along the Aegean coast, over

There were the presbyter Germanus and the deacon Cassian, pious men, who brought a letter from all of John's clergy in which they wrote about the violence and tyranny to which their church had been subjected (Dial 3).

The participation of Cassian and Germanus in the mission to Rome is further substantiated in the sympathetic letter of reply Pope Innocent sent to Chrysostom's clergy.

Innocent, the bishop, to the presbyters, deacons, and all the clergy, and to the people of the church of Constantinople under John, the bishop, greeting to you, beloved brethren. From the letters of your love that you forwarded to me through Germanus, the presbyter, and Cassianus, the deacon, I have learned, with anxious solicitude, the scenes of evil which you have placed before our eyes (Ep 7).

Innocent's identification of Germanus and Cassian by name suggests they were senior members, perhaps leaders, of the delegation. Both Innocent and Palladius describe Germanus as a presbyter (priest) and Cassian a deacon. The delegation delivered an inventory of the Church treasures of Constantinople intended to counter charges of financial mismanagement laid against Chrysostom at the Synod of the Oak (Stewart 1998:14). Germanus and Cassian may have held prominent posts within the treasury of the Church at Constantinople (Chadwick 1968:32).⁵⁷

Innocent's response was probably sent to Constantinople towards the end of 405 or the beginning of 406 (Stewart 1998:14). It is unclear whether Cassian and Germanus returned to Constantinople as part of the delegation delivering Innocent's reply to Chrysostom. Palladius in the *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* records the return of this delegation to Constantinople but makes no mention of Cassian or Germanus (Stewart 1998:14).⁵⁸

The most probable course of events is that Cassian returned to Rome soon after delivering Innocent's reply to Chrysostom and his supporters in Constantinople or that he simply remained in the city and was not part of the delegation that journeyed back to Constantinople. Cassian's reference

the Candaviae mountains to Dyrrachium (now Durrës) on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Across the *Strait of Otranto* the *Via Appia* (The Appian Way) ran from the port of Brundisium (now Brindisi) in South East Italy up to Rome (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Via_Egnatia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Via_Appia). This route is almost certainly the course followed by Cassian and Germanus when they travelled with the deputation from Chrysostom in Constantinople to petition pope Innocent in Rome.

⁵⁷ Chrysostom's promotion of outsiders to senior positions within the church at Constantinople was a source of much discontent among local clergy (Chadwick 1968:31). He also consecrated Palladius, who had arrived from Palestine, Bishop of Helenopolis and Heraclides, a monk from Egypt, Bishop of Ephesus (Chitty 1966:59).

⁵⁸ Two further letters from Innocent, this time to Alexander who was appointed Bishop of Antioch in 413, refer to a presbyter named Cassianus who was an advisor to the bishop of Rome. Some scholars suggest that this presbyter was Cassian and postulate that he was resident in Antioch during some of Alexander's tenure as bishop. However, it is far from clear whether the Cassianus mentioned in this letter of Innocent is Cassian or even if he travelled to Antioch. An alternative destination of Bethlehem, proposed by some scholars, also appears unlikely (Stewart 1998:14-15).

to Leo as a 'dear friend' in *On the Incarnation* (n.d. *On the Incarnation*. 7.) implies that his stay in Rome was more than a brief visit.

Gennadius' reference to Cassian in *On Illustrious Men* (De Vir LXII) as 'a presbyter at Marseilles' locates the monk in the latter part of his life not just in Gaul but specifically in Marseilles (*Massilia*), an important city in the Roman province of *Gallia Narbonensis*. It has long been assumed that Cassian composed the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* while living in Marseilles (Stewart 1998:16; Ramsey 2000:3; McGinn & Ferris McGinn 2003:60). Goodrich (2007:211-234), however, argues convincingly that Cassian's dedications in the prefaces to the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* to bishops and monks in *Narbonensis Secunda*, rather than to Proculus the influential bishop of Marseilles in *Gallia Narbonensis*, point to their composition in the former province. Cassian either spent all his stay in Gaul in the *Narbonensis Secunda*, and Gennadius mistakenly or surreptitiously relocated his memory to Marseilles, or he moved to the Mediterranean port city after the composition of the *Institutes* the *Conferences* and probably *On the Incarnation* (Goodrich 2007:210). The latter view appears the most likely as Gennadius, a native of Marseilles, wrote *On Illustrious Men* less than 50 years after Cassian's death. An erroneous location of Cassian's place of residence would probably have been recognised by Gennadius' original audience.⁵⁹

On Illustrious Men does not specify where Cassian founded the two monasteries, 'one for men and one for women, which are still standing' (De Vir LXII). The long-held tradition that one of them was St Victor's in Marseilles, which was destroyed during the French Revolution (1789-1799), has little evidence to support it (Goodrich 2007:211).

Gennadius ends his entry about Cassian in *On Illustrious Men* by stating that the monk 'made an end, both of writing and living, at Marseilles, in the reign of Theodosius and Valentinianus' (De Vir LXII).⁶⁰ This would date Cassian's death between 419 and 450.⁶¹

2.5 Conclusion

An examination of primary and secondary texts provides considerable insight into Cassian and his spirituality. Cassian lived in Palestine, Egypt, the cities of Constantinople and Rome, and Gaul during the fourth and fifth century. Born into a wealthy family, well educated and fluent in Latin and Greek, Cassian possessed a zeal for the Christian faith at an early age and was ordained a deacon and then a priest within the Church. The greatest influence to his spirituality was his exposure to the

⁵⁹ Goodrich (2007:230) suggests that Gennadius wanted to stress Cassian's association with Marseilles in the face of competing claims from other towns and cities. Goodrich (2007:234) favours the view that Cassian moved to Marseilles after completing the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*.

⁶⁰ Goodrich (2007:228) points out that Gennadius mentions Cassian on two other occasions in *On Illustrious Men*. He states that Eucherius condensed the works of St Cassian into a single volume and that Prosper of Aquitaine deemed the *Conferences* harmful.

⁶¹ Theodosius II (The Younger) was the emperor of the Eastern Roman empire from 408 to 450 and Valentinian III ruled the Western Roman Empire from 419 to 455.

desert abbas in Egypt. At the behest of Church leaders in Gaul, where he lived in the latter part of his life, Cassian wrote the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* to instruct monks in the region about the teaching and practices of the desert abbas. Cassian appears to have had close ties with senior Church leaders in Constantinople, Rome and Gaul as well as several prominent desert abbas in Egypt. While in Gaul, Cassian was commissioned by archdeacon Leo to write *On the Incarnation*, a treatise condemning the teaching of Nestorius bishop of Constantinople.

Cassian's texts reveal him to be an accomplished writer and teacher with firm convictions about the value of Christian monastic practice and confidence in the superiority of its expression in the deserts of Egypt. He displays a keen understanding of human nature and a deep compassion for those who commit themselves to a monastic way of life.

An examination of secondary texts indicates that Scythia Minor was probably Cassian's place of origin. Cassian's date of birth is widely estimated at around 365 (Cross & Livingstone 1974:246). It appears likely that he and his travelling companion Germanus arrived at the monastery in Bethlehem between 380 and 390 (Chadwick 1968:10). They soon journeyed to the deserts of Egypt in the hope of obtaining greater wisdom and spiritual insight from the desert abbas. The total length of their stay in Egypt was probably between ten and twenty years.

The secondary texts indicate that Cassian and Germanus travelled from Egypt to Constantinople around 400 among the Origenist clerics and monks that fled Theophilus.⁶² This suggests that his spirituality was strongly marked by the teaching of Origen. Cassian was probably a senior cleric in Constantinople under the authority of Chrysostom. It appears likely that Cassian and Germanus left Constantinople around 405 soon after Chrysostom was exiled for the second and last time. In Rome Cassian appears to have been ordained a priest (Institute 12. 2000:265). He was probably ordained by Pope Innocent I who was bishop of Rome from 402 to 417 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:703). While he was in Rome Cassian probably befriended Leo the future bishop of the city who later commissioned him to write *On the Incarnation*. It is unclear when Cassian left Rome but by around 415 was settled in Gaul (Stewart 1998:15).

It is likely that Cassian wrote the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* as well as *On the Incarnation* while living in the Gallic province of *Narbonensis Secunda*. The first of these texts was completed by 426 and the last by 431. The *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, which describe the teachings Cassian received while living among the desert abbas, were composed more than 20 years after his departure from Egypt. Cassian's teaching on spirituality conveyed by these texts is therefore far from a precise record of the instruction he received from the desert abbas. It is most likely a representation of this teaching shaped by his own experiences and reflection. Cassian omits any indication of the upheavals

⁶² Philip Rousseau (1978:171-172) cautions against assuming that Cassian left Egypt because of Theophilus' purge against the Origenists. He points out that Cassian may have already been unhappy in Egypt and wanted to return to his homeland or else he might have been attracted by the reputation of Chrysostom who was then Bishop of Constantinople (1978:172).

he experienced as a follower of Origen and supporter of Chrysostom in Egypt and Constantinople. These experiences would have influenced his spirituality and his teaching about spirituality. Cassian's original audience appears to have members of the Church in the Gallic province of *Narbonensis Secunda*.

Towards the end of his life Cassian appears to have moved south to Marseilles in the province of *Gallia Narbonensis*. It is unclear whether the two monasteries that Gennadius attributes to Cassian were founded in *Narbonensis Secunda* or *Gallia Narbonensis*. Cassian is widely believed to have died in Marseilles around 435 (Cross & Livingstone 1974:246).

The spirituality of Cassian, the historical person, is masculine, religious, Christian, ecclesiastical, monastic and probably strongly shaped by the teaching of Origen. It is a spirituality that appears to have been forged during Cassian's stay among the Egyptian desert abbas. It was formed not only by the teaching he received from the desert abbas but primarily by his experience of the spiritual practices they prescribed and the environment within which he first applied them (Casiday 2006:149). Cassian's experiences during his time in Egypt provide him with the bulk of his material for the teaching about spirituality contained in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* as well as his confidence in its merit. Cassian provides little information in his texts about his life before or after his stay in Egypt. However, his experiences before arriving in Egypt and afterwards in Constantinople, Rome and Gaul would have left an imprint on his spirituality. The original audience for Cassian's teaching about spirituality appears to have comprised senior clerics in fifth century Gaul.

Chapter Three

Historical context of the spirituality of Cassian

3.1 Introduction

To gain a greater understanding of the spirituality of Cassian it is necessary to examine its historical context. This will show how Cassian's experience of spirituality was shaped by social, religious and political influences. It will also reveal the effect of such forces on the communication and reception of his teaching on spirituality. An understanding of the historical context of Cassian's texts helps identify the biases contained in these documents. This is necessary for the later hermeneutical process that endeavours to elicit understanding of Cassian's spirituality as the lived experience of contemporary Christian communities.

3.2 Cassian's macro historical context

When Cassian was born around 365 in Scythia Minor, the land of his birth and the distant territories he would come to travel were united politically, socially and economically under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Church was still adapting to its sudden and surprising shift, less than 50 years earlier, from a small, sometimes persecuted, but increasingly significant religion (Markus 1983:28) into a public religion legitimised and endorsed by the emperor (Cameron 2010).⁶³ Christians were still outnumbered by their polytheist neighbours, whom they considered 'pagans', but they were increasing and their social and political influence growing (Cameron 1993:68, 77-78).⁶⁴

By the time of Cassian's death around 435, the empire's Western and Eastern territories, which had been ruled separately on several occasions before, were now split irrevocably. Provinces to the west of the straits of Byzantium in Asia Minor formed the Western empire while those to the east comprised the Eastern empire. Christianity, and the ecclesiastical structures that promoted and sustained its beliefs, was thriving in both territories but in very different conditions.

The Western empire, ruled by Valentinian III (419-455) out of the Italian city of Ravenna, was undergoing considerable social, political and economic upheaval largely as a result of the influx

⁶³ The persecutions of the early Church by the Roman emperors Decius (c201- 251) and Diocletian (245–311) encouraged the creation of an extensive institutional structure that provided a good foundation for its expansion and growth after its endorsement by Constantine (Cameron 1993:10).

⁶⁴ Before its appropriation by the Christian community the term "pagan" (*pagani*) was generally used to describe a rural peasant or, in a military context, a civilian (Chadwick 1993:69). While Late Antiquity Christians generally used the word with some sense of disapproval or condemnation (pagans were seen to have failed to enlist through baptism in 'Christ's militia for the battle against satanic idolatry and superstition' (Chadwick 1993:69)) it is used in this investigation simply to identify those people the Church at this time labelled as pagan. No judgement or criticism, of either Christian or pagan, is intended by the use of the word. Such is the diversity of the peoples and religious practices deemed pagan by the Church of Late Antiquity that it is impossible to apply an alternative, non-pejorative, description with any precision.

of groups of people the Romans termed foreigners or ‘barbarians’.⁶⁵ Southern Gaul, Italy and, until 439, North Africa remained imperial provinces under the authority and protection of the emperor (Brown 2003:97). The rest of the western territories, however, were a ‘patchwork of separate regions’ (Brown 2003:97). These small regions were controlled by a mixture of both newly ascendant barbarian leaders and established wealthy Roman landowners. Roman aristocrats (*Romani*) managed to retain much of their wealth and privilege by various forms of accommodation with barbarians who were both ‘partners and, in many ways, their masters’ (Brown 2003:98).⁶⁶ The mostly Latin-speaking Church in the West, centred on Rome and covering most of the territories that became modern Europe, was far removed from the religious powerhouse it would become by the end of the first millennium. In Late Antiquity it was only the ‘westernmost variant of a far wider Christian world, whose centre of gravity lay, rather in the eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East’ (Brown 2003:2).

The Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, ruled by Theodosius II (408-450) from Constantinople, endured far less military encroachment during Cassian’s lifetime. They remained politically and socially stable and experienced considerable economic prosperity. The Eastern, or Byzantine, empire would survive, albeit in a much weakened and contracted form, for a further thousand years (Cameron 2010). The Church in the Eastern territories continued to enjoy close association and support from the emperor. This relationship enabled it to assume increasing social and political influence. Constantinople, the new royal city, was the main centre of the predominantly Greek-speaking Church in the East. Its rise to political, economic and ecclesiastical prominence was one of the most significant developments of the Eastern Empire in Late Antiquity (Brown 2003:115).

The main forces that shaped Cassian’s historical context were the movement of barbarians into the territories of the Roman Empire and the extensive growth and development of the Church. An important aspect of the transformation of the Church was the emergence of the monastic movement.

3.3 Influence of barbarian migration on Cassian’s historical context

The nature of the barbarian influx into the territories of the Roman Empire and its rate of progress are matters of considerable debate among contemporary historians (Freedman 2011f). Some view

⁶⁵ The term “barbarian” was applied by members of Roman society to people who lived and roamed beyond the boundaries of the empire, who engaged in combat against Roman military forces or who moved in to settle in former imperial colonies (Brown 1996:8). It was often used to describe members of nomadic tribes who were perceived by the Roman establishment as uncouth and unsophisticated compared with the civilised urban residents of the empire (Brown 1996:8). As in the case of the use of the term ‘pagan’ this investigation uses the word ‘barbarian’ simply to identify those people whom members of the Roman Empire described in such terms. No derogatory meaning is intended.

⁶⁶ The word ‘aristocrat’ was rarely used by Latin writers. They tended to use words such as senator, *nobilis*, *optimus* to describe members of the elite class (Mattison 1993:9).

the influx as a ‘cataclysm’ that brought about a sudden and dramatic shift while others regard it as gradual ‘transition’ (Freedman 2011f). There is little doubt, however, that the influx of barbarians shaped the social and political landscape of much of the Rome Empire, particularly its western territories, during Cassian’s lifetime (Freedman 2011f).⁶⁷

Barbarians began engaging with the Roman Empire before the first century (Freedman 2011g).⁶⁸ They arrived in the Roman territories from across the Danube and Rhine rivers not just as invaders but also as traders and refugees as well as military recruits and allies (Freedman 2011f).⁶⁹ Often they fought within Roman military legions, or as members of bands of confederates (*federati*), against armies of other groups of barbarians. Barbarian leaders such as Stilicho (c365-408) and Alaric (c370-410) rose to senior ranks within the Roman army (Freedman 2011f). Some barbarians were granted land within the bounds of the empire by the Roman Senate in return for military service or as part of political treaties (Freedman 2011f). Many of them acquired Roman citizenship as a result of their military service or residence within the empire (Cameron 1993:9). Centuries of interaction between the Roman empire and its barbarian neighbours resulted in the transfer of Roman products, lifestyles and ideas into territories well beyond the imperial boundaries (Brown 2003:46).

Large numbers of barbarians, like a lot of their Roman counterparts, were Christians (Freedman 2011f). Followers of the teachings of the Alexandrian priest Arius (c250-c336) had embarked on missionary journeys into barbarian territories since early in the fourth century (Chadwick 1993:249).⁷⁰ While Roman Christians resident in the empire and its former territories regarded Arianism as a heretical strain of Christianity, there appears to have been little religious conflict between in-coming barbarians and their new neighbours (Mathieson 1993:48). However, the arrival of large numbers of Arian Christians in the Western territories strongly reinforced the identification of the resident Roman occupants of these regions with Catholic orthodoxy (Chadwick 1993:249).⁷¹

The occupation of much of the Western territories by the barbarians was most likely a combination of military incursion, banditry and social assimilation (Mathieson 1993:xiii). The extent

⁶⁷ The Romans appear to have perceived the barbarians in a common light as foreigners or aliens. However, the barbarians did not see themselves as part of a united mass of people encroaching on the empire (Mathieson 1993:1). The ties of many barbarians extended little further than small kinship groups (Freedman 2011g). The process of “ethnogenesis”, by which the Romans created the identities and traits of specific groups of barbarians, was long, complex and fluid (Geary 1999).

⁶⁸ Tacitus in his text *Germania*, written around 100, describes the barbarians living on the Rhine frontier of the Roman Empire (Freedman 2011g).

⁶⁹ The Danube and Rhine rivers did not demarcate the boundaries of the Roman Empire but were rather important transport routes within the boundary zones of the empire (Whittaker 1994:71).

⁷⁰ The most notable of these missionaries was Ulphilas (c311-383) who ministered to the Goths and translated most of the Bible into the Gothic language (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1404).

⁷¹ The term catholic, meaning “general” or “universal”, was first applied to the Church by Ignatius of Antioch (c35 – c107) (Cross & Livingstone 1983:254). It is used in this context to describe the doctrines that the early ecumenical councils of the Church came to recognise as orthodox or correct as opposed to beliefs deemed heretical or schismatic.

of these forces was determined by local circumstances and conditions. The number of barbarians that moved into these regions in the fourth and fifth centuries probably totalled less than 100 000 (Freedman 2011f). Once they had assumed control of former imperial territories the barbarian leaders did little to eradicate Roman political, economic or social systems and practices but rather adapted them to their own advantage (Mathieson 1993:2). Nonetheless, literacy appears to have declined, urban populations fell, building projects decreased, trade slumped and lawlessness and violence seem to have been more prevalent (Freedman 2011f).

Cassian almost certainly came into direct contact with barbarians early in his life. Barbarians, termed Goths by the Romans, lived north of Scythia Minor, beyond the Danube River, for around a hundred years before Cassian was born (Revill 1951:114).⁷² In 374, when Cassian was around 10 years' old and almost certainly still living in the region, the Goths sought the protection of the Roman Empire from attacks on them by other barbarians. They were granted permission by Valens (328-378), emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, to cross the Danube and settle in Scythia Minor, provided they pledged military support to the empire (Brown 2003:47). These Goths came to be known as Visigoths (Western Goths) (Jones & Ereira 2007:131). The agreement turned sour. Enraged by hunger and their exploitation by local Roman governors the Visigoths revolted (Revill 1951:116, Brown 2003:47). They marched on Constantinople and in 378 near the port of Adrianople the Visigoths defeated the Roman forces and killed Valens (Revill 1951:109). Theodosius I (379-395), Valens' successor, made peace with the Visigoths and convinced most of them settle in Thrace (Revill 1951:116).

Cassian again encountered the Visigoths after he had left Scythia Minor. He moved to Rome around 405 and three years later the city was besieged by the Visigoths. After the citizens of Rome paid a ransom to the Visigoth leader Alaric the inhabitants of the city were offered safe passage to the nearby port of Ostia (Jones & Ereira 2007:141). Alaric then sought a peace treaty with Honorius (384-423) the emperor of the Western Roman Empire living in Ravenna (Jones & Ereira 2007:142). When Alaric's petition was snubbed by Honorius he once more marched on Rome. Having seized the port of Ostia and cut off supplies of food to Rome he met with little opposition and entered the city. Alaric appointed Attalus as the new emperor (Jones & Ereira 2007:143). Alaric later deposed Attalus and entered into a treaty with Honorius. However, while journeying to Ravenna to ratify the agreement the Visigoths were attacked by forces that appear to have been backed by Honorius (Jones & Ereira 2007:144). Rebuffed once more, Alaric journeyed to Rome for a third time and overran the city in 410. After occupying the city for less than a week, Alaric's forces moved further south (Revill 1951:118). Alaric died later that year while on the point of invading Sicily (Revill 1951:118-119).

⁷² The Roman Emperor Aurelian (214-275) concluded a treaty with the Goths around 270 that enabled them to settle in the province of Dacia north of the Danube River (Revill 1951:114).

Cassian left Rome before 415. He may have fled the city to avoid the Visigoth forces that besieged and finally overran the capital between 408 and 410 or he could have departed later. Among the many inhabitants who fled the city was the Briton Pelagius (354-420) who left around 410 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1058-1059). Pelagius achieved notoriety for his teaching on grace that was condemned by several eminent clerics and labelled heresy at the Council of Ephesus in 431 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1058-1059).⁷³

Cassian's journey to Gaul may well have embroiled him in further encounters with groups of barbarians. In 418, at least three years after Cassian arrived in Gaul, the Visigoths moved from Spain to the Garonne Valley in south-west Gaul (Brown 2003:102). Honorius granted the land to the Visigoths as well as *foederati* status in return for their pledge to provide him with military support. Other groups of barbarians, such as Burgundians and Alans, were garrisoned elsewhere in Gaul (Brown 2003:102). Around ten years before the Visigoths moved into Gaul several groups of barbarians, Vandals, Alans and Suevi, crossed the Rhine River and entered the province from the north. In 408 many of them traversed the Pyrenees Mountains and journeyed into Spain. Harried by the Roman forces, including the Visigoths, the Vandals crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 429 and moved into Africa (Chadwick 1993:247-248).

Barbarian conflict and the withdrawal of imperial forces to address uprisings elsewhere in the empire weakened the military strength of the Roman province of Gaul early in the fifth century (Goodrich 2007:13). The province had a history of rebellion and internal uprising. Several contenders for the imperial throne, including Magnentius (303-353), Julian (331-363) and Magnus Maximus (335-388), garnered strong support in Gaul (Goodrich 2007:12). Soon after the barbarians crossed the Rhine in 406 another contender, Constantine III (375-411), a Roman general in Britain proclaimed emperor by his troops, arrived in Gaul and was welcomed by many members of the local elite (Goodrich 2007:18). Constantine landed near Boulogne and in 408 captured the city of Arles. The following year the Western emperor Honorius in Ravenna, faced with dwindling military support and fearful of the threat of Alaric in Epirus, appointed Constantine co-emperor. However, Constantine, weakened by a military revolt, was attacked by Honorius' general Constantius, defeated at the siege of Arles in 411 and later executed (Goodrich 2007:18).⁷⁴ A further contender for the mantle of emperor, Jovinus (d413), led an uprising after the defeat of Constantine in 411 and again attracted substantial support from members of the Gallic elite (Goodrich 2007:18). He also enjoyed the support of many Burgundian and Alan barbarians. Jovinus was defeated by forces loyal to Honorius at Valence in 413 and later executed at Narbonne. Many nobles from Gaul who supported Jovinus were also put to death (Goodrich 2007:18). Rome reasserted its authority in southern Gaul at the Council of the Seven Provinces in 418 (Goodrich 2007:18).

⁷³ The most notable of Pelagius' critics was Augustine (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1059).

⁷⁴ Constantius became co-emperor of the West with Honorius in 421 but died later that year.

Cassian's arrival in Gaul in the early fifth century is unlikely to have been a retreat from the turmoil of Rome into a safe and untroubled haven in the Gallic provinces (Goodrich 2007:5).⁷⁵ He encountered a rapidly changing and often volatile social and political environment in Gaul that was deeply affected by the increasing presence of barbarians.

3.4 Influence of the Church on Cassian's historical context

The decision in 313 by the Roman emperor Constantine to legitimise Christianity in the eyes of the State quickly and radically transformed the conditions in which the religion functioned (Markus 2004:399).⁷⁶ With backing from Constantine and most of his successors, Christianity grew rapidly in membership and influence. By the 430s, towards the end of Cassian's life, most educated Romans living in towns and almost all the ruling elite were Christian (Markus 1993:71). Many inhabitants of the rural regions of the Western and Eastern territories were also Christians. Little more than a century earlier Christians had been very much a minority and accounted for between 2% and 10% of the population of the empire (Cameron 2001:23).

As the Church grew, its influence on the societies in which it functioned increased. Growing numbers of adherents to Christianity attended gatherings for worship, gave alms for the poor, evangelised the unconverted and were critical and often hostile to other religions. However, the Church received as much as it gave. It was quick to absorb many of the dominant values and practices of Roman society (Markus 1993:73). The 'Christianisation of Roman society' was accompanied by the 'Romanisation of Christianity' (Markus 1993:79). Ancient institutions, customs, political practices and cultural traditions were incorporated into the Church and its new Christian society (Markus 1993:91). The most visible expressions of Christianity's expansion were the extensive Church building projects funded by the imperial court and other wealthy members of the ruling elite in most of the major cities of the empire (Cameron 2001:26).

Christianity by no means held a monopoly on religious observance in Late Antiquity. Traditional Roman cults persisted well into the sixth century and various sects such as the Gnostics and Manicheans attracted many adherents. Among intellectuals in the ranks of the social elite, Neoplatonism, as promoted by philosophers such as Plotinus (c205-270) and Porphyry (c232-c303), rivalled Christianity (Cameron 1993:80). Ancient animist religions continued especially in rural communities (Cameron 2001:36). Many cities and large towns throughout the Roman Empire and neighbouring territories also hosted strong Jewish communities (Cameron 1993:76-77).⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Cassian's possible departure from *Narbonensis Secunda* to the city of Marseilles in *Gallia Narbonensis* late in his life may also have been influenced by social and political upheaval in these territories.

⁷⁶ In 313 Constantine assumed control of the Western empire after defeating fellow contender Maxentius in the battle of Milvian Bridge near Rome in 312 (a victory he attributed to the Christian God).

⁷⁷ Violence between Christians and pagans erupted frequently. The temple of Serapis in Alexandria was razed by a Christian mob in 392, the prominent female philosopher Hypatia was lynched in the same city in 415 and in the Syrian town of Apamea the temple of Zeus Marnas was destroyed by Roman soldiers at the

3.4.1 Rise of the institutional Church

The favours granted to the Church by Constantine, which included the right to inherit property and wealth as well as tax exemption for clergy, gave its bishops control over substantial funds and resources (Cameron 2001:28). The Church's organisational structures soon crystallized around the urban centres in which Christian communities were established (Markus 1993:79).⁷⁸ These structures replicated in many ways the imperial system of civic administration. They usually comprised a network of urban bishoprics grouped into provinces that were headed by a metropolitan bishop. These metropolitans often lived in the province's capital. The Church's most influential metropolitans were resident in Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Rome and Jerusalem. The emergence of parishes within a diocese, a geographical area under a bishop's authority, was a much slower, later, and uneven process that occurred as Christianity gradually penetrated rural communities (Markus 1993:79).

The clerical offices of priest and deacon began to be formalised towards the end of the fourth century and these ministers of the Church operated under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. The title 'priest', instead of 'presbyter', began to be used in the Church in the third century (Bradshaw 1992a:355). The office of deacon was not originally a probationary order for the priesthood. It was intended to be a lifelong vocation unless the person became a bishop (Chadwick 1993:48). Many deacons, especially archdeacons who were senior clerics with substantial administrative and financial responsibilities, were appointed bishops (Chadwick 1993:48-49). By the fourth century, however, the perception of the offices of deacon, priest and bishop as successive grades of ministry was common (Chadwick 1993:48).⁷⁹ Women deacons, or deaconesses, frequently engaged in pastoral ministry but were generally excluded from liturgical duties (Chadwick 1993:49). Specific rites of ordination evolved within the Church to mark the appointment of these clerics. Bishops were originally elected from within local Church communities but by the third century candidates usually required the approval of neighbouring bishops (Bradshaw 1992:357a).⁸⁰ In addition to the formal office-bearers of the Church there was a wide variety of preachers, evangelists, healers and ascetics who operated outside any formal hierarchy.

The Church not only formalised its administrative structures in Late Antiquity but also galvanised the practice of much of its worship. This development affected the Church's observance of liturgical seasons and festivals as well as the form and structure of its services of worship.

prompting of Bishop Marcellus in 386. Violence against Jews, often fuelled by the rhetoric of Church leaders, was also not uncommon (Cameron 1993:75-76).

⁷⁸ The Council of Nicaea in 325 formalised these organisational structures.

⁷⁹ Cornelius of Rome (d253) is the first person known to have moved through the offices of deacon, priest and bishop (Chadwick 1993:48).

⁸⁰ The Council of Nicea (325) directed that a bishop should be ordained by all the bishops of his province, never less than three, and gave power of veto to the bishop of the provincial metropolis (Chadwick 1993:131).

Christian festivals often coexisted with ancient non-Christian celebrations for much of the Church's early history (Markus 1993:82). By the fourth century, when the Church was an established component of Roman society, two systems of sacred time had emerged and most Christians appear to have observed the ancient festivals as well as their own (Markus 1993:82). The boundary between what was 'Christian' and what was 'pagan' was drawn by the limits of clerical tolerance (Markus 1993:83).

The resurrection of Christ, the pivotal event in Christian theology, shaped the Church's demarcation of its annual and weekly cycles of religious observance. Easter, which incorporated the Jewish festival of the Passover, was the most prominent festival of the annual Christian calendar.⁸¹ It was probably celebrated by the first generation of followers of Christ (Cobb 1992:459). By the end of the fourth century Good Friday was widely observed as a commemoration of the Cross and the crucifixion of Christ (Cobb 1992:460). The season of Lent (*Quadragesima* in Latin and *Tessaraktoste* in Greek) was discussed at the Council of Nicea but appears to have been in practice, in various forms, well before (Cobb 1992:465). Sunday, the first day of the Jewish week, was celebrated as the day of the resurrection of Christ by his early followers (Cobb 1992:456). This celebration involved gathering each week for worship and usually participating in the eucharist. It probably took place after dusk on the Saturday or very early on Sunday. Cassian in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:48 Institute 2.) describes the Lord's Day as beginning on Saturday evening and continuing until the following evening.⁸² Constantine decreed Sunday (which kept its pagan name *dies solis*) as a civil day of rest in 321 (Cobb 1992:457).⁸³ Sunday appears to have superseded the Jewish Sabbath as the weekly day of worship for most Christians very early in the life of the Church (Buxton 1986:500). Similarly, Wednesday and Friday were set aside as fast days by the early Church in preference over the Jewish tradition of observing Monday and Thursday (Cobb 1992:459).

The feast of Christmas, the commemoration of the incarnation of Christ, and the season of Epiphany, which marks the revelation of the divine to humankind, were widely celebrated by the fourth century (Cobb 1992:467). Both festivals may have been instituted by the Church, at least in part, to counter pagan celebrations associated with the Winter solstice (Cobb 1992:466). Epiphany, most likely the older of the two festivals, was probably a celebration of Christ's nativity, his baptism and his first miracle at Cana (Cobb 1992:467). In the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:371 Conference 10.) Cassian states that the Church in Egypt recognised the day of Epiphany as a celebration of both

⁸¹ The fifty days of the season Easter, which is concluded at the feast of Pentecost, is the oldest season of the Church year and corresponds to the seven weeks of the Jewish feast of Pentecost. It was not until the latter part of the fourth century that the Ascension was commemorated on the fortieth day and the gift of the Spirit on the fiftieth (Cobb 1992:463).

⁸² Cassian (2000:48 Institute 2.) claims this was a time when the monks in Egypt refrained from kneeling in worship or fasting.

⁸³ Constantine's motive for declaring Sunday a day of rest may have been respect for the Sun deity (Chadwick 1992:128).

Christ's birth and his baptism whereas Christians in 'the Western provinces' mark these events separately. Epiphany may have its origins in the pagan celebrations of the virgin birth of Dionysus and the legends of epiphanies in which the ancient gods revealed themselves to humans (Cobb 1992:466). The date of Christmas, first celebrated in Rome in the fourth century, was probably adopted by the Church to overcome pagan sun worship. The pagan festival that commemorated the birth of the sun, *Natalis solis invicti*, was celebrated on 25 December (Cobb 1992:466). The annual festivals of Easter and Christmas were accompanied during the fourth century with an increasing flood of commemorations of the deaths of the Church's martyrs. Large numbers of these martyrs or saints were local figures who had suffered during earlier times of persecution for their faith in Christ.⁸⁴

The liturgy of the Church, although frequently diverse and regional in character, became increasingly formalised during the fourth century. The weekly service of the eucharist grew from a simple celebration of Christ's passion within a common meal, based on Jewish ritual meals, into a distinct rite that comprised Scripture readings, a kiss of peace, prayers and the sharing of bread and wine (Stewart 2005:77). Baptism, the service of worship that marked both a person's initiation into the Christian faith and the Church's admission of the convert into its community, became more prescribed.

As Christian worship moved from intimate gatherings of followers of Christ, who often met in private homes, to public displays and rituals the Church quickly adopted the ceremonial trappings of its imperial sponsor. Processions within and outside churches, often accompanied with the carrying of lights and banners, together with elaborate vestments and the use of incense became commonplace (Stewart 2005:78). During the fourth century regular services of prayer, at specific times throughout the day, became increasingly common. Whether these rounds of prayer evolved from the ancient Jewish practice of praying at set times during the day is a matter of debate among contemporary scholars (Bradshaw 1992b:402-403). These daily cycles of set prayers became the basis of the 'Liturgy of the Hours' or 'Divine Office' that was to become the cornerstone of Western and Eastern monastic worship (Bradshaw 1992b:399). In the *Institutes* Cassian describes at length the offices or canonical prayers he claims to have observed in Palestine and Egypt and describes the rules that governed these liturgies (Cassian 2000:35-68 *Institutes* 2 & 3.).

3.4.2 Church's close relationship with secular authority

The endorsement of Christianity by Constantine forged an intimate relationship between the emerging religion and the Roman State that at times was almost indivisible. Christians in public life, identified themselves 'almost without reservation with the political and social order of the Roman

⁸⁴ Markus (1993:85) suggests that the celebration of martyrs' feast days helped the Church reconcile a triumphant faith that occupied a dominant position in society with the belief, forged in its early history, that blessedness lay in being persecuted for faith in the name of Christ.

empire' (Markus 1993:77) The empire was perceived by the growing numbers of adherents to Christianity within its boundaries as an image of God's heavenly kingdom and the emperor its divine representative on earth (Markus 1993:77). Constantine's first intervention in the affairs of the Church was his instigation of councils of bishops, first in Rome in 313 and the following year in Arles, to address the potential schism posed by the Donatists in North Africa.⁸⁵ The councils rejected the argument of the Donatists and Constantine later suppressed its protagonists (Cross & Livingstone 1983:419).

Constantine's most significant intervention in the development of Christianity was his instigation and oversight of the Church's first ecumenical council in Nicea in 325. Church representatives from across the Roman provinces gathered to address a theological dispute about the nature of Christ that threatened the unity of both Church and empire.⁸⁶ This was the first attempt to gather all the bishops of the Church together and the first time that the findings of the council were to be considered universally binding (Cameron 1993:68).

Relations between Church and State converged further during the fourth century. Constantius II (317-361), son of Constantine, passed the first major law against paganism in 341 (Johnson 1990:97). Theodosius I (347-395) outlawed pagan worship and instituted Christianity as the official religion of the empire.⁸⁷ Such was the closeness of this relationship that religious heresy, deviation from the doctrines of the Church hierarchy, was regarded by those who held religious and secular power as a form of revolt akin to treason (Markus 1993:78). Theodosius later reinforced this perception by subjecting heretics to punishment by the law (Cameron 2001:24). This legislation was applied against dissenting Christian factions such as Arians in the 380s and Donatists in 411 as well as rival sects such as the Manicheans. Among the punishments meted out to heretics were exile and death (Johnson 1990:86).⁸⁸

As Roman military, political and economic influence waned in many of the Western provinces, and barbarians acquired increasing control of these territories, the Church assumed a lot of the civic functions formerly performed by agencies of the empire. It frequently engaged with the incoming barbarians as a representative of the local 'Roman' population. Activities conducted by the Church included care for the poor and the sick, the administration of justice and even the military

⁸⁵ Church leaders in Carthage refused to accept the appointment of Caecilian (d c345) as bishop of the city because he had been consecrated by the *'traditor'* Felix of Aptunga (Cross & Livingstone 1983:216). They argued that because Felix had renounced his Christian faith during the persecutions of Diocletian he could not perform the duties of a bishop. The councils of Rome and Arles rejected the argument of the Donatists (Cross & Livingstone 1983:419).

⁸⁶ About 220 bishops, mostly from the Eastern territories, attended the Council of Nicea (Lane 1992:28).

⁸⁷ Theodosius introduced a series of laws that curtailed pagan worship. He initially forbade all sacrifices in pagan temples. Then he banned not only sacrifices but all forms of "pagan" cult. A little later, pagan priests had their privileges withdrawn. Soon after, pagan temples were subject to confiscation and then pagans were prohibited from holding civic office (Cameron 2001:38).

⁸⁸ After the Council of Arles (314) bishops deposed by Church councils were usually exiled by civil authorities to prevent them from instigating disorder (Chadwick 1993:166).

defence of towns and cities (Freedman 2011f). Bishops, the most senior local representatives of the Church, often exercised considerable civic as well as religious authority. Their influence was heightened by the importance and extensive autonomy of the cities within the empire (Freedman 2011f).

The increased importance of towns and cities in the Western provinces, together with the collapse of the former imperial structures of administration, further influenced the development of the Church in these territories. With career opportunities in the military, political or administrative ranks of the empire greatly diminished many of the sons of wealthy and influential Roman families living in the Western territories turned to the Church to pursue their vocation (Mathisen 1993:x). Well educated, trained in oratory and rhetoric and able to command a strong following, many of the prominent Western bishops and abbots of Late Antiquity were the products of the empire's social elite (Cameron 1993:72).

The influx of members of the Roman social elite into clerical orders was particularly prominent in Gaul (Brown 2003:110). As a result, the Church in Gaul differed from that in Italy, North Africa and the Eastern territories where clergy tended to come from the urban middle classes (Brown 2003:112). Among the many Gallic 'aristocrats' appointed bishop were Honoratus (c350-429) and Hilary (403-449) of Arles, Eucherius (d c449) of Lyons, Lupus (c383-479) of Troyes, Faustus of Riez (c408-c490) and the former prefect of Rome, Sidonius Apollinaris (430-480), who was appointed bishop of Clermont (Mathisen 1993:xiii). The 'episcopal dynasties' ruled by these aristocratic bishops were an enduring feature of post imperial Gaul (Brown 2003:110).

Gallic aristocrats keenly observed the classic notion of friendship (*amicitia*) as a defining and binding force among the elite (Mathisen 1993:14). Maintaining and honouring these ties enabled aristocrats to preserve their status and influence.⁸⁹ Correspondence was important and many Gallic aristocrats, including prominent bishops, were prodigious writers (Mathisen 1993:xiii). A further distinctive feature of the Gallic episcopal dynasties was the large number of bishops who were also monks. All the Gallic bishops listed above, with the exception of Sidonius Apollinaris, became monks. Monastic communities headed by aristocratic bishops emerged in Marseilles and on the Mediterranean island of Lérins (Brown 2003:111).⁹⁰ Others were established at Marmoutier near Tours and at Agaune in the upper Rhône valley (Leclercq 2000:119). The communities in Marseilles and Lérins appear to have been the audience for Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences*.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Roman aristocrats defined themselves as the *boni* (good people) or *optimi* (best people) in contrast to the *multi* (many) or *mali* (inferior). The most important tie between Romans recognised by others as *boni* was their friendship with other *boni* (Mathisen 1993:11-13).

⁹⁰ The monastic community at Lérins was particularly influential in the development of the Church in Late Antique Gaul. It was founded between 400 and 410 by Honoratus and his companion Caprasius. Many of its monks did not stay long on the island and left to take up bishoprics in the cities of southern Gaul. By 434 eight episcopal sees in southern Gaul were occupied by men from Lérins (Brown 2003:111-112).

⁹¹ Cassian dedicated the second section of the *Conferences* to Honoratus, founder of Lérins, and Eucherius, a monk at the community and later Bishop of Lyons (Cassian 1997:399 *Conferences* Preface 2.).

3.4.3 Development of theology and the rise of theological disputes

The emergence of powerful bishops and other influential Church leaders who were intelligent, well educated and devoted to their faith, profoundly shaped the development of theology within the Christian community of Late Antiquity. Prominent Church leaders such Augustine of Hippo (354-430), John Chrysostom, Jerome (c342-420) and Basil of Caesarea (c330-379), were prolific writers (Cameron 1993:13).⁹² Their theological tracts, letters and sermons were often distributed to churches throughout the empire and helped define how adherents to Christianity understood their religion and its relations to the world in which they lived. Many of these theologians were educated and trained in the classical Roman disciplines of philosophy, literature and rhetoric and employed these practices in their writing and preaching (Cameron 1993:13). Latin scholarship, pioneered by Tertullian (c160-c225), blossomed in the work of Augustine and Jerome as well as Ambrose bishop of Milan (c339-397). In the Eastern territories theologians such as the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea (c330-379), Gregory of Nazianzus (c329-389) and Gregory of Nyssa (c330-395) continued to further the tradition of applying the Greek language as well as its philosophical concepts and methods to the understanding of the Scriptures and the proclamation of the Christian message (Cameron 1993:13). Prominent schools of theology emerged in Alexandria and Antioch (Young 1983:10).

Disagreements over the interpretation of Scripture and the expression of theological concepts, often subtle in their distinction, were easily amplified into bitter and divisive conflict within the Church. Letters and tracts written by senior members of the Church to fellow clerics or members of their congregations were frequently disparaging of, and hostile to, those who held conflicting views. Cassian's condemnation of Nestorius in *On the Incarnation* is typical of such censure (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 6.).

Early in the history of the Christianity bishops began meeting with their local or regional counterparts, in councils or synods, to obtain consensus or clarity on pressing matters facing the Church.⁹³ At times politics and personal ambition swayed such meetings and the legitimacy of the councils was often disputed by those whose cause was not advanced by the proceedings (Cameron 2001:25). The Council of Nicea was convened by Constantine in 325 to resolve the growing dispute within the Church about the divinity of Jesus the Christ and his relationship with God the Father. Constantine was concerned that the dispute not only threatened the unity of the Church but also the solidarity of the empire (Johnson 1990:88). The dispute has long been depicted as a contest between the defenders of Christian orthodoxy and Arian heretics (Hanson 1989:143). At the time of the

⁹² Many of the prominent theologians of Late Antiquity have left a legacy of numerous surviving manuscripts. The number of extant manuscripts containing works by John Chrysostom, for example, runs into thousands (Cameron 2001:35).

⁹³ The first recorded council of the Church was the first century gathering of Church leaders in Jerusalem described in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (2:1-10) and Luke's Acts of the Apostles (15:6-29).

council, however, there was no formal definition of such orthodoxy. What came to be broadly, but not universally, accepted as the orthodox doctrine of the nature of Christ was in the throes of being worked out by a lengthy process of ‘trial and error’ (Hanson 1989:151).

The resolutions of the Council of Nicea, which condemned the teachings of Arius (c250-c336), who argued that the Son was created by the Father and therefore not eternal (Lane 1992:28), did little to bring harmony into the Church or the empire. On the contrary, it initiated within the Church the process of attempting to define precisely what was correct, or orthodox, belief (Cameron 1992:69).⁹⁴ This process, and the definitions it generated, caused substantial strife within the Church for much of its history (Cameron 1992:69).

Arianism remained a cause of division within the Church. The Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius I summoned the Council of Constantinople in 381 to resolve the dispute (Lane 1992:35). The council adopted the approach to the distinctiveness of the persons of the Trinity expressed by the Cappadocian theologians Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. It recognised the unity of the Father and the Son by describing them as being of one substance (*homoousios*) but stressed the distinctiveness of the Trinity by stating that they were three beings (*hypostases*) (Lane 1992:33; Stewart 2005:75).⁹⁵

Half a century later the third ecumenical council was convened at Ephesus in 431, at the instigation of the emperor Theodosius II, to address the rupture within the Church caused by the teaching of Nestorius bishop of Constantinople. Nestorius, who was probably a pupil of Theodore bishop of Mopsuestia (c350-428), argued that Christ was the human person of Jesus indwelt by God the Word (Cross & Livingstone 1983:961). While they shared a common purpose, he claimed, they were fundamentally two distinct individuals (Meyendorff 2000:234; Lane 1984:45). The Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus but could not be rightly described as ‘*Theotokos*’, the mother of God, contended Nestorius (Meyendorff 2000:234). Such a description, he argued, confused the human and divine natures of Christ (Stewart 2005:76). The Christology endorsed by Nestorius and his followers sought to protect the distinction between the two natures of Christ (Stewart 2005:76). To their opponents, many of whom were associated with the Church in Antioch, it was perceived as an attack on the doctrine of the incarnation and an attempt to divide Christ into two people (Lane

⁹⁴ Cameron (1992:69) points out that the Greek word *hairesis*, from which the term heresy is derived, originally meant “a set of beliefs or practices.” After the Council of Nicea, heresies were regarded as “deviant beliefs” and “catalogued and demonologized” by the Church as it became increasingly authoritarian in defining correct and incorrect belief.

⁹⁵ The Council of Constantinople condemned Arianism as well as Macedonianism, the belief that the Father and Son are divine but not the Holy Spirit, and Apollinarianism, the view espoused by Apollinaris (c310-c390) Bishop of Laodicea that denied that Jesus possessed a human soul (Lane 1992:35-36). The Council of Constantinople is traditionally credited with the formation of the Nicene, or Niceno-Constantinople, Creed (Cross & Livingstone 1983:968).

1992:48; Stewart 2005:76).⁹⁶ To them Mary's title '*Theotokos*' conveyed the fundamental unity of the human and divine in Christ (Stewart 2005:76).

The proceedings of the Council of Ephesus were at times chaotic, with opponents and supporters of Nestorius staging their own separate conventions, and its outcome confusing (Lane 1992:47). Two years after the meeting of the council a settlement was reached and a *Formula of Reunion* endorsed by most of the prominent representatives of the Church (Lane 1992:47).⁹⁷ Nestorius was deposed as Bishop of Constantinople. In 436 he was banished to Upper Egypt and died there a few years later (Cross & Livingstone 1983:962). Disapproval of the council's declaration that the Virgin Mary was the *Theotokos* prompted many Syriac-speaking communities to break from the rest of the Church. The Church of the East, or Assyrian Church, as these communities became known, was mostly situated beyond the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in the Persian territories around Mesopotamia (approximately modern Iraq) (Ware 2001:67).

Cassian was clearly involved in the dispute that dominated the Council of Ephesus. In *On the Incarnation* he fiercely condemns Nestorius and his theology. Commissioned by archdeacon Leo of Rome, perhaps in preparation for the Council of Ephesus, the treatise indicates that Cassian continued to be enmeshed in ecclesiastical politics after his departure from Constantinople and Rome.

In *On the Incarnation* Cassian refers to another ecclesiastical controversy that would later embroil his own writings. He condemns the teaching of Nestorius as heresy and ranks it alongside the heresy of Pelagius (Cassian n.d. *On the Incarnation* 5.). Pelagius taught that a person can take the initial and fundamental steps towards salvation by the effort of their own free will (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1058). Conversely, human beings sin by their own choice not because they have inherited a propensity to sin since the fall of Adam (Chadwick 1993:227). Pelagius and his teaching attracted opposition from several prominent fifth century Church leaders including Jerome and Augustine (Chadwick 1993:229). Pelagius was banished by the Western Roman Emperor Honorius as a threat to peace in 418 and Pope Zosimus (d418), after earlier supporting Pelagius and his followers, condemned him and his teaching (Chadwick 1993:230-231; Cross & Livingstone 1983:1058).

Around 428, towards the end of Cassian's life, Prosper of Aquitaine (c390-c463), a layman living Marseilles, wrote to Augustine informing him about local opposition to his teaching on grace among local 'servants of Christ' (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1134; Stewart 1998:20). The target of

⁹⁶ Cyril attacked with vigour Novatianism, Neoplatonism, Jews and the Imperial prefect Orestes (Cross & Livingstone 1983:369). He also allocated a treasure trove of bribes to gain influence at the Imperial court in his doctrinal battle with his rival Nestorius (Chadwick 1993:199).

⁹⁷ In 449 Leo, then bishop of Rome, proposed a doctrine that blended the Antiochene and Alexandrian Christologies. Ratified by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, this doctrine asserted that Christ was 'one person in two natures', united without confusion, change, division or separation (Stewart 2005:76).

Prosper's criticism was Cassian and his followers.⁹⁸ A complaint was also sent to Augustine by another resident of southern Gaul named Hilary (Stewart 1998:20). At the root of their suspicion was Cassian's treatment of the subject of grace in the 13th conference of the *Conferences*. Cassian argues in this text that it is possible for a person, thanks to the God-given goodness of human nature, to accomplish something virtuous before receiving the divine grace to do so (Ramsey 1997:459).⁹⁹ Cassian in this conference presents an understanding of grace that falls between Augustine's extreme emphasis on the pre-eminence of God's grace and the teaching of Pelagius which stressed the supreme capability of free will. This theological position was later termed semi-pelagianism and more recently semi-augustinianism (Ramsey 1997:459).

It is unclear whether Cassian, in expressing his understanding of grace, was reacting against Augustine. Ramsey (1997:461-462) argues that the tenor of the 13th conference and two specific allusions, to the salvation of unbaptized infants (Cassian 1997:472 Conference 13.) and to people who are unyielding in their assertion of the pre-eminence of either grace or free will (Cassian 1997:476 Conference 13.), indicate that Cassian was challenging Augustine.¹⁰⁰ Stewart (1998:20) suggests that the 13th conference was a general response to Augustine's thinking, well-known in Gaul, rather than a rebuttal of specific treaties. However, Markus (1990:177-179) suggests that Cassian intended to counter the teaching of Pelagius, rather than Augustine, in the 13th conference. Casiday (2006:110) concurs and argues that Cassian's intention in the 13th conference was to 'cultivate a kind of humility inconsistent with Pelagian preaching.' Whatever Cassian's motive, his teaching on the subject of grace certainly differed from Augustine's standpoint. Augustine responded to the concerns raised by Prosper and Hilary in the *Predestination of the Saints* and the *Gifts of Perseverance* written shortly before his death in 430 (Stewart 1998:20). The ascendance of Augustine's status as a theologian within the Western Church, during and after the fifth century, not only eclipsed the understanding of grace proposed by Cassian but tainted it with the suspicion of heresy. This suspicion dogged Cassian's reputation for much of the history of the Church.¹⁰¹ Although Prosper and Hilary took their concerns to Pope Celestine in Rome, Cassian received no

⁹⁸ Prosper does not mention Cassian by name. In an earlier letter to Rufinus he complained of people undermining Augustine's teaching by their "many conferences" (Stewart 1998:20).

⁹⁹ Munz (1960:10) argues that Cassian, following the teaching of Origen, understood God to be both the "innermost kernel of the soul and the ground of all existence." Any human urge was therefore also the result of grace, says Munz. "Cassian stressed the need for effort because he saw in it not the opposite of grace but merely another aspect of it," adds Munz.

¹⁰⁰ Ramsey (1997:10) suggests that Cassian may also have been taking issue with Augustine in the 17th conference of the *Conferences*. He points out that Cassian's 'broad and humane approach to the subject of lying' may have been intended, at least in part, as a "critique of Augustine's rigorous and unrelenting" stance (Ramsey 1997:584).

¹⁰¹ A list of "Books to be Received and Not to be Received" erroneously attributed to Pope Gelasius I (461-496) lists Cassian's works among those considered suspect (Stewart 1992:21).

censure during his lifetime. (Stewart 1998:21).¹⁰² It was only after his death that he suffered lasting damage to his reputation.¹⁰³

3.5 Influence of monasticism on Cassian's historical context

One of the most influential developments in the Church during the life of Cassian was the development and expansion of monasticism.

During the fourth century thousands of Christians left their homes in the urban and rural regions of the empire and moved to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria to live in various degrees of isolation and poverty. This mass migration into the wilderness captured the imagination of many Christians in the Western territories and by the late fourth century monks, living alone or in monastic communities, began to appear in Italy, Spain and Gaul (Leclercq 2000:115-119). Cassian was one of a handful of early pioneers who brought information about the practice of monasticism from its origins in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine to the West. Others include Martin of Tours (d397), Jerome and Evagrius.

The migration into the desert was prompted by several factors. The most significant was a reaction by many Christians against what they perceived to be a widespread weakening and dilution of their religion as a result of its endorsement by the Roman State (Freedman 2011i). The prospect of persecution and martyrdom for their religious beliefs, the most exalted expression of Christian devotion, was now denied to the followers of Christ. Solitude and deprivation in the desert offered an alternative form of endurance and sacrifice (Sheldrake 2007:42). Monastic life in the desert provided devout Christians with a new form of martyrdom (Markus 2004:408).¹⁰⁴ Other motives for fleeing to the desert were often less sublime and included escape from social obligations, slavery, military service, financial creditors, tax collectors and legal authorities (Johnson 1990:140).

In the desert, Christians tended to live in solitude, as hermits (*eremites*), or else in small loosely connected communities (*coenobia*) and sometimes larger more ordered settlements (Sheldrake 2007:44-45).¹⁰⁵ The term 'monk, derived from the Latin word *monachus* meaning 'alone', was applied to both male and female ascetics.¹⁰⁶ Living in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine

¹⁰² Cassian's involvement in the opposition to Nestorius that culminated at the Council of Ephesus probably ensured that he was held in high regard among senior clerics in Rome (Stewart 1992:21).

¹⁰³ While Cassian began to be honoured as a saint in the diocese of Marseilles during the Middle Ages he is not recognised as an official saint of the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church, however, views him as a saint (Chadwick 1968:159). His feast day is 29 February (Cross & Livingstone 1974:246).

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Louth (1991:43) points out that the members of the early Christian community perceived themselves to be aliens in the pagan Greco-Roman world in which they lived. Once they found themselves to be at home in the world, as a consequence of the endorsement of the Church by the secular authorities, many Christians then sought to live as aliens in the hostile desert (Louth 1991:45).

¹⁰⁵ Texts composed during fourth and fifth century often used the word 'monastery' to describe the dwelling place of a monk and not just the residence of large groups of such people (Chitty 1966:5).

¹⁰⁶ The word *monachus* first appears in the anonymous Latin translation of Athanasius' *Life of Antony* (Dietz 2005:73).

and Syria there were large numbers of female sages or ammas as well as their male counterparts known as abbas. The presence of such women was largely eclipsed by the attention given to male ascetics in monastic texts written in the fourth and fifth centuries (Swan 2001:3). Women in Late Antiquity were widely regarded as intellectually and physical inferior to men and ‘disadvantaged by their bodies and a suspect sexuality’ (Dunn 2003:42).

Many of the radical desert Christians were recognised for their wisdom and piety and often attracted visitors looking for instruction (Chadwick 1968:13). They also provided hospitality and charity (Dietz 2005:69). Although isolated from urban society, these monks were often influential within the Church. They were important supporters or opponents of local bishops (Dietz 2005:69) as well as ‘validators’ of established religious practices and ‘facilitators’ of new religious alliances and observances (Brown 1995:60). Their extreme asceticism earned the desert monks a reputation as custodians of ‘spiritual power’ that could be directed by intercessory prayer to the benefit of people in need (Freedman 2011i). They also performed important socio-political functions and were often ‘arbiters’ of conflict or disputes in environments where traditional forms of authority had been eroded (Brown 1995:60). For such roles to be performed, it was necessary for these revered desert sages to be removed from conventional society and yet be sufficiently accessible to those who wished to receive advice or direction (Lane 1998:163). They consequently inhabited the margins of social settlements and lived in the borderlands between established communities and the untamed territories they adjoined. Close proximity with social settlements was also necessary for solitary monks and monastic communities that benefited from donations from patrons or the sale or trade of goods such as baskets, ropes and agricultural produce.

The growing number of monks that emerged in the cities of the Roman Empire during late fourth century was a phenomenon that was not universally welcomed. The pagan writer Eunapius of Sardis (c347-c414) described them in his *Vitae Sophistarum* as ‘men in shape, but their life is like that of pigs’ and decried the tyrannical power of ‘every man who wore a black garment and wanted to behave himself unseemly in public’ (Chitty 1966:55). Libanius (314-394) frequently attacked monks in his writings. In his *Oratio Pro Templis* he calls them a ‘black-robed tribe, who eat more than elephants’ (Chitty 1966:55). Criticism of monks was not without foundation. Bands of monks were often closely attached to city bishops who frequently incited them to riot to further their own ecclesiastical or political aims. The targets of such disorder were pagans, Jews and occasionally ecclesiastical opponents (Johnson 1990:94-95).

3.5.1 Egyptian monasticism

The third century ascetic Antony of Egypt (c 215-356) is traditionally recognized as the pioneer of Christian desert monasticism (Freedman 2011i).¹⁰⁷ The *Life of Antony*, written by Athanasius between 356 and 362, records how, in around 269, Antony gave away his possessions and devoted himself to a life of asceticism.¹⁰⁸ About sixteen years later Antony retreated to the desert where he is said to have fought with demons disguised as wild beasts (Cross & Livingstone 1983:67). In 305 the monk came out of solitude to organise a group of disciples, attracted by his holiness and discipline, into a community of hermits. He retired again into solitude around 310 but was later called out of seclusion to lend his support to opponents of Arianism (Cross & Livingstone 1983:67). Athanasius' *Life of Antony* makes it clear that there were well-established ascetic traditions in Egypt before Antony began his religious quest (Stewart 2005:86). The text records how Antony was able to place his sister in a community of virgins when he decided to leave his family and to also find an ascetic mentor on the outskirts of the village (Stewart 2005:86).

The ascetic practices and disciplines that emerged from the early desert monastic communities, and the spirituality that guided such endeavours, were highly influential in the development of Christian monasticism and the broader Church for more than a millennium. Antony stressed the importance of withdrawing from the distractions and temptations of common life not only geographically but also psychologically. Greater isolation enabled a deeper confrontation with the 'demons' that oppress the monk and subvert focus on God. Rigorous self-examination and the discernment of spirits, usually facilitated by ascetic discipline and the guidance of elders or superiors, became the cornerstone of monastic spirituality. The practice of celibacy and the renunciation of sexual desire, was a prominent feature of monastic discipline (Markus 2004:408).¹⁰⁹ The primary goal of monastic asceticism was not to enhance moral conduct but rather to help the practitioner become free from emotional, psychological and spiritual disturbances that hindered prayer and relations with God. This non-judgemental approach to spiritual development is clearly evident in the teaching of the desert abbas compiled in the collection of sayings known as the *Apophthegmata* (Brown 2005:87).¹¹⁰

Monks were present not only in Egypt but also Palestine and Syria by early in the fourth century. Jerome attributes the birth of monasticism in Palestine to Hilarion, a disciple of Antony,

¹⁰⁷ Latin translations of the *Life of Antony* were highly influential in accelerating the spread of monasticism from the Middle East to the Western territories in the fifth and sixth centuries (Dietz 2005:73).

¹⁰⁸ Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, was a strong supporter of early Egyptian monasticism (Gribomont 2000:90).

¹⁰⁹ The growing insistence within the Church hierarchy in the fourth and fifth century that its priests be celibate may have been a response to the rising influence of monasticism (Hunter 1999:152).

¹¹⁰ The *Apophthegmata* (Sayings of the Fathers) survive in two forms: the Alphabetical Collection of sayings of prominent abbas and the Systematic Series of sayings and stories compiled under the headings of major themes addressed by the desert monks. The *Apophthegmata* was later translated into Latin, among other languages, as the *Vitae Patrum* (Lives of the Fathers) (Ward 1986:x).

who founded monasteries in the port of Gaza around 330 (Chitty 1966:13).¹¹¹ Hilarion, however, was one of a long line of Jewish and latterly Christian ascetics who sought to deepen their relationship with God by subjecting themselves to the harsh conditions of the desert in Palestine (Chitty 1966:14).¹¹² It is unclear which monastic community Cassian and Germanus entered when they arrived in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem some time between 380 and 390. Cassian merely locates it somewhere near the Cave of the Nativity (Cassian 2000:96 Institute 4.). Among the sites posited by contemporary scholars are Posidonius' monastery beyond the Shepherds' Fields, where Palladius also stayed for a short time around 399 (Chitty 1966:52).

The development of coenobitic or communal desert monasticism in Egypt is generally attributed to Pachomius (c 290-346). Although there were gatherings of Christian ascetics in Egypt before Pachomius began his monastic vocation, his ability to establish and organise religious communities marks him as a pioneer of this way of life (Chitty 1966:20). According to the anonymously composed *Life of Pachomius* he was initially a disciple of the hermit Palaemon. Pachomius then founded a monastery at Tabennisi in the southern Thebaid region of Egypt around 320. The very tightly-organised monastic community established by Pachomius proved popular and other coenobia or communal monasteries were subsequently founded near the River Nile in Upper Egypt (Chitty 1966:23). By the time of his death in the middle of the fourth century, Pachomius was the abbot-general of nine monasteries for men and two for women (Cross & Livingstone 1983:67).

In addition to the communities of Pachomius, other, looser, federations of groups of ascetics emerged in the north of Egypt in areas around the Nitrian lakes and desert of Skete (Williams 1983:110). These monastic communities achieved prominence in the latter fourth century and attracted Cassian and Germanus during their second visit to the teachers of the Egyptian desert. Amoun (Amun), a disciple of Antony, is widely credited with founding the first monastic communities near Nitria around 330 (Chitty 1966:11). Amoun's first settlement at Nitria was on the edge of the Western desert about 14km south-west of the town of Damanhur (Hermopolis Parva) (Chitty 1966:11; Gribomont 2000:94). Nitria was the gateway to the desert interior and during the fourth century could be reached by boat from Alexandria (Chitty 1966:12-13). The number of monks attracted to the Nitrian community rose quickly. In 338 Amoun, after consulting with Antony, founded a second Nitrian monastic settlement at nearby Cellae for monks who required more complete solitude (Chitty 1966:29; Gribomont 2000:94). Around 600 anchorites were eventually settled, out of ear-shot of each other, in the area of Cellae (Chitty 1966:29). The monastic communities near the village of Skete about 64km north of Nitria, were pioneered by Macarius the

¹¹¹ Jerome makes this assertion in his *Life of Hilarion* written between 386 and 391 (Cross and Livingstone 1983:648).

¹¹² Basil of Caesarea (c330-379), who is often credited with establishing the pattern for orthodox monasticism (Cameron 2001:30), toured monasteries in Egypt and Palestine around 357 before establishing his community in Cappadocia (Chitty 1966:49).

Egyptian (c300-c390), also known as Macarius the Great, around 330 (Chitty 1966:13; Cross & Livingstone 1983:853; Gribomont 2000:94). Monks at Skete were involved in the production of rope and baskets as well agricultural goods (Chitty 1966:34).

The monastic settlements of Nitria, Cellae and Skete were among the first to be integrated into the parochial structures of the local church. They comprised monks who were also priests and operated under the jurisdiction and authority of the local bishop (Chitty 1966:11). Macarius, the founder of the monastic communities at Skete, was ordained priest around 340 (Cross & Livingstone 1983:853). The distinction between solitary and communal monastic vocations was also far less distinct in these communities than in the settlements of Upper Egypt inspired by Pachomius (Chitty 1966:11).

Apart from the prominent monastic settlements in the Thebaid region of Upper Nile and in the desert communities of Nitria, Cellae and Skete other ascetic gatherings were active elsewhere in Egypt (Chitty 1966:20). Among these other communities were the settlements near Thenneus, Panephris and Diolos in the Nile Delta that Cassian and Germanus visited during their first journey to the Egyptian desert sages. By the time Cassian and Germanus arrived in Skete, sometime between 387 and 387, the monastic communities in the region, together with those at Nitria and Cellae, were thriving. The anonymous *Historia Monachorum*, estimates that 5 000 monks lived at Nitria at this time (Chitty 1966:29). These monks lived alone, in pairs or in communal houses. In addition to accommodation for its monks and spaces for worship, the Nitrian settlement also comprised bakeries and guest houses (Chitty 1966:31). These monastic settlements were not only inhabited by men. Palladius in his *Lausiac History* estimated that there were twice as many women as men in these communities (Swan 2001:3).¹¹³ Most of the inhabitants of the monasteries at Skete, Nitria and Cellae were Egyptians who either spoke Coptic or Greek (Chitty 1966:46).¹¹⁴ Many are likely to have been bilingual (Chitty 1966:46). The inhabitants of such monasteries were also bolstered by the arrival of predominantly Greek-speaking foreigners. The close proximity of these monastic settlements to the great port city of Alexandria resulted in a stream of visitors during the late fourth and early fifth century. Among the most prominent visitors to these settlements were the Cappadocian Basil of Caesarea (c330-379), Athanasius Bishop of Alexandria (c296-373), Evagrius and Palladius (Chitty 1966:46; Caner 2002:25-26).

The settlements of Skete, Nitria and Cellae provided the setting for the monastic texts of not only Cassian but also Evagrius and Palladius (Caner 2002:25-26).¹¹⁵ Cassian makes no mention of

¹¹³ The *Historia Monachorum* and Palladius' *Lausiac History* were two of the main historical accounts of Egyptian monasticism written in the early fifth century (Cameron 1993:82).

¹¹⁴ Research into Egyptian monastic communities has long categorized the indigenous Coptic monks as largely rural and unsophisticated and their Greek-speaking counterparts as learned and erudite. Casiday (2006:147) argues convincingly that this dichotomy is false and should be abandoned.

¹¹⁵ Many of the writings that comprise the *Apophthegmata*, the writings of the desert abbas, are also located in this region of Egypt (Caner 2002:25-26).

Evagrius or Palladius in his texts. However, Palladius, like Cassian, was among the group of supporters of John Chrysostom that travelled to Pope Innocent in Rome to lobby support for their bishop. He had earlier stayed in Nitria and then Cellae for around 10 years. During much of his time Palladius accompanied Evagrius who also moved from Nitria to Cellae.

Evagrius was one of the most prominent visitors to the monastic communities of Egypt. Born in Iborra in Pontus around 345 Evagrius was first a disciple of Basil of Cesarea and then Gregory of Nazianzus (Gribomont 2000:104). He was ordained lector by Basil and deacon by Gregory (McGinn 2005b:144). Evagrius was an influential opponent of Arianism at the ecumenical council in Constantinople in 381 and appointed archdeacon in the city. However, he fled the capital and headed for the deserts of Egypt after an emotional entanglement with a married woman (McGinn 2005b:144). He stayed briefly in Jerusalem with Melania (c342-c410) and Rufinius (c345-410), who had founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives, and then journeyed to Nitria in the Egyptian desert. He lived in Egypt for more than ten years before he died in 399 (McGinn 2005b:144). While in Nitria, Evagrius was guided by two prominent Egyptian abbas, Macarius of Alexandria and Macarius the Great. Evagrius, during his stay in Egypt, wrote several texts that sought to integrate the practical teaching of the desert monks with the Neoplatonic speculations of Origen (Stewart 2005:80).¹¹⁶ The results were both highly influential and highly controversial. Evagrius brought Origen's spiritual theology into the mainstream of Egyptian monasticism by stressing the importance of identifying and analysing distracting 'thoughts' that occur during prayer and promoting a 'pure' or imageless practice of prayer (Stewart 2005:80; Gribomont 2000:105). While his teaching on prayer was embraced by many Egyptian ascetics, and later monastic writers, the Neoplatonic influences in Evagrius' theology aroused suspicion among several Church leaders. Soon after his death he was condemned by Theophilus Bishop of Alexandria and later by the emperor Justinian (483-565) in 553 (Gribomont 2000:104; McGinn 2005b:145). Several recent scholars have suggested that Evagrius' mysticism owes more to Neoplatonism, and even Buddhism, than Christianity (McGinn 2005b:146-147).

Cassian probably omitted mentioning Evagrius and Palladius in his texts because of their close association with Origenism which was becoming increasingly tainted with the suspicion of heresy among senior Church leaders in the early fifth century (Stewart 1998:11-12). Cassian's monastic writings clearly show the imprint of Evagrius (Stewart 2005:81). It appears likely that there was some contact between these writers during their stay among the monastic communities in Egypt.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Evagrius' most influential work is the *Monachikos* trilogy that includes the *Praktikos*, the *Gnostikos* and the *Kephalaia Gnostika*. Other important texts are *On Prayer*, *Mirror for Monks and Nuns*, *Letter to Melania* and *Letter of Faith* (McGinn 2005b:145-146).

¹¹⁷ Casiday (2006:15) points out that Evagrius belonged to a widespread theological tradition and warns against perceptions that Cassian was in "thrall" to Evagrius or his teaching.

The monastic communities of Skete, Nitria and Cellae were depleted greatly by Theophilus' the purge of Origenist monks in 399 and 400. Eight years later the region was devastated when attacked by Mazices tribesmen (Chitty 1966:58). Many monks were killed and large numbers fled (Chitty 1966:58). Returning foreigners who had made lengthy visits to the monks in Egypt stimulated interest in Egyptian monasticism in the Western territories. This interest was further fuelled by the circulation of texts that vividly described Egyptian monasticism. Among the most influential was Athanasius' *Life of Antony* that was translated from Greek into Latin by Rufinus (c345-410) (Chitty 1966:61). Early monastic rules, that governed the conduct of monks in communities in Egypt, such as those attributed to Pachomius and Basil as well as the anonymous *Rule of the Master* were also influential in establishing and regulating new communities (Dietz 2005:70-71).

3.5.2 Gallic monasticism

When Cassian arrived in Gaul around 415 the Church in the region was already familiar with the concept of monasticism and had been exposed to teaching on the subject. Cassian notes in the preface to the *Institutes* that Pope Castor wanted to establish 'a new monastery' in the territory and had requested him to provide information about the teachings of the monks in Egypt (Cassian 2000:11-12 *Institutes* Preface.). Furthermore, Cassian criticises the conduct of local monastic teachers who do not have experience of the ancient teachings of the desert abbas of Egypt (Cassian 2000:38 *Institute* 2.).

Among the teachers who introduced monasticism to the Church in Gaul ahead of Cassian were Martin Bishop of Tours (c316-397) and Paulinus Bishop of Nola (c353-431). Around 360 Martin founded a monastery at Ligugé and on becoming Bishop of Tours in about 372 established a monastic community near the city called *Marmoutier* (the great monastery) (Cross & Livingstone 1983:879; Leclercq 2000:119).¹¹⁸ Martin's contemporary biographer, Sulpicius Severus, portrays the former soldier as a wandering monk who was a miracle worker and a vigorous opponent of pagans (Cross & Livingstone 1983:879). The *Marmoutier* community continued after Martin's death in 397 and influenced the development of monasticism along the Loire river and elsewhere in Gaul (Leclercq 2000:119). This expansion also helped promote the cult of its founder (Leclercq 2000:119). Paulinus, appointed Bishop of Nola in 409, established with his wife a home for monks and the poor near the town and lived a life of great austerity (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1054). Although well-travelled throughout many of the Western territories, neither Martin nor Paulinus appear to have visited the early monastic communities in Egypt, Palestine or Syria. These monastic

¹¹⁸ Much of the information available about Martin of Tours comes from the *Dialogues* and *the Life of Martin* written by his friend and chronicler Sulpicius Severus (c360-c420). A substantial body of correspondence of Paulinus of Nola is extant (Cross & Livingstone 1983:1054).

pioneers, or at least their followers, may have been the target of the put-down Cassian directed at teachers who taught what they had not experienced (Goodrich 2007:52).¹¹⁹

The expressions of monasticism Cassian encountered in Gaul seem far less structured and organised than the Egyptian communities described in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* (Stewart 1998:17). These texts identify two authentic monastic types. They are the monk that lives in a structured community, or *cenobia*, under the authority of an elder, or abba, and the solitary monk, the *eremite*, who lives in isolation. Cassian praises both forms on monastic devotion but warns that a monk should only undertake a solitary vocation once he has proven himself in community. Cassian condemns two other types of monk. They are those he terms *sarabaites*, who withdraw from monastic communities and care for their own needs, and an unnamed type of monk that seeks seclusion for selfish reasons (Cassian 1997:640-642 Conference 18.).¹²⁰

3.5.3 Religious travel

Cassian's distinction between different types of monks was part of a broader debate in the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries that sought to identify what forms of monasticism were legitimate (Caner 2002:12).¹²¹ Travel for religious purposes was a widely accepted monastic practice in Late Antiquity (Dietz 2005:2). Monks who adopted this form of observance sought to imitate Christ who is revealed in the Gospels as a wanderer who can call no place on earth his home (Dietz 2005:2). Roving monks usually relied on others for material support. They frequently offered prayers or counsel in return for such favour (Caner 2002:15).

The practice of monastic wandering came to be heavily criticised, and eventually marginalised, by leading authorities within the Church hierarchy and monastic movement (Caner 2002:15). This condemnation may have been a consequence of the Church becoming increasingly structured and institutionalised.¹²² It may have also been a result of the Church associating itself more with the mainstream of Roman society. In an effort to ensure social and economic stability within the empire, and protect its extensive and vital tax base, the Roman State issued a variety of edicts that prohibited its citizens from relocating (Caner 2002:15). The most notable of these edicts are the codes of the emperors Theodosius and Justinian that sought to ensure that members of specific professions not only stayed in their communities but also remained within their occupations (Caner 2002:15).¹²³

¹¹⁹ Stewart (1998:17) argues that the *Institutes* are 'inescapably a critique of the native monastic tradition' Cassian found in Gaul and that was especially associated with Martin of Tours.

¹²⁰ The *sarabaites* described by Cassian is similar to the *remnuoth* condemned by Jerome (Stewart 1998:18).

¹²¹ An earlier discussion on the legitimacy of different types of monks is found in the anonymous *Discussions of Zacchaeus and Apollonius* (Caner 2002:10).

¹²² Dietz (2005:36) argues that monks were a destabilising presence in many cities and were also often an alternative to the spiritual authority of bishops.

¹²³ Caner (2002:16) remarks that "*stabilitas loci* was a guiding ideal for promoting economic and social stability in the imperial domain before it became advocated in monastic circles."

Religious travel was often perceived as a metaphor for the wanderer's spiritual progress and journey (Dietz 2005:3-4). This association was later to be strongly expressed in the concept of pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*) that became widely popular in the European Middle Ages.¹²⁴ However, not all religious travel in Late Antiquity should be viewed as pilgrimage. Such a generalisation could easily obscure the varied nature of religious travel in the late fourth and early fifth centuries (Dietz 2005:6). Among the different forms of religious travel experienced by Christians in Late Antiquity are the forced migration of refugees, travels of episcopal officials, visits to ecclesiastical libraries and the conveyance of clerical messages or petitions (Dietz 2005:7). Flight from military conflict or banditry, prompted by the incursion of barbarian tribes into the Roman territories, forced many Christians and other citizens of the empire to travel long distances in search of safer and more hospitable surroundings. Social upheaval, displacement and the long distance travel of refugees became increasingly common (Dietz 2005:11). The itinerant nature of much of Late Antique society opened new possibilities for the exchange of religious ideas along with fresh opportunities for trade and commerce (Dietz 2005:23).

The emergence of sacred Christian sites, often containing relics of revered saints, began to attract visitors from beyond the boundaries of the local communities during the fourth century. Prominent sites in Rome and especially in Palestine drew visitors from across the territories of the Roman Empire (Cameron 2001:29). Many of these sites were adorned with new churches constructed as part of the building programme initiated by the emperor Constantine (Chadwick 1993:128). Reports of the holy desert abbas and ammas, conveyed by returning visitors as well as popular monastic texts such as the *Life of Antony*, encouraged many devout Christians to journey to Palestine as well as Egypt and Syria. Many of these travellers were women. Among the most notable were Constantine's mother Helena who visited Palestine around 326 and the Spanish aristocrat Egeria who recorded in a journal her impressions of visits to churches, shrines and monks during her visit to the Holy Land in about 384 (Chadwick 1993:240). By the end of the fourth century there was a considerable flow of religious travellers to Palestine. Such visits were not restricted to sight-seeing. Monastic communities were founded in Palestine by religious travellers such as Melania (Cameron 1992:83) and Jerome and his female companions Paula, and her daughter Eustochium (Johnson 1990:110).

¹²⁴ The Latin word *peregrinatio* is most commonly translated as "pilgrimage" and *peregrinus* is usually expressed as "pilgrim". However, *Peregrinatio* should most often be translated simply as "journey" and *peregrinus* as "traveller" or "foreigner" (Dietz 2005:27). Clark (2004:149) points out "a *peregrinus* is not a pilgrim, a purposeful traveller in search of enlightenment, but is someone who feels foreign and wants to go home."

3.6 Conclusion

An examination of Cassian's historical context reveals that he encountered substantial social, economic and political turmoil. The catalyst for much of this upheaval was the increasing influx of barbarians into the Roman Empire during the fourth and fifth centuries. The extent of the influence of this influx on Cassian is unclear. However, Cassian was in Scythia Minor, Rome and Gaul when there was considerable barbarian military action in the region. He may also have been affected by the Gallic civil wars, which included barbarian combatants, early in the fourth century.

Cassian's travels exposed him to a wide variety of different geographic regions and disparate communities in the increasingly polarised Western and Eastern territories of the Roman Empire. He was among a large number of people motivated to travel by a desire to visit the Holy Land to encounter sacred Christian sites and teachers. Cassian further travelled to convey ecclesiastical petitions and messages and probably to flee persecution and military conflict. Throughout the regions travelled by Cassian the Church was growing rapidly and adapting to the particular circumstances within which it operated. Imperial backing dramatically increased its stature, membership, wealth and influence. Cassian was embroiled in the power struggle between two of the Church's most prominent bishops. He witnessed the extensive influence of the Imperial court of Constantinople on the Church in the Eastern Empire and the growing civil authority of the bishops in the Western territories as they adapted to the increasing power of local barbarian rulers. Cassian was also involved in at least one of the bitter theological disputes that gripped the Church as its hierarchy sought to define and defend its religious beliefs. One of many foreign visitors to the Egyptian desert abbas, Cassian was among a handful of travellers who tried to establish the teaching and practices of these monks in a new environment in the Western territories. His monastic writings attempt to promote a form of monasticism that had ceased to exist in Egypt and now had to contend with competing Christian ascetic philosophies in Gaul.

The spirituality of Cassian was shaped and exercised in a social and religious environment which experienced considerable flux and uncertainty. The diverse cultures, religions and ecclesiastical influences Cassian encountered will have certainly marked his spirituality. Cassian's teaching on spirituality, however, is shorn of much of this influence. It is tailored to meet what he perceives to be the needs of a very specific audience of *Romani* aristocrats keen to adopt a monastic way of life. Cassian makes almost no mention of barbarians or other religions in the *Institutes* or the *Conferences*.¹²⁵ Women, many of whom were ascetics living in the Egyptian desert when Cassian was there, are rarely mentioned in the texts other than as the source of sexual temptation or a distraction from monastic vocation (Cassian 1997:443 Conference 12.). Cassian hardly notes secular

¹²⁵ Cassian remarks in the *Conferences* that he and Germanus had heard that a group of pious monks living near the village of Tekoa, in Palestine, had been slaughtered by roving Saracen bandits (Cassian 1997:217 Conference 6.).

clergy within the Church, other than bishops interested in monasticism, or the lay Christians who comprise most of its members unless it is to contrast their conduct to that of monks.

On the Incarnation reveals Cassian's condemnation of Nestorianism and also his disapproval of Pelagianism and Arianism. About his support for Origenism, which was encountering growing disapproval in the Church, Cassian is discretely silent. Cassian's status as an elite member of the Christian community is amplified by his support for theological perspectives that became the dominant viewpoint of an increasingly powerful Church.

Chapter Four

Cassian's teaching about spirituality

4.1 Introduction

The historical-critical examination of Cassian's texts has disclosed substantial information about Cassian and his spirituality. A study of the content of Cassian's teaching about spirituality, contained in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, reveals further information about the spirituality he conveyed to his audience in Gaul. It also helps refine the investigation's understanding of the spirituality of Cassian as both a historical and a contemporary phenomenon.

4.2 Goal of the spirituality presented by Cassian

Cassian's teaching about spirituality is tailored specifically to meet the needs of his audience of monks and potential monks. It is centred on the twin precept that the ultimate goal of monastic life is to encounter the *reign of God* while the nearer goal, or aim, is to attain the *purity of heart* that is essential for such an engagement (Cassian 1997:43 Conference 1.).

The hope of experiencing the reign of God, expressed by Cassian as the 'Kingdom of God' (Cassian 1997:43 Conference 1.) or the 'Kingdom of Heaven' (Cassian 1997:43 Conference 1.), defines Cassian's teaching about spirituality. Monastic practice, as described by Cassian, is constantly focussed on attaining the purity of heart that will lead to the experience of the divine realm. Challenges and difficulties encountered by the monk in the present temporal and material world need to be overcome, teaches Cassian, to enjoy the eternal and spiritual domain of God. The journey described by Cassian is a struggle that requires the monk to continually 'fight', 'strive' and 'resist' to achieve its destination (Chadwick 1968:94). The forces he must overcome include his own impulses and desires as well as external agents, such as demons, that tempt him away from the pursuit of his goal.¹²⁶ Progress towards this end provides the rule against which all of the monk's activities and endeavours are measured (Cassian 1997:43 Conference 1.).

Attainment of the ultimate goal of the realm of God, says Cassian, is not reserved for a life to come or some eschatological moment in the future but can be achieved, by a few and albeit fleetingly, in the present (Cassian 1997:383 Conference 10.). An encounter with the divine is not confined to the 'anterooms of eternity' (Luibheid 1985:xiii). The monastic writings of Cassian provide a collection of spiritual maps that enable the monk to chart a course between the earthly world and the divine realm (Stewart 1998:41). These 'route maps' comprise not only extensive directions, embodied in the instructions in the *Institutes* and the dialogues presented in the

¹²⁶ The use of the male pronoun when discussing Cassian's teaching about spirituality is not a rejection of the need for inclusive language in academic research but rather an indication that Cassian was specifically writing about and for men in his monastics texts.

Conferences, but also details of various ascetic practices essential to accomplish the journey. Experience, not just knowledge, provides the path towards the divine goal, according to Cassian (1997:385 Conference 10.).¹²⁷

The spirituality presented by Cassian is intensely personal. It addresses the monk's most intimate thoughts, desires and experiences. No part of the monk's life is left untouched. Petty jealousies (Cassian 1997:170 Conference 4.), minor resentments (Cassian 1997:569 Conference 16) and fleeting moments of eroticism (Cassian 1997:436 Conference 12.), for example, are all carefully scrutinised. Yet the context of such scrutiny is communal. Similarly, Cassian describes highly personal and intense experiences of prayer but these experiences appear to occur within the context of communal worship (Cassian 1997: Conference 9.). Although Cassian admires deeply the solitary desert abbas of Egypt, it is a communal form of monasticism he advocates primarily to his audience in southern Gaul (Dunn 2003:75). Communal life, especially obedience to a senior monk, is essential to the spiritual life promoted by Cassian (Griffiths 1964:31).

Some of the examples of obedience supplied by Cassian in the *Institutes* and *Conferences* are extreme and at times cruel (Griffiths 1964:30). The story of the monk who was told by his superior to water a dry stick for a year (Cassian 2000:91 Institute 4.) seems excessive to a contemporary audience. The account of the monk who consented to have his son regularly beaten and then thrown into a river to drown (Cassian 2000:92-93 Institute 4.) and the story of the monk who failed to persuade his wife to renounce the world and then abandoned her (Cassian 1997:726 Conference 21.) appear inhumane (Griffiths 1964:30). Such examples in Cassian's texts, however, are infrequent and appear to be parables of humility and obedience rather than instructions about correct behaviour.

The first stage of the monk's spiritual journey, for Cassian, is the renunciation of the world and entry into a monastic community (Cassian 2000:79 Institute 4.). Such renunciation requires the shedding of all material wealth and social status (Cassian 2000:80 Institute 4.; 1997:169 Conference 4.) (Rousseau 1978:205). It also needs a willingness to engage in manual labour (Cassian 2000:233 Institute 10.) (Chadwick 1985:20). Commitment to material poverty and manual labour are common obligations among contemporary religious orders. In Late Antiquity, however, they were radical and extreme demands (Brown 2012:416). Martin of Tours, one of Cassian's Gallic predecessors, shunned manual labour and depended on the charity of others (Goodrich 2007:192). Augustine believed manual labour was appropriate for monks of humble origins (*ex paupertate*) but monks from affluent backgrounds (*ex divite*) should be assigned administrative duties (Caner 2002:17). Often rich landowners retained their wealth and status on entering a monastic community and sometimes

¹²⁷ Columba Stewart (1998:41) uses the term "spiritual map" to describe how the monastic writings of Cassian provide a guide to monks striving to progress on their spiritual journey. The phrase "route map" is frequently used in this research to indicate that these writing provide their audience with direction as well as a description of the spiritual journey.

supported the monastery with their donations (Brown 2012:415). Some influential monastic recruits even brought their slaves to serve them once they joined the monastery (Brown 2012:420). Cassian's insistence on material poverty requires the monk to surrender himself completely to the abbot and the monastic community (Brown 2012:416). He must relinquish all possessions including all vestiges of past status and any previous notions of identity (Brown 2012:416).

Cassian reinforces his demand for a complete renunciation of social status and identity in his exploration of friendship in the *Conferences*. The friendship among monks described by Cassian is based on common moral qualities and the desire for spiritual perfection (Cassian 1997:559 Conference 16.). This is far removed from the classic friendship that distinguished and defined the aristocrats of Gaul (Mathisen 1993:14). It is also very different from later monastic traditions that discouraged close friendships between monks to avoid the creation of cliques within the community (Chadwick 1985:7).

Once the monk has made his renunciation he must then embark on the long struggle to detect, identify and overcome the sins and vices that hinder him from attaining purity of heart and thereby presence within the Kingdom of God. Cassian outlines a two-fold approach to overcoming the obstacles on the spiritual path. It comprises an active or practical approach that involves identifying and remedying the vices that beset a monk and a contemplative or theoretical approach that cultivates the development of virtues in his life (Cassian 1997:506 Conference 14.) (Weaver 2001:396). The former path provides the foundation for the latter (Weaver 2001:369). However, the two approaches often appear interwoven when addressed in Cassian's writings (Chadwick 1968:93). Cassian teaches that the origin of sin and virtue lies in the thoughts of the monk (Weaver 2001:369). By identifying the thoughts that lead to sin, and expelling them, the mind of the monk could be cleansed and the proper attachments that lead to virtue could then thrive (Weaver 2001:369).

Cassian identifies the main thoughts that lead to sin and proposes strategies for combating them. They are addressed in both the *Institutes* (books five to twelve) and the *Conferences* (conference five). He describes them as gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, accidie (boredom), vainglory and pride. Such human traits are dangerous, according to Cassian, not just because they entice a person to continued and often greater sinfulness and rebellion against God. They are also dangerous because they lure the monk away from his primary task of seeking purity of heart and presence within the reign of God (Cassian 2000:118 Institute 5.). The monk's struggle against these obstacles is a battle within his own consciousness against conflicting desires and inclinations. It is also, in the eyes of Cassian, a war against evil that is manifest in the life of the monk in the form of demons and their master Satan. Such demons are able to join themselves to the spirit of the monk but cannot forge a union with his soul (Chadwick 1968:97). They preside over a particular temptation and attempt to entice the monk with this temptation into sin (Chadwick 1968:97). Opposing these demons is the monk's guardian angel that ensures that he is not tempted beyond his capacity to resist (Chadwick 1968:97-98).

Cassian believed celibacy was essential for monks (Chadwick 1998:8). However, he understood human sexuality differently from many of his contemporaries (Brown 1998:64). Cassian regarded human sexuality not as the source of ‘passions’ that jeopardised the monk’s pursuit of perfection or purity of heart but rather as a ‘privileged sensor of the spiritual condition of the monk’ (Brown 1998:64). By scrutinising his sexual impulses and fantasies, often with the guidance of a superior, the monk was able to observe the intimate stirrings of his soul (Brown 1998:64). Such observation often revealed more dangerous hidden vices and sins such as anger, pride and avarice (Brown 1998:64). Cassian taught that by recognising and relinquishing the highly personal meanings of sexual thoughts and feelings the monk shed the vices and sins that lurked behind them (Brown 1998:64).

The monk’s triumph over the obstacles that block his path to the twin objectives of the attainment of purity of heart and the Kingdom of God depends, according to Cassian, on his resolute obedience and dedication to his monastic disciplines and practices. Such commitment alone, however, is insufficient. Only by the grace of God, stresses Cassian, can the forces that separate the monk from his divine goal be overcome (Chadwick 1985:26). It is God’s grace that inspires, sustains and empowers the monk on his quest. In conference 13 of the *Conferences* Cassian emphasises the monk’s capacity to initiate the quest for purity of heart and then experience the sustaining and guiding power of the Holy Spirit. The monk has the ‘moral freedom’ to choose to respond to God (Chadwick 1985:27). Taken in isolation the conference appears to underplay the role of grace and the Holy Spirit in the monk’s spiritual journey. Throughout the *Conferences*, however, Cassian emphasises the monk’s continued dependence on the grace of God (Chadwick 1985:27).

If the monk is successful in overcoming the obstacles that lie between his earthly domain and the heavenly realm of God then he is able to attain a state of purity of heart (Cassian 1997:46 Conference 1.). In this state virtue becomes a habit and a life of true contemplation is possible (Cassian 1997:47 Conference 1.; Chadwick 1968:93). This state may be permanent or a brief experience that soon ends when the monk succumbs to the ever-present temptations to sin. Cassian uses the term ‘purity of heart’ to denote both moral and spiritual integrity as well as tranquillity and stability of the heart or mind (Stewart 1998:42). Cassian sometimes uses the Neoplatonic term ‘perfection’ to describe this state (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.; Cassian 1997:45 Conference 1.). It is a condition that is progressive and comprises levels of achievement (Stewart 1998:42). It is both a goal to be attained and a gateway to the contemplative state that enables the monk to experience the reign of God.

The words used by Cassian to describe contemplation are the Latin noun *contemplatio* and its verb *contemplari* (Stewart 1998:48). The Greek *theōria* (passionlessness) also occurs in his texts (Stewart 1998:48). Contemplation for Cassian incorporates not just divine vision but also divine knowledge or wisdom (Cassian 1997:48 Conference 1., Stewart 1998:48). Such spiritual knowledge enables the contemplation of ‘divine things’ present in Creation and an awareness of the ‘most sacred

meanings' of the Scriptures (Cassian 1997:505 Conference 14.). The 'ultimate reward' or 'highest happiness' that occurs during contemplation, according to Cassian, is the beatific vision of God (Cassian 1997:383 Conference 10.). This beatific vision encompasses intimacy with the divine within the Kingdom of God (Cassian 1997:51 Conference 1.). It is an intimacy that can be experienced in the temporal world as well as in the eternal realm. The 'highest happiness,' however, appears to be attained in the fulfilment of Kingdom of Heaven (Stewart 1998:56). It is not always clear in Cassian's texts which of these two states is being described (Stewart 1998:58).

4.3. Cassian's teaching about prayer

The essential practice that can lead the monk to the state of contemplation and beatific vision is prayer. Cassian believes prayer is of utmost importance in the monk's pursuit of his twin goals. The end of every monk and the perfection of his heart, says Cassian, incline him to 'constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer' (Cassian 1997:329 Conference 9.). He goes to great lengths in his monastic texts to describe and interrogate the practice of prayer.

In the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* Cassian uses the term 'prayer' (*oratio*) in both a generic and a particular sense (Stewart 1998:100). It is used to describe all types of human communication with God, 'communal or individual, audible or silent, verbal or wordless, petitionary or doxological' (Stewart 1998:100). In this sense it is applied to the canonical prayers that formed the heart of communal worship within the monastic community. These times of formal prayer or offices, which Cassian terms *sollemnitatis* or *synaxis*, comprised 'psalmody, intervals of silence for personal response in prayer and readings' (Stewart 1998:100). Cassian applies the term 'prayer' in a more specific sense when he refers to the time of silent reflection that followed each psalm recited during the canonical office (Stewart 1998:100).

Cassian's most comprehensive examination of prayer is presented in the dialogues with Abba Isaac that appear in the ninth and tenth conferences. The desert abba, an acquaintance of the great monk Antony (Cassian 1997:349 Conference 9.), remarks that there are as many different kinds of prayer as there are conditions of the soul (Cassian 1997:335 Conference 9.). These conditions, he says, determine the character of one's prayers and no-one's prayers can be uniform (Cassian 1997:335 Conference 9.). Cassian recognises that every person prays differently (Chadwick 1985:11). Prayers are shaped by the personality of the person praying and the circumstances in which prayer is expressed (Chadwick 1985:11).

Abba Isaac notes, in the ninth conference, that the apostle Paul identified four main types of prayer. They are supplication, prayer where an offering or vow is made to God, intercession and thanksgiving (Cassian 1997:336 Conference 9.). Cassian points out in the dialogues involving Abba Isaac that not all prayer is equal. These four types of prayer often emerge from other forms of prayer and can then be stations on the journey to 'richer prayers' (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.). Supplication, says Cassian, is born of compunction for sin, the prayer of offering and the keeping of

vows emerges from a pure conscience, intercession proceeds from ‘fervent charity’, and reflection on the God’s greatness and loving kindness can lead to thanksgiving (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.). According to Abba Isaac, there is a progression from supplication, which ‘seems to pertain more especially to beginners who are still being harassed by the stings and by the memory of their vices’, up to thanksgiving, in which those who have ‘already torn from their hearts the penal thorn of conscience’ can consider the kindness and mercies of God with a ‘most pure mind’ (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.).

Beyond the realm of prayer of thanksgiving, says Abba Isaac, there is a higher form of prayer. This type of prayer, he terms ‘fiery prayer’ or the ‘prayer of fire’ (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.).¹²⁸ The prayer of fire is both ineffable and trans-rational (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.; Cassian 1997:451 Conference 12.). It produces an ‘ecstasy of the mind’ (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2) as well as an ‘ecstasy of the heart’ (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.).¹²⁹ Cassian’s descriptions of the prayer of fire suggest a transcendence of the mind or heart as well as the normal constraints and realities of ordinary existence.¹³⁰ Such transcendence leads to an engagement with another form of reality that is invisible, at least to those who dwell in the realm of ordinary existence, and eternal (Cassian 1997:225 Conference 6.). This form of reality is the state of contemplation that facilitates engagement with the Kingdom reign of God.¹³¹

Although Cassian describes the prayer of fire as ineffable and beyond the narrow confines of human words he nonetheless does occasionally attempt to convey this form of prayer in his monastic texts. Cassian does not try to directly describe the phenomenon. Instead, he seeks to convey the experience of the prayer of fire by referring to its attendant sensations. Cassian’s monastic writings contain just six descriptions of the prayer of fire. One of these descriptions occurs in the *Institutes* and the remainder are found in the *Conferences*.¹³²

Cassian’s description of the prayer of fire in the *Institutes* appears in the second book. This text addresses the canonical method of prayers that Cassian says he observed in the monasteries of

¹²⁸ Merton (1986:18) states that the prayer of fire is “a lower degree of contemplation” than the “pure and perfect” form of prayer that occurs when the contemplative no longer realises that they are praying. Such division is not necessary. Cassian’s doctrine of the higher stages of prayer appears to be fluid (McGinn & Ferris McGinn 2003:69). The prayer of fire is likely to have encompassed states of prayer during which the prayer was unaware that they were praying.

¹²⁹ The Latin word Cassian uses to describe this phenomenon is *excessus* which is a translation of the Greek *ekstasis* and means ‘standing outside’ familiar circumstances or the normal experience of the self (Stewart 1998:116).

¹³⁰ In keeping with Platonist tradition the terms “mind” and “heart” are synonymous in Cassian’s texts (Stewart 1998:42).

¹³¹ Cassian describes similar ecstatic prayer elsewhere in the *Conferences* without alluding to the prayer of fire (Cassian 1997:125 Conference 3., 1997:155 Conference 4., and 1997:672 Conference 19.). Such references may refer to other types of ecstatic prayer or they may describe the prayer of fire without specifically using such terminology. As this distinction is unclear, this study will confine itself to such descriptions where Cassian either applies the term ‘prayer of fire’ or makes a clear allusion to such prayer by the use of fire imagery.

¹³² Cassian’s last text, *On the Incarnation*, contains no reference to the prayer of fire.

‘Egypt and the Thebaid’ (Cassian 2000:37 Institute 2.).¹³³ Recalling the silence and apparent keen attention of the monks during times of formal prayer, Cassian remarks, almost as an aside, that sometimes this stillness is broken by the occurrence of what the author later terms the prayer of fire.¹³⁴

No sound is heard other than the priest concluding the prayer, except perhaps that which escapes by an ecstasy of the mind from the gate of the mouth and steals up all unawares on the heart, enkindled by the extreme and unendurable heat of the Spirit when what the mind, once inflamed, cannot keep within itself attempts to escape by a kind of ineffable groan issuing from the inmost chambers of the breast (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.).

The first reference to the prayer of fire in the *Conferences* occurs in the sixth conference. Abba Theodore discusses the appropriate response to the appearance of good and bad and warns that ‘it is not the result of the deed that must be considered but rather the disposition of the doer’ (Cassian 1997:223 Conference 6.). Describing a holy person who has attained ‘spiritual achievements’ (but who may still be subject to the vices of pride and vainglory), Theodore remarks that this person, whose prayers are ‘inflamed with spiritual ardour’ can ‘pass over’ to invisible and eternal realities.

He has this when, fervent in spirit, he masters all his desires and lusts; when, safe from every diabolical attack, he rejects and cuts off the vices of the flesh without any effort or difficulty; when, raised up from the earth, he contemplates all present and earthly realities as mere smoke and an empty shadow and disdains them as soon to disappear; when, with ecstatic mind, he not only ardently desires future realities, but even sees them with clarity; when he is effectively fed by spiritual *theoria* (contemplation); when he sees unlocked to himself the heavenly sacraments in all their brightness; when he sends prayers purely and swiftly to God; and when, inflamed with spiritual ardour, he passes over to invisible and eternal realities with such utter eagerness of soul that he cannot bring himself to believe that he is in the flesh (Cassian 1997:224-225 Conference 6.).

The first direct reference to the prayer of fire, or fiery prayer, occurs in the ninth conference when Abba Isaac is discussing the subject of prayer. The desert abba tells Cassian and Germanus that from the four types of prayer identified by the Apostle Paul there can arise ‘very fervent and fiery prayers’ (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.). Such prayers are most likely to be experienced by monks who have progressed from being accomplished in supplication to those who have mastered the practice of thanksgiving. These monks, says Abba Isaac, have ‘already torn from their hearts the penal thorn of conscience’ and can consider the kindness and mercies of God with a ‘most pure mind’ (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.). It is in this latter state that those monks who have progressed to this level of prayer are ‘rapt by their fervent heart to that fiery prayer which can be neither seized nor expressed

¹³³ Cassian uses the term “Egypt” to refer to upper or northern Egypt while “Thebaid” describes lower or southern Egypt (Ramsey 2000:50).

¹³⁴ The term ‘prayer of fire’ or ‘fiery prayer’ first occurs in the *Conferences* (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.).

by the mouth of man' (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.). Isaac describes how such proficient sometimes respond to such rapture.

Yet sometimes the mind which advances to that true disposition of purity and has already begun to be rooted in it, conceiving all of these at one and the same time and rushing through them all like a kind of ungraspable and devouring flame, pours out to God wordless prayers of the purest vigour. These the Spirit itself makes to God as it intervenes with unutterable groans, unbeknownst to us, conceiving at that moment and pouring forth in wordless prayer such great things that they not only – I would say – cannot pass through the mouth but are unable even to be remembered by the mind later on (Cassian 1997:339 Conference 9.).

Isaac points out that Jesus used all four kinds of prayer identified by the Apostle Paul and, in so doing, taught his followers to do the same (Cassian 1997:339 Conference 9.). Later, within the same conference, Isaac delivers an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. The desert abba then states that while this prayer 'seems to contain the utter fullness of perfection' because it was instituted and established by the authority of Jesus himself there is a still higher form of prayer – the prayer of fire (Cassian 1997:345 Conference 9.). Isaac adds that praying the Lord's Prayer can lead followers of Jesus to this higher form of prayer.

It (the Lord's Prayer) leads them by a higher stage to that fiery and indeed, more properly speaking, wordless prayer which is known and experienced by very few. This transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not, I would say, by a sound of the voice or a movement of the tongue or a pronunciation of words. Rather, the mind is aware of it when it is illuminated by an infusion of heavenly light from it, and not by narrow human words, and once the understanding has been suspended it gushes forth as from a most abundant fountain and speaks ineffably to God, producing more in that very brief moment than the self-conscious mind is able to articulate easily or reflect upon (Cassian 1997:345 Conference 9.).

Cassian's fourth, and most brief, reference to the prayer of fire occurs towards the end of the ninth conference. Abba Isaac remarks that while singing the psalms one of the verses might offer 'the occasion for fiery prayer' (Cassian 1997:346 Conference 9.).

Cassian returns to the subject of the prayer of fire in tenth conference. Abba Isaac once more discusses the topic of prayer and stresses the importance of pure and imageless prayer which, once the mind has been 'purged of every carnal desire' (Cassian 1997:376 Conference 10.), can manifest itself in elevation of the human person to the point at which 'one's whole way of life and all the yearnings of one's heart become a single and continuous prayer' (Cassian 1997:376 Conference 10.). In response to Germanus' request for an explanation about how to conceive and maintain a perpetual awareness of God (Cassian 1997:377 Conference 10.), Abba Isaac teaches the importance of meditating upon the Scriptures and single-mindedly repeating a devotional formula.¹³⁵ He advocates the opening verse of Psalm 70: 'O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me' (Cassian

¹³⁵ Cassian appears to be the first Christian writer to describe this method of prayer (Chadwick 1985:13) and use a contemplative spiritual formula to achieve continual prayer (Hausherr 1978:20).

1997:379 Conference 10.).¹³⁶ This verse, says Abba Isaac, is useful and necessary to whatever condition a person may find oneself (Cassian 1997:380 Conference 10.). He then identifies the various vices that may be held at bay by its repetition (Cassian 1997:380-383 Conference 10.). Furthermore, the constant reciting of Scripture in prayer, says Abba Isaac, can lead a person to experience the meaning of such texts. Such experience, while not specifically identified as such, is clearly the manifestation of the prayer of fire.

Thus we shall penetrate its (Scripture's) meaning not through the written text but with experience leading the way. So it is that our mind will arrive at that incorruptible prayer to which, in the previous discussion, as far as the Lord deigned to grant it, the conference was ordered and directed. This was not only not laid hold of by the sight of some image, but it cannot even be grasped by any word or phrase. Rather, once the mind's attentiveness has been set ablaze, it is called forth in an unspeakable ecstasy of heart and with insatiable gladness of spirit, and the mind, having transcended all feelings and visible matter, pours it out to God with unutterable groans and sighs (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.).

The sixth occurrence of the prayer of fire appears in the twelfth conference. In this conference Abba Chaeremon addresses the subject of chastity. The desert abba states that control of the mind is the key to the control of the body. After Abba Chaeremon has discussed what he identifies as the seven levels of chastity he outlines the difference between chastity and abstinence. Abstinence is a consequence of struggle, says the desert abba, whereas chastity is a love of purity for its own sake (Cassian 1997:447 Conference 12.). It is in the peace of such chastity that the Lord is encountered.

For there is no one who does not know from the vastness of creation itself that the works of God are marvellous. But what he accomplishes in his holy ones by his daily activity and abundantly pours into them by his particular munificence – this no one knows but the soul which enjoys it and which, in the recesses of its conscience, is so uniquely the judge of his benefits that it cannot only not speak of them but cannot even seize them in understanding or thought when, leaving behind its fiery ardour, it falls back to gazing upon material and earthly realities (Cassian 1997:450 Conference 12.).

While Cassian does not specifically term this divine encounter as the prayer of fire the use of the term 'fiery ardour' to describe the soul's response to such an experience, together with references to its incomprehensible and ineffable nature, gives a clear indication that this is what is being described. This association is further strengthened when Abba Chaeremon moves on to discuss the mysterious nature of such encounters.

¹³⁶ The practice of meditating on the Scriptures by frequently repeating a short phrase from the Bible as a devotional formula was very influential in the emergence of Eastern monasticism. Reciting the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner"), in particular, became an important discipline for monks who sought stillness of the mind and heart (*hesychia*) and endeavoured to be faithful to the biblical injunction to pray at all times (Ware 2000:403; Hausherr 1978:126).

Let me pass over those secret and hidden dispensations of God which each holy person's mind sees operative in a special way within itself at given moments; over that heavenly inpouring of spiritual gladness by which the downcast mind is uplifted by an inspired joy; over those fiery ecstasies of the heart and the joyful consolations at once unspeakable and unheard of, by which those who occasionally fall into a listless torpor are raised as out of the deepest sleep to the most fervent prayer (Cassian 1997:451 Conference 12.).

The desert abba remarks that, the 'more the mind has advanced to a more refined purity, the more sublimely it will see God, and will grow in wonder within itself rather than find the ability to speak of it or a word to explain it' (Cassian 1997:451 Conference 12.). Abba Chaeremon adds, with a further oblique reference to the prayer of fire, that the human response to such divine encounters is praise and wonder.

So, then, whoever has deserved to arrive at that state of virtue which we have been speaking of, after examining in the silence of his mind all the things that the Lord works in those who are his own by his special grace, and aflame with astonished reflection on them all, will cry out with the deepest emotion of his heart: 'Wonderful are your works, and my soul knows them exceedingly' (Cassian 1997:452 Conference 12.).¹³⁷

4.4 Importance of spiritual disciplines

All of Cassian's descriptions of the prayer of fire locate the phenomenon within the context of monastic communities in the Egyptian desert. Participation in these isolated communities, the renunciation of wealth and status and the observance of collective disciplines such as silence, fasting and vigils, appear to be necessary components of the experience of the prayer of fire.

The experience of the prayer of fire seems to occur during or after participation in *liturgical worship*. Cassian's mention of a priest concluding prayers prior to the occurrence of the prayer of fire (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.) and Abba Isaac's comment that such prayer might take place after the singing of the psalms (Cassian 1997:346 Conference 9.) indicate that some, if not all, occurrences of this form of prayer are related to the practice of formal communal worship.¹³⁸ Certainly, all the occurrences of the prayer of fire described by Cassian take place during, or soon after, some formal act of prayer. These acts of prayer are variously described as 'spiritual *theoria*' or contemplation (Cassian 1997:224-225 Conference 6.), thanksgiving (Cassian 1997:338 Conference 9.), the Lord's Prayer (Cassian 1997:345 Conference 9.), 'singing the Psalms' (Cassian 1997:346 Conference 9.) and 'reciting the Scriptures' (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.).

Closely allied to the conduct of liturgical worship is the spiritual discipline of engaging with the *Scriptures*. Among the monastic communities in Egypt the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms,

¹³⁷ Abba Chaeremon is drawing on the words of the Psalmist (Ps 139:14) in his example of the praise and wonder that results from such divine encounters (Ramsey 1997:456).

¹³⁸ Cassian's mention of a priest leading worship in his description of the prayer of fire in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.) suggests that this particular instance of liturgical worship was a celebration of the eucharist.

were read, reflected upon and used as inspiration for prayer (Grisbrooke 1992:405). They were also read aloud, for other monks to hear, and also recited during times of private prayer as well as during communal services of worship. Often monks learned large portions of the Scriptures and recited passages during prayer from memory (Ramsey 1997:531) Many monks were illiterate and written texts scarce (Bourgeault 2008:163). The reciting of these passages was frequently in the form of chanting (Bourgeault 2008:164). Meditation on the Scriptures appears to have been a vocal rather than a silent practice (Cassian 2000:47 Institute 2.) (Ramsey 2000:54).

The Scriptures were regarded by the early Church as superior and distinct from any other form of literature. Not only was every word they contained believed to be inspired by God but also such words were themselves bearers of some form of divine revelation (Schneiders 2005d:6). Accurate understanding of the Scriptures depended not only on the knowledge of the person engaging with the texts but also their faith and prayerful attentiveness to the Spirit of Jesus the Christ. Because the Scriptures were God's revelation to the Church they could only be correctly interpreted by a Christian who was working within a community of followers of Christ (Schneiders 2005d:6).

For Cassian the self-knowledge and renunciation that are achieved through the practice of spiritual disciplines within monastic community were essential preparation for engagement with the Scriptures (Weaver 2001:371) Only through such a radical reorientation of life could the monk grasp the mysteries contained in the Scriptures (Weaver 2001:370). Cassian observes that the prayer of fire can occur while the monk is reciting or reflecting upon a passage of Scripture (Cassian 1997:345-346 Conference 9.; 1997:385 Conference 10.). Furthermore, the experience of the prayer of fire and the accompanying state of contemplation enable the monk to 'penetrate' the meaning of the passage of Scripture that is being engaged (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.). Such discovery is brought about not by the acquisition of knowledge but rather through experience, says Cassian (1997:385 Conference 10.).

The practice of engaging with the Scriptures is clearly an important part of Cassian's teaching about spirituality. He recognises that such engagement can take several forms (Cassian 1997:510 Conference 14.). A schema for engaging with the Scriptures is presented in the dialogue with Abba Nesteros, addressing spiritual knowledge, in the fourteenth conference. Apart from its literal or historical sense, Scripture can be understood as 'allegory', 'anagogy' or 'tropology' (Cassian 1997:510 Conference 14.). Using the example of the city of Jerusalem, Abba Nesteros points out that in a historical sense this phrase in Scripture simply refers to the city of the Jews (Cassian 1997:510 Conference 14.). In an allegorical sense, however, the term acquires a distinctly Christian or theological meaning and implies the 'Church of Christ' (Cassian 1997:510 Conference 14.) (Schneiders 2005d:15). The anagogical meaning of the Scriptural term points to its eternal or eschatological meaning and in this instance refers to the 'heavenly city of God' (Cassian 1997:510 Conference 14.). The tropological meaning concerns an individual's Christian practice and the city

of Jerusalem in this light refers to the praise or reproach that the human soul receives from God (Cassian 1997:510 Conference 14.) (Schneiders 2005d:15).¹³⁹

A further spiritual discipline vital to the spirituality taught by Cassian is *obedience* to a monastic superior. All the descriptions of the prayer of fire conveyed in the *Conferences* are presented by revered desert abbots to their devoted pupils Cassian and Germanus. In the description of the prayer of fire in the *Institutes* Cassian, the author, adopts the role of the teacher of the desert wisdom and his Gallic audience are the disciples receiving instruction. This master-pupil relationship appears essential to the process of imparting and receiving spiritual wisdom. The pupil is required to be eager for knowledge, dedicated, obedient and trusting of the abba. The abba needs to be holy, a person who has successfully overcome the obstacles to God through the application of the spiritual disciplines, and has experienced the divine. Furthermore, such teachers need the wisdom to discern the spiritual maturity and earnestness of those who come to them for guidance. Spiritual wisdom should only be imparted to those who are ready to receive it, warns Cassian (Cassian 1997:379 Conference 10.).

4.5 Compunction and discernment

Integral to the pursuit of the spiritual disciplines advocated by Cassian are the attitudes of ‘compunction’ and ‘discernment’. Compunction (*compunctio*) is a state of sorrow or sadness. It is often manifest in tears of joy or sorrow and reflects an awareness of one’s own sin (Stewart 1998:123). Cassian frequently uses the term in relation to the experience of the prayer of fire (Stewart 1998:122). Compunction is sometimes a condition that exists within the heart of a monk before he experiences the prayer of fire and at other times it is part of this ecstatic experience (Stewart 1998:128).

Discernment, or discretion (*discretio*) is, according to Cassian, essential for the monk to overcome the passions and temptations that hinder his progress on the ‘royal road’ towards purity of heart and the reign of God (Cassian 1997:85 Conference 2.). It encompasses the ability to distinguish between good and evil spirits, to correctly determine the merit of one’s own thoughts, and to identify the correct motive for action (Levko 1996:156). It is a charism that can be cultivated by the monk to better enable him to avoid sin and the excesses of behaviour that impair his spiritual progress (Levko 1996:157).

The exercise of this charism strengthens a monk’s prayer and enables him to detect and overcome threats to the well-being of his soul (Cassian 1997:90-91 Conference 2.). For a monk to progress in the application of discernment, and thereby advance on his spiritual journey, he must practice true humility and be willing to subject himself to the guidance of his monastic superiors

¹³⁹ Cassian’s use of the four-fold theory of Scriptural interpretation proved highly influential in the development of Western monasticism. In particular, it shaped the practice of *lectio divina*, the prayerful study of the Scriptures, that was one of the central disciplines of monks in the West (Schneiders 2005d:15).

(Cassian 1997:90 Conference 2.). These monastic teachers, advanced in the practice of discernment, help the monk in their charge discern the ‘interior dynamic’ of their souls and also encourage them to submit their own will to the will of God (Levko 1996:169). They enable the monk to ‘hear the voice of God’ above all the other voices that clamour for his attention (Levko 1996:171).

4.6 Influences on Cassian’s teaching about spirituality

Cassian attributes the spirituality he presented to the monks in Gaul to the holy abbas he encountered during his sojourn in the deserts of Egypt. A close reading of Cassian’s monastic texts reveal that his teaching on spirituality was shaped by several other influences.

Cassian’s debt to the *Bible* has been noted above. The great biblical themes of creation, sin, redemption and restoration provide Cassian with the ‘meta narrative’ that underpins the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*. It is in the context of a worldview forged by such biblical themes that Cassian presents his teaching about spirituality and seeks to guide Christian monks towards perfection and presence in the divine realm. The Bible gave Cassian a theology of religious life and more particularly a basis for the spiritual practices of communal and private prayer. The sacred texts provided both a language and, through its incorporation into liturgy, a framework for prayer (Stewart 1998:101). Other influences on the spirituality taught by Cassian may include the writings of *Basil* and *Jerome*, which Cassian praises in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:13 *Institutes* Preface.), as well as those of other contemporary authors such as Palladius and Sulpicius Severus (Stewart 1998:36). The extent of such contributions is unclear.

One of the strongest influences on the spirituality presented by Cassian in his monastic texts is *Evagrius*. Much of the theology expressed in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* appears to have been inspired by Evagrius who in turn was greatly influenced by Origen (Munz 1960:1).¹⁴⁰ Whether this inspiration was achieved through direct encounters between Cassian and Evagrius when the two men lived in nearby monastic communities in the Egyptian desert is unclear. Cassian may have had access to Evagrius’ writings while he was staying in Egypt or at a later date when he was resident in Constantinople, Rome or Gaul. Alternatively, Evagrius may have influenced some of the desert abbas who then instructed Cassian. Evagrius was certainly highly influential during his residence among the monks of Egypt and a leading proponent of Origen’s teachings in the region (Chadwick 1968:26). Among the most significant influences of Evagrius on the writing of Cassian are the categorisation of the eight major distractions that hinder and divert monastic practice; the distinction between the active and the contemplative life; the internal struggle against the passions that beset the human person; the quest for the state of *apatheia* or ‘dispassion’; the attainment of *gnosis* or divine

¹⁴⁰ Stewart (1998:36, 253) notes that since the publication of Salvatore Marsili’s *Giovanni Cassiano ed Evagrio Pontico: dottrina sulla carita e contemplazione (John Cassian and Evagrius of Pontus: The doctrine of charity and contemplation)* in 1936 it has been widely accepted that Evagrius was a major influence on Cassian.

knowledge; and the stripping of the mind during prayer (Chadwick 1968:92-94). Evagrius shaped Cassian's perception of human sexuality as a 'sensor of the spiritual condition of the monk' (Brown 1998:64). Cassian followed Evagrius' example by employing Greek philosophical terminology and concepts to describe the monastic quest (Chadwick 1968:92).

There are major differences, however, between the spirituality presented by Cassian and that contained in the writings of Evagrius. Among the most noticeable is that Cassian avoided using the term *apatheia* (passionlessness) that Evagrius frequently deployed in his spiritual theology. He adopted instead the phrase *puritas cordis* (purity of heart) to express the contemplative state that is the gateway to greater intimacy with the divine (Dunn 2003:77; Stewart 1998:42). Evagrius drew on Stoic philosophy and the teaching of Clement of Alexandria in his use of the term *apatheia* (Stewart 1998:42). Cassian probably avoided using the word to distance himself from controversy that was beginning to emerge around its usage as well as to disassociate himself from the already controversial Evagrius (Stewart 1998:12). While Evagrius charts a course of spiritual progress that leads to the 'reign of heaven' and then to the 'reign of God' Cassian makes no distinction between these two realms (Stewart 1998:41). They are the ultimate goal of monastic life and the realm in which the monk is able to experience a vision of God (Stewart 1998:41). Cassian's description of the experience by which a monk might ascend the spiritual path to an engagement with God differs from that of Evagrius. Steeped in the Neoplatonic tradition, Evagrius frequently describes this process as one in which the mind of the monk realises its true condition by being 'taken up' to divine knowledge or to God (Stewart 1998:120). Cassian, in contrast, depicts this progress as an ecstatic experience in which the mind or heart of the monk transcends its normal condition and engages with the divine. It is an ecstatic experience rather than the contemplative process described by Evagrius (Stewart 1998:120).

Evagrius' theology is undoubtedly influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy but it remains Christian, particularly Trinitarian, in content (Casiday 2006:232). While adopting Evagrius' teaching Cassian heightens the emphasis on Christ. (Casiday 2006:232). The spiritual practices of Cassian are based on meditation on the Christian Scriptures and the prayer that this practice elicits, which at its highest level leads to mystical union with God, is centred on Christ (Casiday 2006:233; Griffiths 1964:38).¹⁴¹

Cassian uses Jesus' teaching of the Beatitudes on the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3-11) to describe the experience of mystical union with God (Stewart 1998:55).¹⁴² It is from this passage of Scripture that Cassian adopts the term 'purity of heart.' Cassian also uses other Scriptural texts to

¹⁴¹ Casiday (2006:224) argues that Cassian conceives of Jesus as the "connective thread of history" and understands the Bible as a "testament to Jesus Christ's actions in history" that is "pervaded by Christological significance."

¹⁴² Stewart (1998:48) points out that an indication of Cassian's Christo-centric understanding of contemplation is the way he interchanges the words "God" and "Christ" when describing this experience.

describe the phenomenon. They include Psalm 51:10 and Proverbs 20:9 (Cassian 1997:49 Conference 1.; Cassian 1997:475 Conference 13.; Cassian 1997:808 Conference 23.) as well as the story of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38-42) and Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Rom 1:20) (Cassian 1997:47 Conference 1.; Cassian 1997:791-792 Conference 23.) (Stewart 1998:53). Adopting the words of Paul, Cassian asserts that the practice of the monastic disciplines prepares the monk for the 'fullness of the measure of Christ' (Cassian 1997:253 Conference 7.) (Stewart 1998:58).¹⁴³

The spiritual journey of the monk is not only centred on the Kingdom of God, as revealed in the Christian Scriptures, but also guided and sustained by the person of the Holy Spirit. Engagement with God, presence in the Kingdom of God either in the temporal or eternal realm, is made manifest in Christ. Cassian portrays perfection as a unity with Christ and a sharing in the divine love, *agape*, between Christ and the other persons of the Trinity (Cassian 1997:375 Conference 10.).

4.5 Conclusion

An examination of the content of Cassian's teaching about spirituality, contained in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, identifies the goal of this instruction to be the monk's attainment of 'purity of heart' and consequent presence within the Kingdom of God.

Cassian provides within his monastic texts a set of guidelines or spiritual route maps to lead the monk to his objective. This ultimate goal can be experienced not only in a future eschatological realm but also, to some degree, in the temporal domain. Cassian describes a series of spiritual practices that enable the monk to journey towards his goal. These practices stress the importance of experience as well as knowledge in the quest for perfection and presence in the divine realm. Within them there is a balance between personal devotion and communal activities and obligations.

Essential components of Cassian's teaching on spirituality are his insistence on the monk's renunciation of wealth and status, the abandonment of classical notions of mutually beneficial friendships in favour of bonds founded on common attitudes of morality, and the recognition of human sexuality as an indicator of a person's attachment to deeper hidden vices and sins. These aspects of Cassian's teaching on spirituality differ greatly from the instruction of most of his contemporaries. Cassian emphasises the importance of divine grace in the monk's struggle for purity of heart and presence in the divine realm. If these twin objectives are accomplished, teaches Cassian, the monk is able to attain the state of contemplation that heralds the experience of the beatific vision that offers intimacy with the divine.

Cassian highlights the importance of prayer in his teaching about spirituality. He recognises the unique and diverse forms of prayer practiced by Christians and the influence of human personality and context. He highlights the importance of praying by meditating on the Scriptures as well as the practice of constant repetition from memory of a word or phrase from the Bible as a

¹⁴³ Cassian is quoting Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (4:13).

means of practicing 'wordless' prayer. Cassian, through the teaching of Abba Isaac, addresses the four main types of prayer identified by the apostle Paul. They are supplication, prayer that invokes a vow, intercession and thanksgiving. According to Cassian these types of prayer represent progressive stages in the practice of prayer. The highest form of prayer is what Cassian terms 'the prayer of fire.' Trans-rational and ineffable, the prayer of fire elevates the monk who has attained purity of heart to presence within the Kingdom of God. It is a state of contemplation that leads to perfection. Cassian's brief and infrequent descriptions of the prayer of fire identify the importance of spiritual practices, especially liturgical worship, engaging with the Scriptures and obedience to a superior, in the journey to perfection.

Cassian attributes his teaching on spirituality to the Egyptian desert abbas but the extent of their contribution is unclear. However, the influence of Evagrius and his master Origen is very evident. Although Evagrius' theology was strongly marked by Neoplatonic philosophy it was Christian, and particularly Trinitarian, in content (Casiday 2006: 232). While adapting Evagrius' teaching Cassian increased its emphasis on Christ (Casiday 2006:232). Cassian employs a hermeneutic approach in his writings and reinterprets the teaching of the desert abbas he received in Egypt in the past for a new audience in Gaul.

The examination of the content of Cassian's teaching on spirituality greatly expands the researcher's understanding of the spirituality Cassian wished to convey to his audience in Gaul. It also refines the researcher's insight into the spirituality of Cassian the historical person. Cassian's spirituality, as well as the teaching about spirituality he conveyed to others, was moulded by the teaching and practices of the Egyptian desert abbas and particularly influenced by the Origenist instruction of Evagrius. Recognition of these aspects of the spirituality of Cassian is valuable to the hermeneutical process that endeavours to establish a contemporary understanding of Cassian's spirituality.

Chapter Five

Evaluating Cassian's spirituality for contemporary Christian communities

5.1 Introduction

To assess the value of Cassian's spirituality for contemporary Christian communities it is necessary to understand this phenomenon as lived experience. It is this aspect of Cassian's spirituality that we can best access and appropriate. To gain this understanding it is necessary to apply a hermeneutical approach to Cassian's writings.

The investigation uses a synthetic and constructivist hermeneutical approach based on the 'philosophical hermeneutics' of Hans-Georg Gadamer. It engages Cassian's texts, the primary sources of the investigation's data, using Gadamer's heuristic model of 'the game of conversation' between text and reader (Gadamer 1979:330). This model recognises that the texts available to us do not simply point back to a possible meaning of the phenomenon under investigation. Valid meanings can also be discovered within the texts themselves and, furthermore, can be generated by these texts in interaction with the reader (1979:263). Cassian's texts are therefore not depositories of the 'remnants of past existence' but rather bearers of a 'living tradition' (Gadamer 1979:351). The investigation of Cassian's spirituality adapts Gadamer's 'hermeneutic of retrieval' by incorporating the critical insights provided by the historical-critical and literary-critical approaches to the author's text. This corrective measure can be termed a 'hermeneutic of suspicion.'

5.2 Gadamer's conversational hermeneutical model

Gadamer (1979:258) describes the interaction between text and interpreter as a fusion of traditions or 'historical horizons'. The text is not simply an expression of a past reality for Gadamer but has its own meaning and is immersed in a tradition of its own (Gadamer 1979:262). This tradition goes beyond the confines of the text's historical composition and includes subsequent accretions of meaning acquired in a 'constant process of education' (Gadamer 1979:261). Gadamer (1979:264) argues that the temporal distance between the composition of a text and its interpretation is not a gulf that needs to be bridged for valid interpretation to occur. This span of time does not separate the interpreter from the text but is rather the 'supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted' (Gadamer 1979:264). It is not a 'yawning abyss' but is 'filled with the continuity of custom and tradition' through which all that is handed down through history is made present to the interpreter (Gadamer 1979:264-265).

The interpreter is not in Gadamer's opinion a detached observer seeking to uncover meaning within the texts. The interpreter brings to the process of interpretation their own tradition or historical consciousness (Gadamer 1979:261). It is the engagement of the tradition of the text with the tradition of the interpreter that generates understanding (Gadamer 1979:258). Such understanding, according

to Gadamer, is not an action of subjectivity but rather ‘the entering into an event of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated’ (Gadamer 1979:258). For Gadamer, understanding is not reconstruction but mediation (Linge 1976:xvi). It is not an accidental or subjective event but an ontological process (Linge 1976:xiv).

Gadamer (1979:261) recognises that prejudices or pre-judgements are inherent within historical consciousness. They are present within the tradition of the text and the tradition of the interpreter. These prejudices should be recognised, argues Gadamer, not because they are obstacles to understanding but because they are constituents of the traditions within the hermeneutical situation (Linge 1976:xvii). It is in a conversation between text and interpreter that the prejudgements of the traditions of both parties are disclosed and understanding, through a fusion of these traditions, elicited (Gadamer 1979:258). The conversational process of questions and answers opens possibilities of understanding for both the text and the interpreter. Furthermore, the process has the capacity to further change the historical consciousness or tradition of the text and the interpreter. Gadamer (1979:262) remarks that tradition is not simply a precondition inherited by text and interpreter but is something which the components of the hermeneutical situation produce. They participate in its evolution and determine its future (Gadamer 1979:261).

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics acknowledges the ‘ontological direction of understanding’ (Gadamer 1979:264). The search for the true meaning of a text is never finished (Gadamer 1979:265). Fresh sources of error continue to be discovered and rejected while new sources of understanding are encountered that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning (Gadamer 1979:265-266).

5.3 ‘Claims of attention’ of Cassian’s texts

To apply Gadamer’s conversational hermeneutical model to Cassian’s texts it is necessary to identify the ‘claims of attention’ of these documents (Tracy 1984:170). These elements of attraction inevitably affect how we perceive and approach the documents. They exist because of the status of Cassian’s texts as ‘classic’ works of literature. The *Institutes*, the *Conferences* and, to a lesser extent, *On the Incarnation* are classic texts because they continue to attract readers long after they were written (Kermode 1975:44). They possess ‘intrinsic qualities that endure’ but also have an ‘openness to accommodation’ that keeps them alive (Kermode 1975:44). The perception that Cassian’s writings, particularly his monastic texts, contain information about spirituality of the past that is of value, or at least worth discovering, in a contemporary context inevitably affects how we engage with the documents. The beliefs, values and attitudes expressed in Cassian’s documents are foreign to us but not so alien that they cannot be retrieved in some form.

The claims of attention of Cassian’s texts are also shaped by the historical tradition of which they are a part. Cassian’s writings, and the teaching about spirituality they convey, greatly influenced subsequent writers and their spirituality. The *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, in particular, exerted

great influence on prominent Christian writers such as Benedict, Aquinas (Ramsey 1997:7) and Merton (1990:283). Such is the extent of their influence on Benedict, and the subsequent impact of the Rule of Benedict on the development of Western monasticism, that the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* have assumed the status of classic monastic texts. Cassian's writings are part of a 'living tradition' that spans more than one and a half millennia. It is a tradition that has its roots in the premodern world of Late Antiquity but also stretches through the European eras of the Medieval period, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It continues to be present in the global age of the twenty-first century that is marked by a mix of premodern, modern and postmodern religious and secular perspectives (Wilber 2006:1).¹⁴⁴ The living tradition that embodies Cassian's texts is inevitably shaped by changing developments within Western, as well as Eastern, monasticism and also external perceptions of such developments. The increase in religious pluralism in most societies during the past century, and the prominence of Hindu and Buddhist monastic practices, has also affected this tradition. Contemporary readers of Cassian's texts will inevitably be influenced by these developments and perceptions that emerged long after the original composition of the documents. Their understanding of what it means to be a monk, a Christian even a human person is likely to be very different from the views of Cassian. It is at the juncture where the tradition of Cassian's texts encounters the tradition of the contemporary reader that Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' occurs and new meanings are generated and discovered.

5.4 Identification of pre-understandings in Cassian's texts and in the tradition of the reader

Identification of the pre-understandings or biases within the tradition of Cassian's texts and in the tradition of the reader is an essential part of Gadamer's hermeneutical process.

Recognising one's own biases is often difficult but it is essential that pre-understandings are identified as explicitly as possible (Tracy 1984:172). This can best be accomplished through a process of self-interrogation about the principal purpose of the investigation. The reader of Cassian's texts who seeks insight into the spirituality of the author must first reflect on the nature of their own spirituality. The examination of the primary and secondary texts, research into Cassian's historical context, and study of the teaching conveyed in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* has revealed some of the prejudgements evident in the spirituality of Cassian and the spirituality he conveyed to his audience in Gaul.

The cultural context of a contemporary reader of Cassian's texts exhibits some broad similarities to those of the author. South Africa at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the territories inhabited by Cassian in the fourth and fifth centuries both experienced considerable

¹⁴⁴ Premodern perspectives in contemporary Western culture tend to interpret religious myths, such as the Garden of Eden and the creation of the world in six days, as literal truths and dogmatically resist the claims of Modernity that emphasise the application of reason and science (Wilber 1998:41-43). Postmodernity is a reaction against Modernity that rejects, among other things, essentialism, rationality and grand narratives (Wilber 1998:120-121).

political, social and economic upheaval and uncertainty. Previously fixed systems of thought and behaviour in these contexts fragmented and gave way to radically plural and fluid environments.¹⁴⁵

However, there are many differences between the context of the contemporary reader and that of Cassian. The Church, for example, is not the powerful religious and social phenomenon it was in Late Antiquity. It first split during Cassian's lifetime, when the Church of East ceded from the rest of the Christian community, and has continued to fragment and rupture because of theological and political divisions. Secularism and scepticism have replaced Christianity as the dominant belief system in Europe and North America. In Africa and South America, the emerging strongholds of Christianity, the Church possesses little of the wealth and political influence it enjoyed in Late Antiquity. Most of the territories of the Eastern Roman Empire are now inhabited by followers of Islam. Enormous advances in technology, dramatic population growth and the emergence of a multitude of nation states have substantially redefined the world in which Cassian once lived.

The biggest transformation, however, has probably occurred in the realm of human identity. Contemporary understanding of the human person has been influenced greatly by the pioneering work in the past century of Sigmund Freud on the concepts of the conscious and unconscious mind; Carl Jung on the role of myth and archetype in the realm of the collective unconscious; Rudolph Otto's theory of the numinous; William James' examination of the varieties of religious experience; Abraham Maslow's investigations of 'peak experiences' and Jean Piaget's theory of intellectual development. The emergence of depth psychology, transpersonal psychology and multidisciplinary consciousness studies, together with progress in evolutionary biology, neuroscience and psychiatry, has further advanced understanding of the complexities of the human person. The rise in the past century of various philosophical perspectives broadly termed postmodernism, which are a reaction to the Modernism that grew out of the Enlightenment, has reshaped the cultural context of the human person. Postmodernism recognises that all interpretations of 'truth' are culturally-conditioned, contingent and morally flawed as well as intellectually partial (Sheldrake 1998:8). It is suspicious of any system of thought or belief that seeks to detach itself from the moorings of its context (Sheldrake 1998:8). Contemporary notions of the human person and their cultural context differ greatly from the anthropology of Late Antiquity and worldview of the Roman Empire and its former territories. There was no concept of 'self' as understood since the philosophy of Descartes but nonetheless there were discussions among philosophers about the 'mind-body' problem (Chadwick 1999). Such thinking was often influenced by Neoplatonism as well as the teaching of Aristotle and Stoicism (Chadwick 1999). It shaped both pagan and Christian attitudes (Chadwick 1999). Gregory of Nyssa, for example, describes the human person as comprising *psyche* (animal

¹⁴⁵ Sheldrake (2007:173) describes the close of the 20th century as a context where "previously fixed systems of thought and behaviour had fragmented and the world was understood as radically plural."

nature), *nous, mens* or *ratio* (rational nature or the mind) and *pneuma* or *spiritus* (spiritual life, grace or divinisation) (Merton 2005:56). The human person is made in the image of God and the purpose of life is to reproduce in the depths of the soul the divine likeness (Merton 2005:56).¹⁴⁶ Cassian portrays the journey of transformation in a world imbued with the supernatural in which both angels and demons are present and active (Chadwick 1968:97-98).

5.5 Determining what is of value to contemporary Christian communities

Gadamer's conversational model of hermeneutics encourages the reader to ask questions of the texts under scrutiny. It also recognises that texts address and ask questions of the reader (Gadamer 1979:266). One of the key questions Cassian's texts reflect back to us is the purpose of the engagement. *Why is the reader studying the texts?* The answer mirrors Cassian's twofold description of the purpose of monastic life. The aim of the reader's engagement with Cassian's texts is to understand Cassian's spirituality as lived experience. The goal of the engagement is to determine whether Cassian's spirituality is of value to contemporary Christian communities. This disclosure prompts a further question. *How would we know whether Cassian's spirituality is of value to contemporary Christian communities?*

The investigation earlier defined a Christian community as a body of people drawn and held together by their common desire to emulate the way of life modelled by Jesus of Nazareth and to follow his teaching. A contemporary Christian community is active and comprises people who are currently drawn and held together by a common relationship to the Christ as distinct from groups that existed only in the past.

A desire to engage with the divine is one of the distinguishing features of most contemporary Christian communities. This desire is often eschatological, and looks to the future return of Christ, but frequently it is also immediate. Communal worship, as well as private devotions, such as prayer, contemplation and reflection on the Scriptures, is usually undertaken by members of these groups in the hope and anticipation of engaging in some way with the divine. Caring for others, within and beyond the community, is also recognised by many such groups as an activity that can result in engagement with the divine.¹⁴⁷ Jesus of Nazareth, an exemplar for members of contemporary Christian communities, is frequently depicted in the Scriptures engaging with the divine or teaching his followers to follow his example. The Gospel texts of the New Testament describe how Jesus is filled with the spirit of the divine, the 'Holy Spirit', at his baptism in the River Jordan, at the outset of his earthly ministry (Mt 28:19, Lk 4:14). They relate how Jesus engages directly with the divine

¹⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa argues that while there are differences between male and female in the body of the human person there is no distinction in the soul (Dunn 2003:43).

¹⁴⁷ Traditional Christian missiology asserts that the care of others is an act that not only pleases or satisfies God but also facilitates an encounter with the Divine because all people are created in the image of God and, furthermore, God is incarnate within all people.

in prayer and addresses the divine as ‘Father’ (Mt 14:36, Lk 23:46) (Johnston 2000:182). This intimacy is dramatically demonstrated not only in the baptism of Jesus but also in his transfiguration (Mt 17:1-13, Mk 9:2-13 and Lk 9: 28-36) and during his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:39, Lk 22:44-46) (Johnston 2000:186-188).

The dramatic encounters between Jesus and the divine, described in the Gospels, can be understood as ‘mystical’ experiences (Johnston 2000:186).¹⁴⁸ They depict a union of human and divine consciousness. During these events Jesus is united with the divine and yet preserves his own identity. This mystical union, or communion, is particularly apparent when Jesus, inspired by the Holy Spirit, engages in prayer with the Father. The Gospel of John presents Jesus telling his followers that he is ‘in’ the Father and the Father is ‘in’ him (Jn 14:11). Jesus’ capacity for intimacy extends beyond his relationship with the Father to include communion with his followers (Johnston 2000:183). He invites his followers to reciprocate the love he has for them and thereby ‘dwell’ in him as he ‘dwells’ in them (Jn 15:4). Jesus encourages his followers to emulate the relationship he has with them, in the way they relate to others (Jn15:12), and to also emulate the relationship he has with the Father (Jn 17:20-23) (Johnston 2000:183-184). By his teaching and example Jesus acts as a ‘mystagogue’ and leads his followers into mystical union with the divine. Through their relationship with him they are united with the Father (Jn 14:9) (Johnston 2000:184). For followers of Jesus, who recognise him as the Christ, the capacity to elicit union with the divine is extended beyond time and space by the supernatural act of the resurrection (Johnston 1984:87). The potential of divine union in and through the resurrected Christ lies at the heart of much of the Christian mystical tradition (Kourie 1998:448).¹⁴⁹ It is the kernel of the pre-eminent Christian doctrine of salvation (Schneiders 2003:170). Christian salvation involves personal union with God, now and in eternity, as well as the transformation of all creation in Christ (Schneiders 2003:170).

It is this orientation towards possible engagement with the divine that marks most contemporary Christian communities as religious.¹⁵⁰ While the term ‘religion’ has many meanings it is used in this investigation to describe humankind’s desires and endeavours to ‘rebind’ itself with the divine.¹⁵¹ Downey (1997:24) applies Von Hügel’s model of religion and identifies three distinct

¹⁴⁸ Within the Academy there is no consensus on a precise definition of the term mysticism nor on its relationship to institutional religion, prayer or dogmatic belief (Perrin 2005:442). The word mysticism is often used to describe the experience of some form of union between the human person and that which is perceived to be ultimate reality. Kourie (1992:86) defines mysticism as “consciousness of union with the Divine, or the Ground of Being, or Ultimate Reality.” Wayne Teasdale (2001:20) defines it as direct, immediate experience of Ultimate Reality. David Perrin (2005:443) suggests that the core of mysticism is ‘the radical surrender of self to the loving embrace of the Other who is the foundation of all life, the One to whom we owe our very existence’.

¹⁴⁹ In Christian mysticism it is Christ who articulates the experience of union with God through the Spirit (Kourie 1998:439).

¹⁵⁰ Schneiders (2003:169) describes religions as “cultural systems for dealing with ultimate reality, whether or not ultimate reality is conceptualized as God.”

¹⁵¹The word “religion” is derived from the Latin *religio* meaning to “rebind” (Rohr & Feister 2001a:9).

but frequently overlapping expressions of the phenomenon.¹⁵² The first is the institutional or communal dimension of religion whereby formal structures and practices make use of prescribed texts, rituals, rites, myths and narratives to mediate communion with the divine. Secondly, there is the intellectual component of religion, whereby systems of thought are developed, communicated, defended and, where necessary, adapted or appropriated to maintain an appreciation of the presence of the divine in the life of the individual, the community and the cosmos. Finally, there is the mystical aspect of religion whereby experience of the divine is encouraged, facilitated and responded to. Healthy expressions of religion, according to Downey (1997:24), display an interaction between its three functions.

The mystical aspect of religion is often overshadowed by the two other more common expressions. However, it holds great potential to elicit transformation among religious adherents.¹⁵³ Mystical experience often results in a reorganisation of a person's belief systems and life-style together with a 'transmutation' of their character (Kourie 1992:87).¹⁵⁴ Among religious adherents who undergo mystical experience within the context of a Christian tradition such transformation often manifests itself in greater adherence to the life modelled and taught by Jesus the Christ. Growth in 'Christlikeness' lies at the heart of the practice of Christian spirituality.¹⁵⁵ Union with 'God in Christ' is both an individual and collective experience (Kourie 1998:447). A person who undergoes such an experience, a Christian mystic, 'engages in passionate communion with God and neighbour' (Kourie 1998:448). The potential of the spirituality of Cassian to facilitate engagement with the divine is the yardstick against which its value for Christian communities is assessed. The investigation attempts to identify salient aspects of Cassian's spirituality that might encourage and sustain such engagement. It particularly focuses on the potential of this spirituality to facilitate

¹⁵² Von Hügel proposed this three-fold model of the functions of religion in *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908).

¹⁵³ Wilber (2000:25-26) distinguishes between the 'transformative' and the 'translative' function of religion. Most religion, he argues, is 'translative' for it offers people myths, narratives, rituals and revivals that console and fortify their 'separate self', an aspect of the human person that might also be termed the 'ego-self' or 'false-self', and provides it with a sense of meaning and security. For a very small minority of people, Wilber asserts, religion is genuinely 'transformative'. In such cases, religion does not console or fortify the separate self, but instead 'utterly shatters it' and produces 'not a conventional bolstering of consciousness but a radical transmutation and transformation at the deepest seat of consciousness itself.'

¹⁵⁴ Kourie (1992:85-86) describes mysticism as a manifestation of a deeper, permanent way of life, in which the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God is experienced, effecting a transformation of the mystic's entire being and consciousness.

¹⁵⁵ Definitions of Christian spirituality are manifold. Downey (1997:43) describes Christian spirituality as a way of living for God in Christ through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Schneiders (1986:266) defines Christian spirituality as that particular actualization of the capacity for self-transcendence that is constituted by the substantial gift of the Holy Spirit establishing a life-giving relationship with God in Christ within the believing community. McGrath (1999:13) believes Christian spirituality is the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian experience, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of, and within the scope of, the Christian faith.

mystical engagement with the divine and thereby promote transformation of Christian communities, and their members, into greater Christlikeness.

5.6 Mystical experience in Cassian's texts

To assess whether Cassian's spirituality facilitates engagement with the divine it is necessary to determine whether Cassian's texts convey experience that could be termed mystical. *Is the prayer of fire, the highest form of prayer described by Cassian, a mystical experience?* Furthermore, did Cassian experience for himself the prayer of fire or merely describe the experience of others? *Is Cassian a mystic?* Such interrogation of Cassian's texts raises several further questions about the nature of mysticism, how it should be understood, how it is experienced and how this experience can be communicated.

Within the Academy there are a wide variety of definitions of mysticism and differing perspectives about its relationship to institutional religion, prayer or dogmatic belief (Perrin 2005:442). The term is often used to describe the experience of some form of union between the human person and that which is perceived to be ultimate reality. It is an experience that is usually direct, immediate and extraordinary (McGinn 2005b:xvii). Mysticism is commonly regarded as a religious phenomenon because it presupposes the possibility of unity between the human person and the divine or ultimate value. Definitions of the term mysticism are invariably shaped by the nature of the religious traditions within which the phenomenon occurs or is described. Christian mysticism can be understood as the experience of mysticism that occurs within a Christian religious context, either personal or communal, and in which the divine is recognised as the triune God revealed in the Christian Scriptures. Johnston (1995:42) describes this mystical union as a Trinitarian experience in which the disciple of Jesus is identified with the Son who filled with the Spirit cries out: 'Abba Father'. Such an understanding of mystical union reflects not just the Trinitarian nature of God, which is central to Christian doctrine, but also the recognition that the divine is both immanent and transcendent. Bourgeault (2008:63) notes that one of the hallmarks of such mystical union is Jesus' self-emptying or descent. The apostle Paul terms this action '*kenosis*' (Phil 2:6-8).

While mysticism is primarily concerned with the experience of union between the human person and the divine the nature of this experience transcends the normal sensory and conceptual capacities of the human person. Kourie (1998:112) describes mystical consciousness as 'supra-rational' for it transcends and incorporates rational consciousness. Union with the divine often results in the gift of enlightenment or mystical wisdom which is distinct from ordinary knowledge or information acquired by the application of the human senses or intellect (Johnston 1995:4). The supra-rational nature of the mystical experience and the mystical wisdom it imparts constrains the communication of this experience and knowledge. Conventional human consciousness, and the language it produces, is inadequate. Written communication is further limited by the conventions of its composition.

5.6.1 Is the prayer of fire a mystical experience?

Cassian acknowledges the limits of language, particularly written language, when attempting to convey the prayer of fire to his audience. Cassian frequently remarks on its ineffable and transrational nature (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.; Cassian 1997:451 Conference 12.). It is a form of prayer that is pure and beyond image and form (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.). Furthermore, it is rare and experienced by few people (Cassian 1997:345 Conference 9.). When the prayer of fire does occur it is often a sudden, intense and brief experience (Stewart 1998:114).

A close reading of these descriptions, however, suggests that the prayer of fire falls short of mystical experience. There is no explicit description of union between the person experiencing the prayer of fire and the divine. McGinn (2005b:xvii) argues that within the context of Christian mysticism the term 'union' should be broadened to include the 'presence of God'. He asserts that there are several and perhaps many different understandings of union with God throughout the history of Christianity (McGinn 2005b:xvii). In addition, union with God may not, in many cases, be the 'central category' for understanding such mysticism. According to McGinn (2005b:xvii) union is only one of the host of models, metaphors or symbols that Christian mystics have employed in their accounts of mystical experience. The term 'presence', he argues, provides a more central and more useful category for grasping the 'unifying note in the varieties of Christian mysticism' (1991:xvii). Christian mysticism would therefore embrace the human experience of direct or immediate union with God, or engagement with the presence of God, as encountered and expressed within the Christian religious tradition. If this broader definition of Christian mysticism is applied to the texts of Cassian it can be argued that the prayer of fire is indeed a mystical experience.

McGinn (2005b:xvi) further contends that mysticism, although centred on the encounter between the human person and the divine, is nonetheless always a process or a way of life. He argues that 'everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter as well as all that flows from it for the life of the individual and the belief of the community is also mystical' (McGinn 2005b:xvi). Examination of this mystical process, presented in historical texts, must consider the religious and social context within which this journey occurs. The cultural environment of the mystic, as well as their understanding of the mystical process, often define the mystical experience and can guide the way they live (McGinn 2005b:xiv). Descriptions of this mystical process within the Christian tradition are plentiful. Origen charts three stages of the mystical journey as 'moral science' (virtuous living); 'natural science' (knowledge of nature and how it is used by God); and 'contemplative science' (mystical union with God) (McGinn & Ferris McGinn 2003:29). His disciple Evagrius represents this process as a movement from *theoria* (understanding created reality) to *gnosis* (knowledge) through to prayer that is 'coextensive with essential knowledge of the Trinity' (McGinn & Ferris McGinn 2003:54-55).

Wilber (2005:33) identifies at least eight stages on the general spectrum of mystical consciousness. He terms them as: 'archaic', 'magic', 'mythic', 'mental', 'psychic', 'subtle', 'causal' and 'non-dual' (Wilber 2005:33). Chirban (1986:285) argues that the stages of mystical consciousness identified by Origen and Evagrius and later pioneers of contemplation within the Eastern Orthodox Church are similar to these stages. He refines them into five major stages: image; *metanoia* (conversion); *apatheia* (purification or transformation); light (illumination) and *theosis* (union) (Chirban 1986:297).

An examination of Cassian's monastic texts reveals a mystical journey similar to that described by Chirban. The human person begins their journey as a creature made in the image of God but separated from the divine by the consequences of sin. The person rejects the sinful context in which they live and its effects on them by renouncing the world and entering the monastic community. They then endeavour to attain purity of heart. If successful they may experience the contemplative state of the prayer of fire that eventually leads to the presence of God.

5.6.2 Is Cassian a mystic?

If Christian mysticism is recognised as a journey with distinct stages, which involves engaging with the presence of God, then Cassian clearly articulates such a process. Cassian's positioning of the prayer of fire not only within a hierarchy of prayer but also within a broader practice of monastic life, which includes liturgical rites, community life and personal reflection, reinforces its identification as mystical experience. While the experience of this ecstatic form of prayer is often intense and brief, its presence, or potential presence, shapes the monk's way of life. The belief that personal experience of the presence of God is possible and desirable exerts a strong influence on the pattern of religious life prescribed by Cassian. The pursuit of monastic life is not simply a flight from the world, the flesh and the devil but also a journey towards the Kingdom of God and the presence of the divine who is the source of eternal life and love (Cassian 1997:375 Conference 10.).

A hermeneutical engagement with Cassian's texts suggests the author is relaying first-hand experience of the prayer of fire. Although most of Cassian's references to the prayer of fire are placed in the mouths of the desert abbas the consistency of vocabulary and theology of these texts indicates that Cassian's voice is behind their instructions. Furthermore, Cassian makes direct reference to the prayer of fire in the *Institutes* (Cassian 2000:43 Institute 2.) where he does not employ the literary device of the master-disciple dialogue used in the *Conferences*. Secondly, Cassian in the *Conferences* refers to ecstatic experiences that both he and Germanus underwent while in the company of the desert abbas (Cassian 1997:155 Conference 4.). While the descriptions of these experiences are not specifically related to the prayer of fire they do indicate the author's personal participation in this phenomenon. Cassian describes such ecstatic experiences as occurring during times of prayer and remarks on being filled with ineffable joy, 'holy sentiments' and spiritual ecstasy during such occasions (Cassian 1997:155 Conference 4., 1997:157 Conference 4.). Such imagery is consistent

with Cassian's description of the prayer of fire (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.). It is likely that it was during the prayer of fire that some or all of Cassian's ecstatic experiences took place. Thirdly, Cassian's emphasis on the importance of experience as a validator of spiritual wisdom (Cassian 1997:385 Conference 10.; Cassian 2000:13 Institutes Preface.) suggests that he would not have emphasised the significance of the prayer of fire unless he had personally undergone this form of prayer and knew for himself its worth.

5.6.3 Appropriating Cassian's mystical experience

Recognition that Cassian underwent mystical experiences and described them in his texts is of limited value to contemporary Christian communities. Such descriptions may help validate Christian mystical experience and provide insight into the attitudes and practices that elicit such experience. They do little, however, to encourage appropriation or participation in such experience. Cassian's descriptions of the prayer of fire should not be seen as limited attempts to portray ineffable reality. Instead, they should be addressed as expressions of 'unthought-of worlds of human becoming' (Perrin 2005:455). By recognising Cassian's descriptions of the prayer of fire as 'fragments of heritage' that function as metaphors, new understandings of this mystical experience can be generated (Perrin 1999:178-180). This hermeneutical engagement is the fruitful 'fusion of horizons' that yields further valid meanings from the texts.

An examination of the literary genres present in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* provides a new avenue of engagement between the reader and Cassian's texts. It is sensitive to the power of the metaphors in the texts and their potential to generate new understandings of the spirituality of Cassian. This process of interpretation offers contemporary Christian communities the opportunity of not only learning about the spirituality of Cassian, or making use of the spiritual practices he advocates, but also engaging with the lived experience of Cassian's spirituality.

The literary genre of both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* is primarily *pedagogical*. Cassian makes it clear that he has written the two texts to teach the monks of Gaul the monastic principles and practices of Egypt (Cassian 1997:30 Conferences Preface 1.). The pedagogical intention of the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* is emphasised by the dialogical structure of the much of the two works. The fourth book of the *Institutes* and all the *Conferences* take the form of a dialogue between an authoritative teacher and eager disciples. Within these dialogues other literary genres are at work. Cassian presents the dialogues as historical events. The documents operate as *historical texts*. They record and preserve words that appear to have been spoken at specific locations, between specific people and at specific (if undisclosed) times in history. The texts therefore not only provide instruction about how monastic life should be conducted in Gaul. They also preserve information about how monastic life was lived in Egypt a generation earlier. The presence of the historical genre within the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* gives added authority to the pedagogical intention of the two literary works. They not only provide instruction about monastic principles and practices

that Cassian believes to be important. They contain and preserve the monastic tradition of Egypt. This tradition, Cassian argues, is superior to any contemporary expressions of monasticism to be found in Gaul (Cassian 2000:14 *Institutes* Preface.). Cassian, as the author of these texts, can be seen not only as a teacher and instructor of monasticism but also as a custodian and conveyor of an earlier and highly prized *tradition* (Rousseau 1978:221). The authority of the teaching conveyed in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* is further enhanced by the identification of the teachers in the dialogues as specific desert abbas. While only some of the abbas can be identified with any confidence it is probable that they were all well-known and revered by Cassian's original audience (Ramsey 1997:9). By presenting them as the teachers of specific aspects of monasticism, Cassian emphasises that the instruction he is conveying is not his own but that of highly respected exponents of such disciplines. Furthermore, Cassian asserts that the teaching presented by the desert abbas was drawn directly from the apostles of the Christ (Cassian 2000:14 *Institutes* Preface.).

Cassian's portrayal of the desert abbas contains elements of *hagiography*. The old monks are presented as the epitome of holiness. No defect or weakness is recorded. Cassian's descriptions of the abbas not only preserve their memory but also help enshrine their sanctity. Such sanctification can reinforce a particular religious status quo but it can also open up new 'realms of possibility' (Sheldrake 2001: 41). By creating a 'fictive narrative' that goes beyond a strictly historical record of events such hagiography expresses a view of what 'ideally ought to have happened' and by implication the 'promise of what may happen' (Sheldrake 2001:40). Cassian's presentation of the holy desert abbas not only entrenches their sanctity and the sanctity of their teaching but also offers the audience of the texts the possibility of participating in such holiness. The texts point back to a revered past as well as forward to the potential holiness of a new generation of followers of Christ who adopt the teaching conveyed by Cassian and emulate the desert abbas that were his guides and mentors. While Cassian is exceptionally modest when describing his role in presenting the teachings of the desert abbas of Egypt, his use of literary genre subtly reinforces his authority as a conveyor of the principles and practices of monasticism. Cassian's frequent self-depreciation is a literary convention rather than a demonstration of monastic humility. Cassian's disavowal of literary ability is an example of the literary convention of '*insinuat*o.' He downplays his talents for the purpose of 'winning the good opinion of an audience' (Goodrich 2007:40-41). Cassian heightens this process of submission by applying the literary genre of panegyric to laud the senior clerics who have commissioned him to write the texts (Cassian 2000:11-14 *Institutes* Preface.).

Cassian's monastic texts also incorporate the genre of *testimony*. The dialogues within the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* can be understood as Cassian's personal testimony. The texts depict Cassian as present when the desert abbas delivered their teaching. The revered teachers were speaking directly to him and responding to questions he and his companion Germanus posed to them. Cassian not only received teaching from the abbas, he also lived alongside the desert fathers and engaged in the disciplines and practices advocated by these spiritual guides. The *Institutes* and the

Conferences depict Cassian as more than a messenger presenting the teaching of the desert abbas to a new audience. He is not, as Merton (1990:397) wryly suggests, the ‘Boswell of the Desert Fathers’ writing down ‘everything they could be cajoled into saying’. Instead, Cassian portrays himself as someone who has appropriated this teaching and put it into practice. Cassian may not have advanced to the proficiency of his instructors but the teaching contained in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* appears to be as much that of the author as it is of the desert abbas who taught him. Frequently within the texts Cassian emphasises the importance of experience in the ancient tradition of the desert abbas and suggests that other contemporary teachers of monastic practices, in Gaul and elsewhere, lack this essential quality (Cassian 2000:37 *Institutes* Preface.).

When the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* are read as the testimony of Cassian another literary genre becomes evident. There is a strong element of the *mythic quest* or adventure present within the two texts. Joseph Campbell (1993:58) identifies the standard path of the mythological adventure as ‘separation’, ‘initiation’ and ‘return’. He adds that the first stage of such a journey is a ‘call to adventure’ that signifies that ‘destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual centre of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown’ (Campbell 1993:58). Cassian is portrayed in the texts as a person who seeks spiritual knowledge or wisdom. As a young man he leaves his homeland and embarks on a journey to a distant country to attain the wisdom he desires. In keeping with the tradition of ancient stories of mythological journeys neither the date nor location of Cassian’s departure is identified. It was a time ‘long ago’ and a place ‘far away’. He travels with an older companion, Germanus and the journey contains many challenges and setbacks.¹⁵⁶ Cassian and Germanus join a monastic community in Bethlehem but this fails to provide them with what they desire. A chance encounter with a holy man, Abba Pinufius prompts them to continue on their quest and they journey to the famed but inhospitable regions of the Egyptian desert seeking spiritual wisdom from the ancient teachers who reside there (Cassian 2000:96 *Institute* 4.). While in the desert Cassian and Germanus are compelled by a vow they have made with their former monastic companions to return to Bethlehem (Cassian 1997:612 *Conference* 17.). After fulfilling this obligation they journey once more into the Egyptian desert. Even after Cassian has attained much of what he desired and has received personal instruction from the desert fathers his quest is not over. He leaves Egypt and experiences many further adventures until he reaches Gaul. It is here that Cassian is given the opportunity to share the wisdom he has acquired from his quest to the East. He is requested to make known this wisdom by the influential leaders of the Church in Gaul (Cassian

¹⁵⁶ The mythical dimension of Cassian’s journey is amplified by the name of his companion. Cassian travels with a man named Germanus (a Latin word that means “brother”) but leaves behind a sister (described in the Latin text of the *Institutes* as “*germana*”) (Cassian 2000:247 *Institute* 11.). Such a distinction suggests that it is the male dimension of Cassian that embarks on the quest while the female dimension is attached to home.

1997:29 Conferences Preface 1.). Although he declares himself unworthy, he proceeds to share the fruits of his quest.

Like most quest stories or mythic adventures, Cassian's tale does not just impart information but invites his audience to engage in their own journey. By engaging with such mythic stories the audience participates in a 'life cycle greater than their own' and 'follow a model on the path to psychological and religious maturity' (Biallas 1989:29). Through his texts Cassian encourages an interaction between his audience and the text that in some ways replicates the author's experience among the desert abbas (Driver 1994:14). They are able to embark on their own quest or journey in search of spiritual wisdom and be informed not just through the acquisition of information but through their own experience. Cassian provides his audience with a map for a spiritual journey that leads to purity of heart and the Kingdom of God (Stewart 1998:41). Kourie (1998:112-114) describes myth as a poetic expression of mystical experience that uses symbols to recapture a pristine reality that is often obscured by the 'encrustation of dogma.' Kourie (1998:114) notes that myth has a 'participatory' role for it has the power to draw the adherent into mystical experience as well as a 'transformative' power by means of which psychological integration and personal wholeness is facilitated.

5.7 Cassian as myth-bearer

Recognition of the literary genres in the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* presents Cassian as a bearer of mythic spiritual tradition. It is a tradition that has been entrusted to him by the holy desert abbas through instruction and experience. Cassian brings this tradition to a new audience hungry for spiritual knowledge. For members of this audience to appropriate this tradition they too must receive instruction and engage in spiritual disciplines that facilitate mystical experience of the divine.

A hermeneutical engagement with Cassian's monastic texts reveals Cassian's spirituality as lived experience to be Christian, mystical and hermeneutical. It is grounded in the uncertain and fluid contexts of the fifth and twenty-first century; centred on the belief that the divine can be experienced in the present and that Christ is the guide, exemplar and point of mystical engagement; and expressed by a process of interpretation sensitive to the contexts of Cassian's texts and their audience. By recognising Cassian as a bearer of mythic spiritual wisdom and interpreting his texts from this perspective contemporary Christian communities can appropriate the spirituality of Cassian. The value of Cassian's spirituality to contemporary Christian communities is substantial. The mystical engagement with God in the prayer of fire, the beatific vision of the divine, purity of heart and presence in the Kingdom of Heaven, described in Cassian's texts, are no longer simply depictions of past states of being but invitations to potential and new relations with Christ. The teachings presented by Cassian and the accompanying attitudes and disciplines constitute a spiritual route map that can be interpreted by a hermeneutical process to enable followers of Christ to be more faithful in emulating the teaching and example of their figurehead. They encourage the pursuit mystical

engagement with God and a life of faithfulness to Christ and create opportunities for greater transformation into Christlikeness. The appropriation of the spirituality of Cassian does not necessarily result in mystical experience. Such experience, as Cassian stresses (Cassian 1997:339 Conference 9.) is initiated by God. However, a hermeneutical appropriation of Cassian's spirituality enables readers of Cassian's texts to recover and reframe past mystical experiences and increase their awareness and receptivity to future mystical experiences.

The spirituality of Cassian is inherently hermeneutical for it requires ongoing interpretation of texts and experiences from the past to meet the requirements of the present. These texts include the Christian Scriptures as well as the writings of Cassian. The hermeneutical aspect of Cassian's spirituality constantly renews and reshapes our relationship with God and the world. It challenges us to find new ways of 'living and believing' (Perrin 2005:456). The hermeneutical process necessary to access the spirituality of Cassian as lived experience also has the potential to dismantle prejudgements, and attitudes of superiority and triumphalism often displayed by Christian communities, and encourage fresh engagement with the history of the Church and its Scriptures. Such engagement can reshape the beliefs of members of contemporary Christian communities, revitalise their private religious devotions, inspire corporate worship and encourage greater compassion in their relations with one another and the world at large.¹⁵⁷ Church history and the Christian Scriptures are recognised as a precious religious heritage that can inspire and create fresh understandings of God and the activity of God in the world rather than used as justifications for intransigent and inflexible attitudes and actions that neglect contemporary contexts.

5.8 Difficulties in appropriating Cassian's spirituality

While the spirituality of Cassian is of great value to contemporary Christian communities, the process of appropriating this spirituality is far from easy. It is a process that poses several challenges to the leaders of such communities.

5.8.1 Elitism in the spirituality of Cassian

The spirituality of Cassian in the fifth century and the spirituality he taught could both be described as elitist. Cassian was a member of a social and ecclesiastical elite that enjoyed the advantages of the value systems in which it functioned. He sought to establish a distinct monastic community among members of the social and ecclesiastical elite in Gaul. However, in his teaching about spirituality Cassian undermines such elitism. The advantages of wealth and social status must be

¹⁵⁷ The Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel (1966:3) astutely remarks that religion declined in Western society not because it was refuted, but because it became "irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid." He warns that "when faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendour of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message is meaningless" (Heschel 1966:3).

renounced before a monk can enter the monastic community. All monks must engage in manual labour as well as the spiritual disciplines prescribed by Cassian. Participation in disciplines such as liturgical prayer, meditation on the Scriptures and contemplation are open to all members of the community. Literacy is not even required. The Scriptures appear to have been recalled, reflected upon and prayed out of memory rather than from texts. Cassian suggests that education might even be a hindrance to progress on the spiritual journey (Cassian 1997:539 Conference 15.). While there is a hierarchy within the monastic community envisaged by Cassian it is founded on the holiness of monks and their devotion to attaining spiritual perfection. Only a few monks attain the holiness necessary to experience the prayer of fire, the highest form of prayer, but it is an experience of the divine open to all members of the community. Senior monks are important guides to other members of the monastic community. Cassian, in his teaching on spirituality, warns of the dangers of pride that might arise from attaining progress on the spiritual journey (Cassian 1997:265-266 Conference 7.). Compunction and humility are the guards against feelings of importance and superiority (Cassian 1997:347 Conference 9.; Cassian 1997:513 Conference 14.).

The spirituality of Cassian as lived experience, with its emphasis on direct mystical engagement with the divine; attention to personal conduct and interior reflection; and the on-going process of interpretation of texts and contexts, can be appropriated by anyone who desires a closer relationship with Christ. It is not a spirituality reserved for clerics, monks or even members of a Church community. However, the spirituality of Cassian does require a person to be attached to a group of people committed to following the teaching and example of Christ. Obedience to the guidance and instruction of guides or teachers further advanced on the spiritual journey, correct conduct with other people, and participation in communal worship and engagement with the Scriptures are important components of the spirituality of Cassian. While this expression of spirituality is intensely personal and addresses intimate aspects of a person's life it is also grounded in responsibility to and for others. This relationship may be expressed in a loose association of people who have personally adopted the spirituality of Cassian or in a well-defined and structured religious community. The spirituality of Cassian is distinctive but not elitist.

5.8.2 Sexism in the spirituality of Cassian

The spirituality of Cassian has its roots in a cultural context that would be considered by many members of contemporary communities to be highly sexist. Cassian's texts reflect the highly patriarchal nature of much of Late Antique society. Furthermore, it is clear that Cassian ignores the influential role played by many women within the early church as well as the strong presence of women in the monastic movement in Egypt. Cassian composed his monastic texts to help men become better monks. The language of the texts is predominantly masculine. Women are rarely mentioned in the texts other than as the source of sexual temptation or a distraction from monastic

vocation (Conference 12. 1997:443). Cassian's innovative examination of the role of sexuality in the spiritual journey is focused solely on the experiences of men.

Much feminist spirituality and women's spirituality tends to be heterarchical and emphasise communion, relationship and care rather than the traditional male concerns of agency, rights and justice (Wilber 2000:217). Such a stance is not antithetical to the hierarchical journey charted by Cassian in his monastic texts. Within the aspects of spirituality identified as more prominent in women than men there is a typical hierarchical progression from egocentric, sociocentric to worldcentric (Wilber 2000:217). Spiritual development for women and for men occurs through hierarchical stages (Wilber 2000:217-218). Cassian's spirituality provides an effective guide and practice for the process of spiritual development. However, the patriarchal language and dominant male perspective of Cassian's monastic texts is undoubtedly a barrier to women who wish to engage with, and possibly adopt, Cassian's spirituality.¹⁵⁸ It is not a barrier that is insurmountable. The hermeneutical process is able to appropriate meaning from texts that originate in a very different cultural context from that of the interpreter. Cassian's spirituality, though grounded in historical texts that reveal considerable bias against women, need not be shackled by the prejudices of the past. Such liberation requires an interpretation of Cassian's texts that addresses the difficulties posed by the language and worldview of Cassian's texts.

5.8.3 Need for spiritual leadership

The spirituality of Cassian challenges the leadership of contemporary Christian communities. It insists that people receive encouragement and guidance on the spiritual journey from those who possess greater experience and wisdom. Spiritual leadership must be exercised by people who are well practiced in the spiritual disciplines, whose lives have been transformed by faithful obedience to Christ, and who are recognised as purveyors of wisdom. Organisational authority or theological education is no substitute for such qualities. If contemporary Christian communities are to appropriate the spirituality of Cassian they will have to identify people who are able to perform the role of spiritual guide or director. These people might not be members of the existing leadership of the community.

Spiritual knowledge or wisdom attained as a result of contemplative prayer and mystical engagement with the divine often challenges a community's attitudes and beliefs. The leadership of such communities will require discernment and maturity to assess the validity of such insight and to demine how best to incorporate it into the lives of its members. The leadership of Christian communities drawn to the spirituality of Cassian will need to recognise the inherent hermeneutical nature of this spirituality. They must be able to facilitate the hermeneutical process that engages the

¹⁵⁸ Many men, sensitive to the destructive nature of sexist language, may also be deterred from appropriating Cassian's spirituality because of the patriarchal language and dominant male worldview contained in his texts.

tradition of Cassian's texts with the tradition of their own context. Such engagement will be an ongoing process. The understandings yielded by this fusion of horizons will vary according to the circumstances and context of the community that performs the hermeneutical process. It is never static and will continually point the community to new and challenging understandings of the spiritual journey and Christian discipleship. During the hermeneutical process the leadership of the community will need to be aware of the challenges posed by the patriarchal language and male worldview contained in Cassian's writings. Creative and sensitive interpretation will be required to elicit meaning from Cassian's texts that is faithful to its sources and applicable to the context of the community.

The spirituality of Cassian encourages and facilitates mystical engagement with the divine and transformation into greater Christlikeness among members of Christian communities. It is unclear how such transformation might be manifest in the community as a whole. It is the responsibility of the leadership of such communities to ensure that the appropriation of the spirituality of Cassian is not reduced to a collection of private or communal experiences but manifests itself in greater Christ like engagement with the world at large.

5.9 Conclusion

The application a hermeneutical approach to the study of Cassian's texts, based on Gadamer's model of conversation between interpreter and text, yields an understanding of the spirituality of Cassian as lived experience. This understanding is distinct from the spirituality Cassian experienced and the spirituality he taught in his writings.

The spirituality of Cassian as lived experience is Christian, mystical and hermeneutical. It is grounded in the belief that the divine can be experienced in the present as well as the future and recognises Christ as the guide, exemplar and point of mystical engagement. The spirituality of Cassian as lived experience is inherently hermeneutical for it requires ongoing interpretation of texts and experiences from the past to meet the requirements of the present. These texts include the Christian Scriptures as well as the writings of Cassian. The hermeneutical aspect of Cassian's spirituality constantly renews and reshapes a person's relationship with God and the world.

Recognition of Cassian as a bearer of mythic wisdom, as well as a conveyor of information about spirituality, enables readers of his texts to appropriate his spirituality as lived experience. The teachings presented by Cassian and the attitudes and practices he advocates provide contemporary Christian communities with a spiritual route map that can be interpreted by a hermeneutical process. It encourages mystical engagement with God and faithfulness to Christ and creates opportunities for greater transformation into Christlikeness. It therefore has great value to contemporary Christian communities that endeavour to follow the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth and encourage mystical engagement with God and transformation into the likeness of Christ.

The appropriation of the spirituality of Cassian does not automatically result in mystical experience. According to Cassian such experience is initiated by God. However, by engaging in a hermeneutical appropriation of Cassian's spirituality readers of Cassian's texts can recover and reframe past mystical experiences and increase their awareness and receptivity in future mystical experiences. This hermeneutical process also has the potential to dismantle prejudgements, and attitudes of superiority and triumphalism often displayed by Christian communities, and encourage fresh engagement with the history of the Church and its Scriptures. Such engagement can revitalise beliefs, practices and expressions of religious devotion as well as encourage compassion and empathy.

However, the spirituality of Cassian as lived experience is not easily appropriated by contemporary Christian communities. The leadership of such communities must address the apparent elitism and sexism within the texts of Cassian. It must also recognise the need for experienced spiritual guidance and discernment within the community. Ongoing hermeneutical practice that engages with Cassian's texts and the community's own context is also essential. The leadership of contemporary Christian communities that attempt to appropriate the spirituality of Cassian must also ensure that this process effects not only personal transformation of its members but also a collective change in the community that manifests itself in greater Christ-like engagement with the world at large.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The spirituality of Cassian is of considerable value to contemporary Christian communities. It has the power to transform members of these communities and enable them to grow in the likeness of Christ. It is a spirituality that is grounded in ancient Christian teachings and practices but addresses contemporary contexts and needs. It promotes the application of traditional spiritual disciplines, such as meditating on the Scriptures, contemplation, liturgical worship and spiritual direction, while encouraging new and innovative ways of engaging with the Bible, the history of the Church and the world at large. It recognises the potential and power of mystical engagement with God and provides profound spiritual wisdom and disciplines that guide and prepare a person for such encounters. Mysticism is not an end in itself but rather an integral part of a pattern of life intended to promote greater obedience and faithfulness to Christ.

The spirituality of Cassian is not easily accessed or appropriated. It requires the application of a hermeneutical approach to Cassian's texts to identify the spirituality of Cassian and interpret its meaning. This is a constant process. New perspectives and contexts generate new understandings of the texts that reveal new ways of 'living and believing' (Perrin 2005:4565).

6.1 Major outcomes of the research

The investigation understands *spirituality* as 'the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives' (Schneiders 2003:166). It distinguishes the spirituality of Cassian who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries from the teaching about spirituality contained in the texts he wrote and the spirituality experienced by contemporary readers of these writings. The latter understanding of Cassian's spirituality is termed 'Cassian's spirituality as contemporary lived experience.' It is this understanding of the spirituality of Cassian that offers the greatest value to contemporary Christian communities. Such a community is defined by the investigation as a body of people drawn and held together by their common desire to emulate the way of life modelled by Jesus of Nazareth and to follow his teaching. They are deemed contemporary because they are currently active.

A *hermeneutical method*, which incorporates tools and data from a variety of different academic disciplines, has been applied to examine the spirituality of Cassian. The application of a *historical-critical approach* to examine Cassian's writings and the study of key secondary sources reveals the spirituality of Cassian to be masculine, religious, Christian, ecclesiastical and monastic. It appears to have been forged during Cassian's lengthy sojourn among the Egyptian desert abbas towards the end of the fourth century. It was shaped not only by the teaching he received from the desert abbas but also by his experience of the spiritual practices they prescribed and the isolated desert communities within which he first applied them. Cassian's spirituality was further formed by

his later experiences as a senior cleric in Constantinople, Rome and Gaul. Born into a wealthy family, probably in the Roman province of Scythia Minor, Cassian was well educated, well-travelled and fluent in Latin and Greek. He possessed a zeal for the Christian faith at an early age and his religious convictions were a powerful influence on him throughout his life.

Cassian's monastic writings, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, were composed around twenty years after he left the desert abbas in Egypt. The teaching about spirituality contained in these documents, although attributed to the desert abbas Cassian encountered, is the product of the author's extensive and lengthy reflection on the instruction he received in Egypt. The spirituality expressed in Cassian's texts is rooted in the monastic tradition of the Egyptian desert abbas. It stresses the importance of rigorous self-examination and obedience to superior spiritual guides as well as the practice of spiritual disciplines in the pursuit of perfection or holiness.

A study of Cassian's *historical contexts* reveals the highly volatile and fluid social, political and religious environments in which Cassian lived. The influx of barbarians, particularly in the western territories of the Roman Empire, and the rapid growth and influence of the Church are likely to have been major influences on Cassian and his spirituality. The rise and development of monasticism during the fourth and fifth centuries certainly affected him. Cassian probably came into contact with militant groups of barbarians in Scythia Minor and Gaul. He was most likely living in Rome when the city was besieged and seized by the Visigoths in 410.

Cassian was also embroiled in controversies within the Church. He appears to have been among the clerics and monks who fled Egypt between 399 and 400 because of the purge of advocates of Origenism by Theophilus Bishop of Alexandria. A supporter of John Chrysostom Bishop of Constantinople, who petitioned Pope Innocent I in Rome on his behalf, Cassian appears to have fled Constantinople after the bishop was exiled at the Synod of the Oak in 403. He also participated in the fierce theological disputes that gripped the Church in Late Antiquity. Cassian wrote *On the Incarnation* at the behest of archdeacon Leo of Rome to condemn the teachings of Nestorius as heresies before the Council of Nicea was convened in 431. While in Gaul, towards the end of his life, Cassian promoted an understanding of monasticism, based on his experiences in Egypt, at the expense of rival models that had begun to be applied in the region.

Cassian's spirituality was lived, reflected upon and communicated, in a variety of regions across the Roman Empire and its former territories most of which were undergoing substantial social, political and religious upheaval. However, the teaching on spirituality contained in the *Institutes* and *Conferences* gives little indication of such turmoil. The texts contain almost no mention of barbarians or other religions and references to other forms of monasticism are brief and dismissive. Women, many of whom were living as ascetics in the Egyptian desert when Cassian visited the region, are rarely mentioned other than as the source of sexual temptation or a distraction from monastic vocation. Also excluded are secular clergy, other than bishops interested in monasticism, and lay Christians unless mentioned to contrast their conduct to that of monks. While Cassian is explicit in

his condemnation of heresies such as Nestorianism, Pelagianism and Arianism his support for Origenism, which was encountering growing disapproval within the Church, is not declared in his writings. The spirituality presented in Cassian's monastic texts is tailored specifically for aristocratic clergy in Gaul keen to adopt a monastic way of life. Cassian employs a hermeneutic approach in his writings and reinterprets the past teaching of the desert abbas in Egypt for a new audience present in Gaul.

An examination of the content of Cassian's teaching about spirituality identifies the goal of this instruction as the attainment of '*purity of heart*' and consequent presence within the Kingdom of God. The texts provide a spiritual route map that guides a monk to his objective. The Kingdom of God can be experienced not only in the future but also in the present. Cassian describes a variety of spiritual practices that enable the monk to journey towards his goal. These practices stress the importance of experience as well as knowledge in the quest for perfection and presence in the Kingdom of God. There is a balance within these practices between personal devotion and communal obligation. Cassian insists that a monk must renounce wealth and status and abandon notions of mutually beneficial friendships. He views human sexuality not as a passion that must be suppressed but rather as a indicator of a person's attachment to deeper hidden vices and sins.

Cassian's teaching on spirituality stresses the importance of prayer. It recognises the unique and diverse forms of prayer practiced by Christians and acknowledges the effect of human personality and circumstance. Cassian highlights the importance of praying by meditating on the Scriptures as well as the practice of constant repetition from memory of a word or phrase from the Bible as a means of attaining 'wordless' prayer. He identifies a progression of stages of prayer that moves from supplication, prayer that invokes a vow, intercession to thanksgiving. The highest stage of prayer is what Cassian terms the '*prayer of fire*'. This trans-rational and ineffable form of prayer elevates the monk who has attained purity of heart to presence within the Kingdom of God. It is a state of contemplation that leads to perfection.

While Cassian attributes his teaching on spirituality to the desert abbas the extent of their contribution is unclear. However, the influence of Evagrius and his master Origen is evident. Evagrius was highly influential during his residence among the monks of Egypt and a leading proponent of Origen's teachings in the region. Cassian incorporates much of Evagrius's theology within his teaching on spirituality but is far from slavish in his borrowings. While adapting Evagrius' strongly Trinitarian theology Cassian places greater emphasis on Christ. The spirituality presented by Cassian in his texts is Christo-centric.

The application of a hermeneutical approach to the study of Cassian's texts, based on Gadamer's model of conversation between interpreter and texts, elicits understanding of the spirituality of Cassian as contemporary lived experience. It is Christian, mystical and inherently hermeneutical spirituality. Grounded in the belief that the divine can be experienced in the present as well as the future this spirituality recognises Christ as the guide, exemplar and point of mystical

engagement. It is inherently hermeneutical because it continually reinterprets texts and experiences of the past to meet the demands and needs of the present. These texts include the Christian Scriptures as well as Cassian's writings. This hermeneutical aspect of the spirituality constantly renews and reshapes a person's relationship with God and their environment.

The spirituality of Cassian can be appropriated by a hermeneutical process that recognises the genres and metaphors within Cassian's texts. The identification of Cassian as a bearer of *mythic wisdom*, not simply a conveyor of information about spirituality, allows us to engage with Cassian's texts in new ways and appropriate his spirituality as lived experience. The teachings contained in these texts and the practices they advocate provide spiritual insight that can be interpreted by hermeneutical engagement with Cassian's writings and applied in contemporary Christian communities. The spirituality of Cassian when appropriated in this way is of great value to contemporary Christian communities whose primary purpose is to follow the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth. It encourages mystical engagement with God and faithfulness to Christ and creates opportunities for greater transformation into Christlikeness.

The spirituality of Cassian as contemporary lived experience is not easily appropriated. Christian communities that wish to embrace this spirituality must address the apparent elitism and sexism within the texts of Cassian. They also require leaders experienced in spiritual guidance and discernment. Ongoing hermeneutical practice that engages with Cassian's texts and the community's own context is also essential. Furthermore, the leadership of these communities must ensure that this process effects not only personal transformation of its members but also a collective change in the community that manifests itself in greater Christ-like engagement with the world at large.

6.2 Value of the research

The main value of this research is that it highlights the profound spiritual wisdom contained in the texts of Cassian and identifies a method by which the spirituality expressed in these ancient writings can be appropriated by Christian communities. By appropriating the spirituality of Cassian such communities can encourage their members to better follow and emulate the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The hermeneutical process required to appropriate the spirituality of Cassian also challenges prejudice. It has potential to dismantle established attitudes and perspectives and encourage fresh engagement with the history of the Church, its Scriptures and its mission. Such engagement can revitalise religious beliefs and practices as well as encourage compassion and empathy.

The investigation also provides a long overdue examination of the spirituality of Cassian the human person. This aspect of the spirituality of Cassian has been neglected. Most recent studies of Cassian have examined his historical context, theology or role in the development of monasticism. Those that have addressed his spirituality have focussed mainly on the spirituality Cassian teaches in his texts.

6.3 Stimulus for further investigation

The findings of this research encourage further investigation of the spirituality of Cassian and specifically its value for contemporary Christian communities. This research confined itself to a survey of literature. A research examination, incorporating data from fieldwork conducted in a particular community, would enable this investigation's findings to be tested and further explored. Specific attention might be given to the efficacy of Cassian's spirituality in encouraging spiritual practices, such as meditation on the Scriptures, spiritual direction and contemplation, as well as facilitating mystical experience. The transformative potential of such practices could then be assessed. The difficulties in appropriating Cassian's spirituality identified by the investigation could be further examined. Approaches to address such difficulties could then be devised and tested. The role of the leadership of Christian communities in the appropriation of Cassian's spirituality offers further opportunities for investigation.

The spirituality of Cassian the human person invites further study. The influence of Cassian's visits to Egypt and Gaul has been examined in some detail but knowledge of his stay in Constantinople and Rome remains scant. Further examination of Cassian's experience of the prayer of fire and its impact on his spirituality would be of considerable value. It would provide greater insight into the mystical nature of Cassian's spirituality.

Cassian's spirituality was forged in Egypt in the north of Africa during great social, political and religious change and later shaped and refined in a variety of diverse regions and cultures across the world. His writings about spirituality were composed for a group of people whose society was being radically fractured and restructured and who were eager to create new forms of Christian community. Cassian's spirituality as lived experience, revealed by hermeneutical engagement with his texts, provides followers of Christ in South Africa and throughout the world with the opportunity to draw upon and appropriate the profound wisdom of the past. It is a spirituality that has the potential to revitalise and transform religious communities, inspire and sustain individual followers of Christ, and encourage compassion and empathy in the country in which we live. The value of Cassian's spirituality goes beyond contemporary Christian communities. The extent to which it inspires greater Christlikeness in the world will be its true measure.

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