

Deadly Sins

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Also called "capital sins," they are those vices that by their particular attractiveness are likely to lead to additional sins. Although the lists of such sins vary, they have been reckoned since the **Middle Ages** to include pride, greed, lust, gluttony, envy, anger, and sloth.

History of the Tradition. Scripture, while it contains lists of sins and mentions all those sins that were later called capital, is not the actual source of the tradition. Moreover, scholarly efforts to trace its beginning to Oriental astrology, mythical soul-journeying, demonology, and even Stoic Philosophy are largely inconclusive. It seems certain that the general cultural milieu of Hellenistic syncretism formed the matrix in which the Christian experience of monastic asceticism developed the idea. When, in 383, Evagrius Ponticus wrote of eight evil thoughts (*Patrologia Graeca* 40:1271–73), the theme was already common in the Egyptian desert. **John Cassian**, after a visit to monastic centers in Egypt (385–403), brought the tradition to the West in his *Conferences* (*Patrologia Latina* 49:609–642) and *Institutes* 5–12 (*Patrologia Latina* 49:201–476). Although arranged in different order, Cassian's list contains the same eight sins as that of Evagrius: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, melancholy, sloth, vainglory, and pride. Gregory the Great, in his commentary on Job (*Moralia* 31.45; *Patrologia Latina* 76:621), gives a slightly different rendition (seven instead of eight, leaving pride out, adding envy, and subsuming sloth under melancholy). Following the Vulgate, where pride is called "the root of all evil" (Sir 10:13), Gregory pictures the root, pride, producing seven branches he considers "leaders of wicked armies," and identifies offspring of each. A modification of the Gregorian classification eventually prevailed in the Western Church.

The theme enjoyed enormous popularity in the medieval period. Together with the Creed and the Decalogue, the deadly sins were the staple of sermon topics, and often received more attention than the virtues with which they were sometimes pictured as battling. In 1236 Guillaume Perrault wrote a *Summa vitiorum* that inspired imitation not only in other sermon books and confessors' manuals but in literature and art. The sins appear in allegorized drama and gargoyles; they form the structure of Dante's *Purgatorio* and the concluding sermon in Chaucer's *Persoun's Tale*. Notwithstanding this popular interest, St. Thomas Aquinas did not grant the capital sins (*vitia capitalia*) a predominant place in his doctrine of sin. In the *Summa*, for example, the deadly sins as causes of other sins are treated in two brief articles (*Summa theologiae* Ia2ae, 84.3–4), although the sins are considered separately in their opposition to the virtues throughout the *Secunda Secundae*. Renaissance classicism, Reformation emphasis on sin rather than sins, and fading interest in allegory weakened the popularity of the tradition, although the theme has recurred persistently.

Theology. Both titles, "the deadly sins" and "the capital sins" are misnomers in that their referents are not necessarily either mortal sins or capital crimes. Following St. Thomas, Catholics have long preferred the designation "capital sins," since the term "capital," when understood as chief or head of a class, indicates that these sins are important not because they are the worst sins but because they lead to other sins. Thomas's designation of them as "vices" or habits of evil as opposed to "sins" or evil acts has received less consideration.

Although much of the appeal of the concept lies in its succinct formulation, the emphasis on a list of "seven deadly sins" contributes to their trivialization. That there are seven, a number that biblically connotes totality, fullness, and completion, may lead to the erroneous conclusion that eliminating the deadly sins and eradicating evil are equivalent. The classical list has also been deemed problematic by theologians who criticize its excessive attention to individual sins, to the exclusion of any consideration of social sin. Other theologians argue that the classical list manifests a cultural bias, and obscures the fact that other sins might rightly be called "capital."

Inasmuch as sin is a reality that dissipates and disorganizes human life, the tradition of the deadly sins has value in tracing patterns of that dissipation and disorganization. In spiritual direction the device can be used to diagnose spiritual diseases manifest in apparently unrelated symptoms. Contemporary efforts along these lines include texts that guide readers through a process of reading about the sins and reflecting on their expressions in life. A more thorough revision of the tradition attempts to correlate personality types, with their particular weaknesses, with the sins. In light of the history of the tradition, such revisions seem appropriate and testify to the continuing vitality of Christian asceticism in general and the theme of the deadly sins in particular.

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