Sources of Spirituality in the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis (Book on Virtues and Vices) and Epistulae (Letters) of Alcuin of York

Abstract: This article will focus on the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis and Epistulae of Alcuin of York. It will highlight the Spiritual Sources which Alcuin utilized for both as well as his exegetical treatment of these sources. Although such an approach is not a novel one, past scholarship has presented Alcuin, in relation to his sources, as a mere verbatim copyist, so that to study Alcuin is merely to study his sources. This perhaps can be explained by the fact that the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis is still only available in the mid 19th century Patrologia Latina edition and exegetical scholarship on his Epistulae is almost non-existent. Nevertheless, as this study shall attempt to show for the first time, Alcuin’s original treatment of the Porcarian and Cassianic monastic traditions illustrates the importance of Alcuin’s writings as transmitters of such sources as Pseudo-Basil’s De admonitio filium spiritualem and John Cassian’s Institutes and Conferences and underscores the need for more recent critical editions of Alcuin’s Liber de virtuibus et vitiis and Epistolae and for further studies which will enable us to assess more precisely the full extent of the influence of monastic ideals on both.

Introduction

A classic example of Christian specula principum (Mirrors of Princes), is Alcuin of York’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis (Book on Virtues and Vices) (Migne 1851) written in the latter part of Alcuin’s life, and dedicated to Count Wido of the Breton March. It was constructed to guide Wido through the vicissitudes of the civitas terrena (the earthly city). The Liber de virtutibus et vitiis contains patristic, monastic and ascetic sources that Alcuin drew upon to instruct Wido on the proper avoidance of vices and the cultivation of virtues. This study specifically investigates the impact of monastic ideals onthe Liber de virtutibus et vitiis.

Although this topic is not a new one, research indicates that the influence of monastic traditions on the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis needs to be more properly assessed and carefully explored. Moreover, in the light of recent scholarship, careful reevaluation and reappraisal of Alcuin’s Exegetical methods may lead to a revision of Alcuin’s image as an unoriginal and derivative writer. Therefore, this study will assess the extent of Alcuin’s attempt to reconstitute Carolingian spirituality on the firm foundation of monastic and ascetic values so that they might serve as the instrument of salvation for the Frankish populus dei.

Alcuin’s Early Years

Dispite the abundance of evidence for Alcuin’s later life, both in York and in Francia, neither the precise date, nor geographical locations of his birth, nor his lineage are known with absolute certainty. Scholars have attempted to establish some parameters. Drawing inferentially from the evidence of contemporary documents, Peter Godman and Donald Bullough, for example, have attempted To reconstruct the date and place of Alcuin’s birth, as well as his familial history. Godman places Alcuin’s family in Northumbria (Godman 1982, 133); Bullough more precisely in southern Deira (Bullough 2004, 34). Both Godman and Bullough reject the nobili gentis exortus prosapia of the Vita Alcuini (Dummler 1873, 6) as evidence for Alcuin’s noble lineage, dismissing it as a mere hagiographical topos. Instead, they prefer to emphasize Alcuin’s connections to Saint Wiligis and Saint Willibrord; Godman arguing for a possible noble lineage, Bullough suggesting rather a modest landowning family origin (Godman 1982, 133; Bullough 2004, 34). Finally, these two scholars diverge widely on the question of Alcuin’s birth. Godman, citing internal evidence from Alcuin’s Versus de patribus regibus et sanctis Euboricensis ecclesiae, has opted for a date of 737/738, while Bullough, questioning the validity of Godman’s argument, prefers a date slightly before or after 740 (Godman 1982, xxxviii; Bullough 2004, 25-6).

Scholars have spoken with a unanimous voice on Alcuin’s Northumbrian origins, their unanimity owed to inferential evidence drawn from his Epistulae. First in a letter dated to 783, and addressed to King Aethelred of Northumbria, Alcuin refers to Northumbrians as nostra gente, when speaking of the great calamity and misery that arose there upon the departure of Saint Paul from York and the birth of the Christian religion in that territory. Moreover, in a letter dated 795 to the monks of York, Alcuin expresses his gratitude in the following manner:

You cherished me in my infancy with maternal affection,

sustained me in the playful time of my childhood with pious

patience, taught me until manhood with the discipline of

paternal correction, and strengthened me with the erudition

sacred teachings.

Further, in a letter dated 806, addressed to the newly elected Archbishop Eanbald of York, Alcuin alludes to the cathedral of York as the place where he was reared and educated (Dummler 1873; 181, 349, 331).

As has been noted in his letter to the monks of York, Alcuin, from an early age, seems to have been exposed to the rigid spiritual discipline and sacred erudition of the vita regularis. This, in turn, has engendered endless debate among scholars concerning Alcuin’s own donning of the monastic habit. Albert Hauck, in particular, has argued that the answer to this fundamental question depends on whether the community Alcuin belonged to at York was a church or a monasterium. Opting for the latter, Hauck accorded Alcuin monastic status, citing especially his intimate familiarity with Benedictine monastic ideals. More importantly, he emphasized Alcuin’s desire, denied by Charlemagne, to return to Saint Boniface’s monastery of Fulda so that he could live in accordance with the precepts of the Regula s. Benedicti (Hauck 1912-29, 2: 130). Walter Delius, closely following Hauck, styled Alcuin “a former Anglo-Saxon monk remaining true to the role of the York cloister until the end of his days (Delius 1931, 473).”

Many scholars have questioned these views. Arthur Kleinclausz (Kleinclausz 1948, 169), for instance, has noted that the Vita Alcuini refers to Alcuin as “one whose life was not interior to the monastic life,” and characterized him as “a veritable monk, without ever having taken monastic vows.” More recently, Albrecht Diem (Diem 1995, 43), in general agreement with Kleinclausz, has denied monastic status for Alcuin, noting that in Alcuin’s time, no clear distinction existed Between monk and cleric. Mayke de Jong (De Jong 1995, 50-51) in similar fashion, has observed that for Alcuin, the issue of distinguishing between clerical and monastic status was unimportant and insignificant.

Whether one accepts or rejects the evidence for Alcuin’s monastic status, his monastic education left an imprint on an impressionable mind, one that was later to define sharply the parameters of his own intense spirituality. This is indicated years later when, as has been previously discussed, he fondly remembered his spiritual matres and magistri, the monks of York, and affectionately recalled, through the eyes of a dutiful young nutritus, their contribution to his physical and spiritual maturation. Moreover, as has been noted, Alcuin had requested permission from Charlemagne to leave the world and retire to the monastery of Fulda, preferring to live according to the Regula s. Benedicti. In addition, when Alcuin retired to his monastery of Tours in 796, his biographer reports that he led a monastic life, engaging in fasts, prayers, and mortifications of the flesh.

Egbert, Aelbert and the Cathedral School of York

In the community of York, two personalities stand out as shining luminaries with whom Alcuin formed intimate and lasting relationships; there was Archbishop Egbert of York (from 735-766), and Aelbert who succeeded him to the See of York in 767. Of the nature of his relationship with Egbert, Alcuin’s own writings and the testimony of his anonymous biographer give some indication.

The portrayal of Egbert that comes down to us in the Vita Alcuini (Dümmler 1873, 11), confirmed by Alcuin’s Versus de patribus regibus et sanctis Eboricensis ecclesiae (Godman 1982, 98-131), indicates that Egbert was instrumental in the development of Alcuin’s spirituality, both by word and example. Egbert, according to Alcuin’s biographer, was accustomed to pouring out twice a day the most fervent and secret prayers in his oratory, with both knees bent devoutly on the ground and hands outstretched to heaven in the form of a cross, this before he ended his fast and before he celebrated Compline. The anonymous author continues: “Following Compline, no student dared to go to bed without his blessing.” More importantly, the anonymous author notes that of all his faithful followers, Egbert loved Alcuin the most because of the diversity of his merits. Similarly, Egbert, following in his master’s footsteps (Bede), studied thoroughly the secrets of the Holy Scriptures every morning until the sixth or very often the ninth hour. This description of Egbert’s spirituality finds similar expression in Alcuin’s Versus de patribus regibus et sanctis Eboricensis ecclesiae:

He was a most famous ruler of the church and a distinguished

teacher, venerated by all the people, excellent in morals, just

affable and savage to the wicked. He spent his days and nights

engaging in various sacred duties, praying tirelessly and

assiduously throughout the long nights, celebrating the solemnities

of the Mass on holy days (Godman 1982, 98).

The personality who emerges as Alcuin’s closest teacher, patron and friend, however, as characterized by Godman, was Archbishop Aelbert, Egbert’s Successor in the See of York in 767. This close friendship between magister and discipulus was fondly remembered by Alcuin, and in fact, finds confirmation in much of his later writing, particularly in his epistles and the Versus de patribus regibus et sanctis Eboricensis ecclesiae (Godman 1982, xxxvii). In epistle 72, dated 796, Alcuin remarks to Archbishop Eanbald II that part of the literary collection in the cathedral library of York was bequeathed to him by his beloved teacher, Archbishop Aelbert. Moreover, in epistle 78 dated 797, Alcuin mentions to Charlemagne how he reluctantly left behind in York books of equisite erudition acquired through the diligence of his most beloved master, Aelbert. In another letter written in the same year and addressed to Eanbald, Alcuin recalls their service under Aelbert’s instruction as he reminds him that, “these are dangerous times in Britain, the death of kings is a sign of misery and discord, the beginning of captivity, as you have often heard from our master previously mentioned Dummler 1873; 331, 346 338).”

Alcuin’s anonymous biographer paints a vivid portrait of Master Aelbert, “adorning” the minds of his pupils with secular erudition, and their souls with divine inspiration. In one instance, the anonymous Vita Alcuini records that Alcuin, reading the Gospel of John before Aelbert with fellow students, arrived at the part only the pure in heart comprehend―from the place where John himself reclined on the breast of the Lord to where Jesus crossed the Kidron with his disciples. Suddenly, he had the same vision experienced by Benedict of Nursia; the whole world gathered together under a beam of the sun (Dümmler 1873, 4).

In another instance, Alcuin is said to have reluctantly learned from Aelbert the bitterness of secular literature so that he might penetrate God’s holy mysteries (Dümmler 1873, 4). Alcuin, himself, gives us a detailed description of the saecularia litteratura provided by Aelbert:

There (at York), he watered parched hearts with diverse streams of

learning, and the varied dew of knowledge, training some of them in

the arts and the rules of grammar and pouring over altars a flood of

rhetorical eloquence. Some he polished with the whetstone of true

speech, teaching others to sing in Kaonian Strain; training some to blow

on the Castalian pipe; and to run with lyric over the peaks of Parnassus

to others, this master taught the harmony of the spheres, the labors of the

sun and moon, the five zones of heaven, the seven planets, their rising and

setting, the movements of the air, the tremors of the earth and sea, the

nature of man and cattle, of birds and wild beasts, the diverse forms and

shapes of numbers (Godman 1982, 432-48).

As Alcuin informs us, Aelbert also traveled abroad, particularly to Rome to obtain books for the Cathedral Library at York. As Alcuin in the same communications adds the phrase, “and due, to some extent, to my own efforts as well,” it is highly probable that he accompanied Aelbert on his continental peregrinations (Wattenbach and Dummler 1873, 78). This is perhaps exemplified by epistolary evidence and the epitaph Alcuin wrote for Aelbert (according to Bullough) shortly after Alcuin returned from Rome in 81. In a letter addressed to the monastery at Murdach that cannot be dated with precision, Alcuin explains that while following in his master’s footsteps, he had absorbed and greatly admired the Murdach monastic life and avowed that during that time, he himself was fervently inspired to become a member of the community (Wattenbach and Dummler 1873, 269; Bullough 2004; 112, 116).

In a much more informative letter, dated to 799, Alcuin, writing from the monastery of Saint-Martin at Tours, related to Charlemagne how, while traveling to Rome as a young man, he had lingered in the Lombard capital of Pavia for a few days. In the same letter, Alcuin adds that a dispute took place between a certain Jew, named Lullus, and a Master Peter, whom Alcuin identifies as the same Peter who distinguished himself teaching grammar in Charlemagne’s Palace (Wattenbach and Dummler 1873, 112). More importantly, Alcuin relates how he followed Aelbert when the latter traveled to Rome, “a city venerated by all nations, and to the flourishing kingdom of the Franks (Dummler 1881, 206-7).

As previously noted, Alcuin’s writing of the Epitaphium Aelberti in 781 coincided with a journey to Rome he undertook following the death of Aelbert. That journey, as Godman has observed , marked a major turning point in Alcuin’s career (Godman 1982, xxxvi). A discussion of the circumstances surrounding that voyage will enhance Godman’s meaning. According to the Vita Alcuini, the trip was organized by Eanbald, Alcuin’s fellow student at the cathedral school of York and Aelbert’s successor to the See there. In the author’s words:

Having been ordered by Eanbald, successor to Aelbert, that Alcuin was

to obtain the pallium from the Apostolic See, he came to Rome.

Returning after he received the pallium, Alcuin encountered King Charles

in the city of Parma. Addressing him, the king implored him with great

Entreaty to return to Francia following the completion of his mission.

Alcuin, wishing to contribute to the success of others, agreed to

Charlemagne’s appeal, with the permission of his own king and

Archbishop, on the condition that he could return to them. And so,

with Christ directing his footsteps, Alcuin came to King Charles,

who welcomed him like a father by whom King Charles was

introduced tothe liberal arts (Wattenbach and Dummler 1873, 5).

However one chooses to interpret the events surrounding this encounter, one thing was certain; it would initiate an intimate friendship between the Frankish monarch and the York scholar that would usher in a new and highly significant phase in the development of Carolingian spirituality.

Alcuin at the Frankish Court

As Peter Godman has indicated, “At Charlemagne’s court, Alcuin was the center of the international elite of scholars and poets in whose works is celebrated the first brilliant phase of the Carolingian renovation (Godman 1982, xxxvii).” Although the notion that such a circle of distinguished scholars constituted an institutionalized palace school has been seriously challenged, it nevertheless reflected a serious attempt by Charlemagne to surround himself with the most renowned continental and insular litterati of his day, many of whom are known to us. The previously mentioned Lombard, Peter of Pisa, was characterized by Alcuin as a scholar who distinguished himself teaching grammar at the palace of Charlemagne. Other luminaries included: Paulinus, later Patriarch of Aquileia (787), best known for his speculum principis, the Liber exhortationis, which was addressed to Duke Erich of Friuli and heavily indebted to pseudo-Basil’s De admonitio ad filium spiritualem; Theodulf, a Goth from Spain, who later became Bishop of Orléans (790); Einhard, author of the Vita Karoli magni; and a certain Jonas, portrayed even at an early age, as an eminent scholar at Charlemagne’s court, and identified by Alain Dubreucq as the Jonas who later became Bishop of Orléans (818) (Dubreucq 1995, 9-10).

Nevertheless, Alcuin was esteemed above all others by Charlemagne and exercised a preponderant influence over both the ruler’s private and public affairs. Privately, as his biographer Einhard relates in the Vita Karoli magni, Charlemagne learned grammar from Peter of Pisa, but in other disciplines, his teacher was Alcuin. Einhard goes on to add that under Alcuin’s tutelage,Charlemagne had a special interest in learning the rudiments of astronomy (Rau 1955, I: 96).

Publicly, Alcuin served as close confidant to Charlemagne, advising him on the resolution of major Christological and Trinitarian issues, serving as lay administrator of important monastic communities, and acting as the major architect of Charlemagne’s educational reforms. For instance at the Synod of Frankfort, held in 794, Alcuin played a major role in suppressing the heretical teachings of Bishop Felix of Urgel and Archbishop Elipand of Toledo. The heresy, known as Adoptionism or “the error of the Spaniards,” as Alcuin called it, held that the crucified Christ or Christ in his human form was not the true son of God, but a son only by adoption. It was at this synod that Charlemagne accorded Alcuin a singular distinction. In the last chapter of the Roman acta, at Charlemagne’s suggestion, the assembled bishops argeed to welcome Alcuin, a man distinguished in ecclesiastical doctrine, into the fellowship and prayers of the Holy Synod (Boretius 1883, 76). This recognition of Alcuin’s theological expertise by Charlemagne receives further confirmation by Alcuin’s anonymous biographer who states that at Charlemagne’s request, Alcuin wrote for him a most useful book about the Holy Trinity; this testimony is also supported by Alcuin in an epistle dated 802 where he stated that he was sending Charlemagne a short manual concerning faith in the one and indivisible Trinity (Wattenbach and Dummler 1873, 12; Wattenbach and Dummler 1873, 672).

Alcuin also appears as the chief architect behind what are perhaps two of the most influential and most extensively quoted texts in Carolingian history, the Admonitio generalis, promulgated in 799, and the Epistula de litteris colendis, dated to between 789 and 800. That Alcuin was the author of at least chapters 72 and 73 of the Admonitio generalis and the entire text of the Epistola de litteris colendis is evident in the close grammatical parallels between those texts and his own writings (Boretius 1883, 52-62; 78-9).

Let us address the contents of chapters 72 and 73 of the Admonitio generalis, which reveal its fundamental purpose: to restore the spirituality of the Frankish populus dei, reunite the ecclesia under the auctoritas of Charlemagne as the rector ecclesiae, and establish the Frankish Christianum imperium as the instrument for the salvation of souls.To this end, Alcuin clearly conceived of the monastic schools as a training ground for both clergy and members of the laity, who would return to the world, and create a community of religious believers bound by the disciplina of the vita monastica. Individually assuming the ministerium of rector ecclesiae, each would implement a fundamental goal, the salvation of souls. A close analysis of chapters 72 and 73 of the Admonitio generalis illustrates this. According to its author, ministers of God, both those canons and members of monastic communities should adorn themselves with good morals. They should lead good and morally upright lives. The author of the Admonitio generalis further states that they are to do this in order to attract many to the service of God, not only children of servile condition, but freeborn boys as well. The author goes on to stress the importance of properly correcting books in all monastic and Episcopal schools, especially those associated with psalms, letters, songs, mathematics and grammar. The Admonitio generalis explains that faulty texts cause Christians to make mistaken requests of God. Additionally, continues the author, boys should not be allowed to lapse into sin by reading and writing erroneous books. The author concludes sby noting that if there is a need to write gospels. Psalters and missals, men of mature age should write them, and with great care. As a result, secular education would serve as the handmaiden of theology. With masters properly imbued with monastic virtues to teach by word and example, students could gain eternal salvation by penetrating the mysteries of Sacred Scripture, subsequently passing on their spiritual knowledge to others (Boretius 1883, 50-60).

The monastic foundation and soteriological nature of Charlemagne’s educational reforms is even more prominent in the Epistula de litteris colendis. First, if monks are to lead the Frankish populus dei to salvation, they must possess the spiritual understanding to undertake such an endeavor. For Alcuin, such understanding could only come, however regrettably, through the study of secular literature. Monks, thus, for Alcuin, must in the Augustinian sense “spoil the Egyptians” by harnessing saecularia litteratura to the higher goal of spiritual enlightenment. According to Alcuin, monks should apply their minds eagerly, and, in a manner pleasing to God, cultivate the study of letters in order to penetrate the mysteries of the Holy Scriptures more easily and more correctly. Moreover, he adds that due to certain rhetorical devices and figurative language found in the sacred pages, the spiritual meaning of the Holy Scriptures would be more quickly understood due to the prior secular learning that monks will have had (Boretius 1882, 79).

But for Alcuin, it is not enough for monks merely to be morally upright and thoroughly trained in spiritualis scientia; they in turn must prepare other leaders, by both words and example, by their spiritual erudition and moral ways of life, both lay and clerical, to lead the Frankish people to salvation in the militia spiritualis. Alcuin explains how this might be accomplished:

We also hope that you, as soldiers of Christ, devoted inwardly, learned

and morally pure teachers outwardly, because of the name of the Lord

and a pious way of life, will have set a good example for members of

the nobility. Thus, his spiritual vision is edified by your appearance. Having been instructed, and having persevered in singing and reading,

as a result of our wisdom, he may return to the world, rejoicing and

giving thanks to almighty God (Boretius 1883, 79).

However, a critical question remains. How do members of the Frankish aristocratic laity who have not shared the disciplined environment of the monastic schools come under the spiritual aegis of monastic and ascetic values? Paulinus of Aquileia had already suggested a solution: the dissemination of monastic and ascetic values through the medium of the Liber exhortationis. Presently, Alcuin also would bring Count Wido of the Breton March into his monastic and ascetic spiritual army through the pages of the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis. It is to that work that we now turn.

The Liber de virtutibus et vitiis Specula principum constituted a major literary genre in the Carolingian Period. Centered on the fundamental premise that salvation can only be attained by the avoidance of vices and cultivation of virtues, they played an important didactic role in providing rulers and members of the Carolingian aristocracy with instruction in the proper ordering of Christian society. Additionally, these literary specula, as the name implies, served as “mirrors” in which rulers and magnates alike could contemplate the health or sickness of their souls, by laying down parameters to enable readers to walk the royal road of virtue from the earthly to the heavenly kingdom.

One of the most notable examples of these metaphoric “mirrors of princes” is Alcuin’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis. As we know from the introduction to the treatise, the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis is dedicated to a certain Count Wido, almost certainly the same individual who, according to the author of the Annales regni Francorum, was presiding over the March of Brittany (Rau 1955, I: 70).

The Liber de virtutibus et vitiis is prefaced by an introductory epistle and terminates with a brief but engaging peroration. Divided into 36 chapters it projects a literary landscape, diverse in both style and tone. The treatise is strictly theological in nature, presenting vivid eschatological overtones; with a fundamental underlying theme mandating cultivation of virtues and avoidance of Vices as prerequisites for the attainment of eternal salvation. The first 26 chapters, based on excerpts primarily from the writings of Patristic Fathers such as pseudo-Augustine (Quodvultdeus, 5th century Bishop of Carthage), pseudo-Basil’s De admonitio ad filium spiritualem, St. Jerome and Isidore of Seville deal with the usual assortment of virtues and vices found in this literary genre (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 614-623). Chapters 28-34 were once primarily attributed by Arthur Kleinclausz to Augustine, but were convincingly shown by Wallach to be derived from the Moralia of Gregory the Great, the Sententiae of Isidore of Seville and the Conférences and Institutions cénobitiques of John Cassian (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 633-638; Kleinclausz 1948. 221; Wallach 1959, 188).

These chapters treat the common theme of the eight principal vices: pride, gluttony, fornication, greed and anger, apathy in the practice of virtues, sadness and vainglory. Concluding with chapter 34 in language calculated to appeal to a Carolingian warrior, Alcuin refers to the eight principal vices metaphorically as armies of impious leaders that are conquered by Christ through holy virtues. Finally, in chapter 35, the four cardinal virtues are discussed: Prudence, Justice Fortitude and temperance, a theme closely paralleling and possibly derived from Gregory’s 18th homily on Ezekiel (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 633-638 ; Morel 1990, 518).

However, it is in the introductory epistle and peroration that Alcuin reveals his fundamental purpose for composing a work of such moral exhortation. Alcuin reminds Count Wido (a man occupied with military affairs) that he promised to write a short treatise of moral advice as urgently requested. Alcuin further states that he wishes to place in Wido’s hands sentences of paternal admonition on which to gaze to arouse his enthusiasm for eternal salvation (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 613).

Alcuin then proceeds to employ the usual Carolingian literary trope of humility when he apologizes to Wido that his writing may not seem eloquent, but he nevertheless emphasizes its spiritual value with reassurance that his words are inspired with the intent of holy charity. Finally, Alcuin informs his reader that he has divided his work into separate chapters, so that Wido, burdened with the thoughts of many worldly affairs (possibly an allusion to his comitial duties), might more easily remember his words (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 613)

In the peroration, Alcuin once again draws attention to the importance of his manual for Wido’s eternal salvation. Repeating the introductory remarks that he has composed a brief treatise, in accordance with Wido’s request, Alcuin adds that in his little work Wido can learn what he should avoid, and (in words closely resembling Cassian’s), what he should pursue to climb to the summit of spiritual perfection (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 638; Pichery 1955, 107). Addressing Wido’s fear that he may not be worthy to enter the portals of heaven because of his lay status and his secular way of life, Alcuin reassures him with the following:

The kingdom of God is open to every sex, age and person equally,

according to the value of their merits. There is no difference based on

whether one was of the world, lay or cleric, rich or poor, junior or senior,

slave or master, but each will be crowned with eternal glory, according to

their measure of good works (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 638).

Alcuin’s notions on virtues and vices, as we have seen, derived not only from the writings of the fathers such as Gregory and Isidore, but also from various monastic and ascetic sources. In fact, a cursory examination of the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis reveals that it rests firmly―at least in terms of monastic and ascetic influence―on the Porcarian and Cassianic monastic traditions. The Porcarian monastic tradition, the topic of our present discussion, is represented by the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem. Paul Lehmann, the most recent editor of the text, dated it to the mid-fifth century, and attributed it to the hand of Rufinus of Aquileia, who he claims translated it into Latin from an original Greek work of Bishop Basil of Caesarea, now lost. More recently, however, Adalbert De Vogüé dated the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem to around 500 and identified the author as Abbot Porcarius of Lérins. De Vogüé based his conclusion on remarkably close thematic and textual similarities between the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem and Porcarius’ Monita or Counsels, a book of spiritual exhortations, presumably intended for his monastic community at Lérins (Lehmann 1955, 3-29; De Vogüé, 1996, 4-72 and 1991-2006, 7: 418-29) .

That Alcuin drew inspiration from the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem for his Liber de virtutibus et vitiis is not surprising, since evidence suggests that the former was widely available in the Carolingian period both during and after Alcuin’s lifetime, accessible both directly in full text, and indirectly through the late seventh-century Defensor of Ligugé’s Liber scintillarum (Rochais 1961, 9-44). Scholars such as Franz Brunhölzl, Albert Hauck, Hans Hubert Anton, and more recently, Franz Sedlmeier have all noted that Paulinus of Aquileia drew extensively from the full text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem for his Liber exhortationis, copying extensive passages verbatim from the former (Brunhölzl 1995, I: 254; Hauck 1912-29, 2: 162, n.2; Anton 1968, 83; Sedlmeier 2000, 50-5). Second, comparative textual evidence suggests that Smaragdus, 9th century abbot of Mihiel drew from the full text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem for specific passages in chapter 4 of the Expositio in regulam s. Benedicti (Spannagel and Engelbert 1974, 103).

Finally, but no less crucial for our argument, it is interesting to note that such Carolingian magnages such as Marquis Evward of Fruili, possessed a copy of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem in his private library (Riché 1963, 98-9).

As in the case of Paulinus and Smaragdus, a close relationship also exists between passages found in the De admonitio ad filium spirituialem and Alcuin’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, possibly filtered through the pages of the Liber scintillarum:

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, chap. 5 De admonitio ad filium spiritualem, chap. 12

… sicut enim ex carnalibus escis Sicut enim ex carnalibus escis aliter caro,

Aliter caro, ita ex divinis eloquiis ita ex divinis eloquiis interior homo nutritur

Interior homo nutritur ac pascitur. ac pascitur.

Liber scintillarum, chap. 81

Sicut enim ex carnalibus

Escis aliter caro, ita et divinis

Interior homo nutritur ac pascitur (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 516, Lehmann 1955, 51; Rochais 1957, 234)

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, chap. 9 De admonitio ad filium spiritualem, chap. 9

Avarus vir inferno est similes, qui Avarus enim vir inferno est similes

Nunquam impletur. Infernus igitur, quantoscunque

devoraverit, non dicit satis est…

Liber scintillarum, chap. 25

Avarus vir similes est infernum,

Avariciam palam saevit (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 619; Lehmann 1955, 46; Rochais 1957, 109).

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, chap. 9 De admonitio ad filium spiritualem, chap. 19

Qui patienter tolerat malo in futuro Qui enim patienter pertulerit mala, in

Coronam merebitur sempiternam. Futuram coronabitur.

Liber scintillarum, chap. 2

Qui pacienter tollerat mala,

In futuro coronam merebitur ( Migne 1851/1995, 101: 619; Lehmann 1955, 60; Rochais 1957, 10) .

To begin, Alcuin’s remarks sicut enim ex carnalibus escis alitur caro, ita ex divinis eloquiis interior homo nutritur et pascitur can almost certainly be ascribed to the extracts from the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem found in the Defensor’s Liber scintillarum or from the full text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem itself. Similarly, Alcuin’s comments avarus vir inferno est similes, qui nunquam impletur seems to be derived from either the text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritiualem or passages preserved in the Liber scintillarum’s chapter on avarice. Further, Alcuin’s exhortation qui patienter tolerat mala in futuro coronam merebitur sempiternam can with a fair degree of certainity be attributed to the Defensor’s florilegium of pseudo-Basil’s comments found in the Liber scintillarum’s chapter on patience―or again, Alcuin may have borrowed it from the full text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem.

If there is a question concerning the manner in which the above mentioned passages of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem were transmitted to Alcuin for incorporation in the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, the answer is quite clear when dealing with his leters. For, in one specific letter, there is no doubt that Alcuin relied on the full text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem. In that letter dated 801-802, Alcuin clearly borrows the words of the pseudo-Basil, not found in any known florilegium. Borrowing almost verbatim from the De admonitio ad filiium spirituialem, Alcuin admonishes his former students, Onias, Candidus, and Nathanahelios, that “riches of this world are foreign to us. We bring nothing into this world and we can carry nothing out, for our possession is the kingdom of heaven.” Let us compare the Later of Alcuin’s letter and chapter 9 of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem:

Alcuin, epistula 251 De admonitio ad filium spirituialem, chap. 9

Alienae sunt a nobis huius Alienae sint a nobis huius saeculi facultates,

seculi facultates, id est extra nostra autem possessio regnum caelorum est.

nostrum sitae naturam. Nihil

enim intulimus in hunc mundum,

haud dubium, quia nec auferre

quid possumus. Nostra autem

possessio regnum caelorum… (Dummler 1895, 406; Lehmann 1955, 9, 45) .

Therefore, we can conclude that for his pseudo-Basilian expressions, Alcuin drew both upon the extracts of the Defensor’s Liber scintillarum, and, like his friend and confidant, Paulinus, upon the original text of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem as well.

Another source used extensively by Alcuin in his Liber de virtutibus et vitiis are the writings of John Cassian. Yet while Alcuin does reproduce verbatim Cassian’s remarks on a particular subject, to some extent, in other instances (as Donald Bullough has noted), he manipulates and rewords Cassian in a highly original manner (Bullough 1983, 140). More recently, Michael Fox echoed Bullough’s sentiments, “Alcuin quotes some of his authorities verbatim, while he paraphrases and manipulates others (Fox 2003, 2).” It is in Alcuin’s discussion of vainglory in chapter 34 of the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis that we see most clearly his literary originality as well as his skilled exegetical elaborations. Here Alcuin is unquestionably drawing on Cassian, not randomly, but in a calculated deliberate manner, in his discussion of vainglory; tailoring it to his own style, adding expressions omitted in Cassian, most appropriate for a secular soldier, yet superfluous or meaningless for a monastic audience. Let us compare the fundamental similarities and significant differences between the two authors:

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, 34 Institutions cénobitiques, 11, 1-6

…ista pestis, id est, vania gloria …etenim cetera vita seu perturbationes

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, 34 Institutions cénobitiques, 11, 1-6

Avaritia est, et undique bellatori uniformes ac simplices esse noscuntur

contra vitia pugnanti, ex omni haec vero multiplex et multiformis ac

parte victori etiam vitiorum varia, undique bellatori et ex omni parte

occurit. Nam et in habitu et in victori occurrens. Nam et in habitu et in

forma corporis in incessu, in voce forma, in incessu, in voce, in opere, in

et in opera, in vigiliis in jejuniis, in vigiliis, in ieiuniis, in oratione, remotione,

oratione, in remotione, in lectione, in lectione, in scientia, in taciturnitate, in

in scientia, in taciturnitate, in obedientia, in humilitate, in longanimitate

obedientia, in humilitate, in militem Christi vulnerare conatur, et velut

patientiae longanimitate militem quidam perniciossimus scopulus

Christi vulnerare conatur, et velut tumentibus undis obtectus ac miserabile

perniciossimus scopulus tumentibus naufragium secundo navigantibus vento

undis obtectus improvisum ac dum non cavetur nec praevidetur, inportat.

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, chap. 34 Institutions cénobitiques, bk. 11, chaps. 1-6

miserabile naufragium prospere Nam cui sub specie scientiae succinctae.

navigantibus, dum non cavetur, vestis ac nitidae χένοδοξιάν non potuit

importat. Nam cui sub specie generare, pro squalid et inculta ac viliore

pulchrae vestis ac nitidae conatur inserere: quem non potuit per

cenodoxiam non potuit generare, honorem deicere, humilitate subplantat:

pro squalid et inculta ac viliori quem scientae et elocutionis ornatu

conatur insesrere; quem non potuit nequivit extollere, gravitate taciturnitate

per honorem dejicere, humilitate elidit. Si ieiunet palam gloria vanitatis

supplantat; quem scientiae et pulsatur: Si illud prolixus sub fratram

elocutionis ornate nequivit vitat celebrare conspectus: et quod eas

extollere, gravitate taciturnitatis latenter exerceat nullumque habeat

elidit. Si jejuna palam, gloria conscium facti, non effugit aculeos

causa contexerit, eodem vitio vanitatis. Alium quod patientissimus

Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, chap. 34 Institutions cénobitiques bk. 11, chaps. 1-6

Elationis intus in seipso homo sit operum ac laboris alium quod

subtunditur. Ne vanae gloriae ad oboediendum promptissimus, alius

contagion maculetur, orationes lectionis, alius vigiliarum prolixitate

prolixus sub fratrum vitat celebrare temptatur. Nec alius quemquem hic

conspectus et quod eos latenter morbis nisi suis nititur virtutibus

exerceat, non effugit aculeos sauciare… (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 635-6;

vanitatis. Alium quod patentissimus Guy 2001, 428-32).

prolixitate tentatur. Non solum ergo

saecularibus operibus sed etiam suis

virtutibus hominem hic morbis nititur

sauciare.

Here, from the outset, Alcuin introduces his subject in words calculated to appeal to a Carolingian count. He refers to vainglory as a pestilence, avarice in many forms which attacks everywhere, on all sides; to the warrior as a fighter against vices, as well as a conqueror vices. If we compare Alcuin’s ista pestis, id est, vana gloria, multiformis avaritia est, et undique bellatori contra vitia pugnanti, ex omni parte victori etiam vitiorum occurit with Cassian’s etenim cetera vita seu perturbationes uniformes ac simplices esse noscuntur haec vero multiplex et multiformis ac varies, undique bellatori et ex omne parte victori occurrens, we note that while there are some interesting textual divergences, source attribution is almost certainly without question. Both, for example, refer to vainglory as

attacking the warrior and conqueror everywhere, on all sides. Yet, interestingly enough, Alcuin identifies vainglory as a pestilence, a many-faceted form of avarice: ista pestis, id est, vana gloria multiformis avaritia est. Cassian, employing the vague haec to refer to vainglory, simply states that it manifests itself in many various forms. Similarly, both Cassian’s and Alcuin’s military metaphors reflect the status of their particular audiences. Cassian’s use of bellaltori and victori are enough to identify them as soldiers and conquerors for his monastic readers; since the metaphor was clear, he does not have to explain further. Alcuin, on the other hand, must explain the spiritual meaning of his metaphoric language to his secular audience in unequivocal terms; he evokes a warrior fighting against vices (bellatori contra vitia pugnanti) and a conqueror of vices (victori etiam vitiorum) (Migne 1851/1995, 101; 636; Guy 2001, 428).

Next, Alcuin, in discussing the various ways vainglory can harm a Christian, follows Cassian very closely with slight grammatical variation. According to Alcuin, vainglory can ruin a soldier of Christ in appearance, in gait, in voice, in work, in vigils, in fasts, in prayer, in renunciation, in reading, in knowledge, in silence, in obedience, in humility, and in long-suffering patience, a virtue not listed in Cassian’s account. Both describe how an unsuspecting soul, unaware of a rock hidden beneath treacherous waves, is suddenly and unexpectedly shipwrecked. Alcuin uses the words: et velut perniciossimus scopulus tumentibus undis obtetus improvisum ac miserabile naufragium prospere navigantibus dum non cavetur, importat. Cassian employs slightly different terms: et velut quidam perniciossimus scopulus tumentibus undis obtectus inprovisum ac miserabile naufragium secundo navigantibus vento, dum non cavetur nec praevidetur, inportat.

Continuing to draw from Cassian for his discourse on vainglory, Alcuin warrns Wido about Satan. If the devil cannot induce vainglory with beautiful and glittering vestments, he will do so by using a dirty, unpolished and rude appearance. Alcuin then proceeds to enumerate the various ways in which the devil can use vainglory to cast down a Christian:

Whom he cannot cast down through honor, he overthrows by humility;

whom he cannot flatter with the adornment of knowledge and elocution,

he destroys by the weight of silence. One who fasts openly is inspired

by vainglory; if he hides it to distain praise, he succumbs to the sin of

pride.

Additionally, Alcuin echoes and closely parallels Cassian’s remarks that a man, who tries to escape contamination by vainglory, by avoiding extended prayer in the in the presence of his brother, will find that praying in seclusion will not stop the darts of pride. Alcuin further observes that vainglory attempts to flatter one Soul who is most patient in work and labor, another who is most servile in obedience, and another who excels his peers in humility. Finally, and most importantly, it is important to note Alcuin’s exegetical originality by his adaptation of Cassian’s nec alias quamquam hic morbus nisi suis nitritur virtutibus sauciare for his secular audience, with the inclusion of saecularibus operibus, a phrase conspicuously absent in Cassian. As he explains to Wido, “this disease attempts to wound a man, not only through his secular works but also through his virtues (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 636; Guy 2001, 430-2).”

The Cassianic tradition continued to exercise considerable influence over Alcuin’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis in his chapters on gluttony and sadness. Although the discussion of gluttony and sadness were common themes in both sacred and profane literature, evidence suggests that Cassian’s thought served as the source for Alcuin’s inspiration and prose on both subjects. For example, both Alcuin in chapter 28 of the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis and Cassian in book 5 of the Institutions cénobitiques recognize the tripartite nature of gluttony. For Alcuin, it is quae tribus modis regnare videtur in homine or the three ways gluttony can rule over a man, while Cassian refers to the triplex enim natura gastrimargia or the triple nature of gluttony (Migne 1851-1995, 101: 633; Guy 2001, 230).

The influence of Cassian’s language continues as Alcuin elaborates on gluttony’s nature. Closely paralleling Cassian’s remarks that the first manifestation of gluttony appears when a monk is drawn to the table before the established canonical hour of refreshment (una quae canonicam refectionis horam praevenire conpellit), Alcuin relates to his reader that when a man desires to take food before the established canonical hour, it is for the sake of gluttony (dum homo horam canonicam et statuam gulae causa anticipare cupit) (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 633; Guy 2001, 230).

This textual relationship is further evident as both Cassian and Alcuin use similar language in ascribing excessive overeating and the preparation of exotic foods to the sin of gluttony. In his account, Cassian using the expressions alia quae tantummodo ventris ingluvie et saturitate quarumlibet gaudet escarum and quae accuratioribus epulis esculentioribus oblectatur teaches that a monk who delights only in gorging his stomach and entertaining himself with more elaborate and delicate feasts if guilty of the sin of gluttony. In a similar fashion, Alcuin, echoing Cassian’s expressive language, admonishes Wido with the words aut exquisitiores cibos sibi praeparare iubet when he warns him to avoid the sin of gluttony by not ordering more exotic food to be prepared than is necessary for the body. Further, with the words si plus accipet in edendo vel bibendo propter desiderium intemperantiae suae, quam suae proficiat saluti he adds that Wido should not eat or drink more than is needed for survival because of desires born of intemperance (Migne 1851/1995, 101: 633; Guy 2001, 230: Pichery1955, 199).

Turning our attention to the sin of sadness, we find that Cassian once again seems to have provided a monastic and ascetic model for Alcuin. In both chapter 33 of the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis and Cassian’s fifth conference, we learn that there are two distinct types of sadness (tristitiae genera sunt duo). Moreover, both Alcuin and Cassian exhibit distinct parallels in their discussions of vices generated by sadness. Both list as coming from sadness; the vices of rancor, Pusillanimity, bitterness and despair (Tristitia: rancor, pusillanimitas, amaritudo desperatio). Alcuin differs from Cassian only in his addition of malice (malitia), which he presumably drew from Gregory the Great’s Moralia in Iob ( Pichery 1955, 200; Migne 1851/1995, 101: 635; Pichery 1995, 209; Adriaen 1985, 1618).

Thus, the evidence presented here seems to establish Alcuin’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis as an important early Carolingian transmitter of the Porcarian and Cassianic monastic traditions.

Conclusion

Alcuin’s reputation as theological originator of Charlemagne’s education reforms and architect of Carolingian spirituality is well known. What has not been emphasized is his extensive use of monastic and ascetic values and sources as means to redeem a society he perceived to be in a grave state of spiritual deprivation and moral depravity. Admittedly, some scholars have drawn attention to Alcuin’s use of monastic and ascetic sources in his literary and legal writings, such as Albrecht Diem’s comparative study on the Regula s. Columbani and Alcuin’s Epistula de litteris colendis (Diem 1998, 27-44).

Moreover, Luitpold Wallach’s analysis of the close relationship between Cassian’s Institutions cénobitiques and Conférences and Alcuin’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, as well as Henri Rochais’ study on Alcuin’s use of the De admonitio ad filium spiritualem, extracted from the florilegia of the Liber scintillarum are significant. Nevertheless, as this study has attempted to demonstrate, the Cassianic influence on the Liber de virtutibus et vitiis has not been fully addressed. More significantly, Alcuin’s original exegetical treatment of Cassian’s writings has not been adequately explored. Furthermore, the hitherto undiscovered parallels between Alcuin’s Liber de virtutibus et vitiis, Epistulae and the pseudo-Basil’s De admonitio ad filium spiritualem constitute areas of study that call for more extensive investigation to be precisely assessed.

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