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# Why Did the Demon Come at Noontide?

## Understanding *Acedia* in Medieval Monastic Life

*Eunju Bahrisch (Coventry)*

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Just as most confined communities or institutions, medieval monasteries were problematic places where basic physical and psychological needs were limited. In this research, I designate *acedia* as a dominant emotion in medieval monastic life. *Acedia* was often misunderstood as equivalent to modern-day boredom, however, it was a religious sin rather than a temporary emotional state. My focus in this research is not limited to defining what *acedia* was. Instead, I take notice of several less asked questions on this particular medieval emotion. Why was *acedia* a deadly sin? Why was it felt at noontide? Why was the meaning of *acedia* transformed from apathy in solitude to sloth or idleness? To answer these questions, I will demonstrate that *acedia* was neither sloth nor boredom, but it was an active craving for physical comfort. To comprehend the true nature of *acedia*, I compare *acedia* to *taedium*, melancholy, ennui and boredom. Furthermore, by closely looking at medieval monks' daily schedule, I attempted to clarify why *acedia* was felt around noontide. Analysing the monks' daily life and symptoms of *acedia*, I carefully suggest that *acedia* might be connected to anxiety caused by hunger. Throughout my research, new aspects of *acedia* will be discussed, which will offer a better understanding of the emotion.

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### 1 What was *Acedia*?

The Walnut Street Prison built by the Quakers in Philadelphia in 1790 is often said to be the first American prison which used boredom as a punitive tool. The prison kept the inmates in solitary confinement in order to “help” them to seek forgiveness from God and self-examination as a means of salvation, however, in reality, the prison drove them insane (Rodriguez McRobbie 2012). However, the Quakers' Walnut Street Prison in the eighteenth century was obviously not the first example of closed institutions, which caused psychological problems to the members. Medieval monasteries, which were built to devote life to God, often turned out to be psychologically unhealthy places. On the premise that *acedia* was a dominant psychological state in the limited space of medieval monasteries, this research will explore *acedia* from various angles.

Since its sudden appearance in the fourth century, *acedia* has never been clearly defined. Classical definitions were different from one another and modern interpretations of *acedia*

based on modern emotions have never sufficiently clarified this medieval and religious emotion. By modern scholars, *acedia* is often defined as a type of depression or boredom, or described as inexplicable. Even Siegfried Wenzel, an established scholar in *acedia* research and the author of *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (1967), was still criticised that he focused on the word *acedia* itself rather than offering a clear definition (Toohey 1990: 339–340). The ambivalence of *acedia* makes it difficult to be clearly defined. In this research, I would like to offer a new insight into *acedia* connecting it to the medieval monks' daily life and their religious goals, beyond the discussion of "which pre-existing definition of *acedia* is correct."

Although the etymological root of *acedia* was originally from a Greek word *akedia* from a (a negative prefix) + *kedos* (care) – therefore, the meaning together becomes "not care about" – Wenzel argues that the meaning grew up on Jewish and Christian soils. Hippocrates, Cicero, Lucian and other classical philosophers used the term beyond the Greek context, and even the Christians took the term to indicate soul weariness, tedium of the spirit, exhaustion and apathy.

To understand the essence of *acedia*, it is necessary to begin with other emotions, which are often compared to *acedia*, such as *taedium*, melancholy, ennui and boredom, although they are all distinguished from one another. Chronologically, *acedia* is located between *taedium* (or, inertia) in the ancient Roman period and melancholy in the early modern period. The metamorphoses of the "boredom family" reflect the problems of each period. *Tedium Vitae* can be said to be a symptom caused by an attempt to escape from excessiveness. Lucretius, Seneca and other Roman writers listed symptoms of *taedium*: *avaritia* (greed), *fastidium* or *supurbia* (pride/disgust/haughtiness), *furor* (anger), *ambitio* (a desire for power, ambition), *luxuria* or *lautitia* (love of luxury/decadence), *segnitia* or *desidia* (sloth) and *satio* or *satietos* (gluttony) (Irvine 2001: 354). It was suggested that the solution to *taedium* was philosophical (Toohey 1988: 159).

After the fourteenth century, *acedia* was less and less considered as a sin and by the time of the Renaissance, the concept of *acedia* was substituted with melancholy (Svendsen 2005: 51). Etymologically, melancholy was from *melas* (black) + *khole* (bile), meaning "black bile." Black bile was believed to be a secretion of the spleen consisting of the body's four humours (Irvine 2001: 60). As seen in the etymological context, melancholy was a physiological term because depression was attributed to an excess of black bile. Whereas *acedia* was linked to the soul, thus it had moral implications, melancholy was linked to the body and it was not necessarily negative. The connotation of melancholy included illness but sometimes wisdom (Svendsen 2005: 51). As medicine and scientific knowledge in the early modern period developed, melancholy began to be understood as a medical condition rather than an emotion.

Ennui entered English during the seventeenth century. Although it was a French term, meaning "annoyance," its etymological origin was from the Latin term *odi*, meaning "I hate,"<sup>1</sup> or the Greek words, *odussomai* (I hate) or *odussasthai* (to be angry) (Irvine 2001: 358).

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Irvine states that the Latin term *odi* is etymologically connected to the Greek hero Odysseus (Ulysses) and the Odin in Norse mythology. However, the etymological root of Odysseus is not certain and still remains controversial.

It contained a state of emotional discord and could be regarded as projecting “hostile feelings onto others as a means to lessen their own sense of suffering and uncertainty” (Irvine 2001: 357). According to Patricia Meyer Spacks’s definition, ennui belonged to those with “a sense of sublime potential,” therefore, it was found among those who felt themselves superior to their environment (Spacks 1995: 12). Whereas *taedium* was often compared to disgust or nausea, ennui was described as “heaviness,” being often allegorically associated with a pregnant woman who is “heavy with child” (Irvine 2001: 358). It was often divided into temporary ennui and chronic ennui.

The concept of boredom came into English in the eighteenth century but began to be widely used only in the nineteenth century. It has been considered as a less serious emotion when compared to *taedium*, *acedia*, melancholy, or ennui. In addition, the concept of boredom was new, which asserted that its subjective suffering was neither associated with religious terminology as *acedia*, nor with medical/physiological terminology as melancholy. Since boredom usually refers to a temporary and less serious emotional state, the prevalence of the term, “boredom,” in modern days causes problems in understanding pre-modern emotions such as *taedium*, *acedia*, or melancholy. Therefore, to the modern mind, the definition of *acedia* which was at the centre of monastic experience, is not easily grasped, especially when many different sources depict *acedia* in various terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *acedia* (or *accidie*) as “spiritual, mental sloth; apathy” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2014). Andrew Crislip attempts to clarify it: “the very persistence of the term *acedia* betrays the fact that none of the modern or medieval glosses adequately conveys the semantic range of the monastic term” (Crislip 2005: 145). Although *acedia* is not easily understood, it still appeals to modern people. A contemporary poet and essayist, Kathleen Norris, in *Acedia & Me*, offers an interesting observation. Although the 1993 *Oxford English Dictionary* declared that the word *accidie* (*acedia*) became obsolete between 1520 and 1730, after people experienced the genocidal horror during two world wars, *acedia* was back in use (Norris 2008: 2–3). If the reemergence of *acedia* reflects people’s interest, it proves that *acedia* is still relevant to modern life or modern problems.

Although the etymological root of *acedia* was from Greek, it was not the main emotion in ancient Greek or Roman society. In history, the importance of *acedia* was emphasised when Ponticus (345–399 AD) described monastic life and when he included *acedia* in the eight sins. Evagrius considered *acedia* as the *daemon meridianus* (the demon of noontide) in the *Psalm* 90. In modern translations/versions of the Bible, *Psalm* 90 does not clearly mention the *daemon meridianus*. However, according to Andrew Solomon’s research, the expression of the *daemon meridianus* (or *daemonio meridiano*) can be found in the Catholic Douay version of the Old Testament (Psalms 90:6) (Solomon 2001: 478, Note 292); “Of the arrow that flieth in the day, of the business that walketh about in the dark: of invasion, or of the noonday devil” (*Psalm* 90:6).

For Evagrius, the demon of *acedia* was the most serious trouble of all. When the demon attacked a monk, he felt; “the sun seemed to barely move,” “the day was fifty hours long,” and finally the demon of *acedia* instilled in the monk a “hatred” for the place, his very life itself and manual labour (Evagrius Ponticus 1972: 18–19). As seen in Evagrius’s description, one was given the impression that at the start of the attack, time stood still. This is similar to modern-day boredom. However, the effects of *acedia* did not stop here, but it was soon

followed by hatred and anger. Evagrius noted that when *acedia* attacked a monk, he saw his life “stretching out for a long period of time,” and saw ahead his life as “toil of ascetic struggle” (Evagrius Ponticus 1972: 18–19). Evagrius emphasised that the struggle with the demon of *acedia* would be in the end worthwhile, by saying, “No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he [the monk] is defeated), but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arises out of this struggle (i. e., *apatheia*)” (Evagrius Ponticus 1972: 18–19). The fact that a philosophical satisfaction such as *apatheia* follows the struggle evinces the difference between *acedia* and modern-day boredom. Defeating boredom is not accompanied by philosophical joy. From this point, it can be assumed that *acedia* was a more profound concept than boredom and its effect could even be existentially threatening.

## 2 Why Was *Acedia* One of the Deadly Sins?

*Acedia* was considered one of the seven/eight deadly sins. The deadly sins were differently defined by period. In the fourth century, Evagrius Ponticus listed eight evil thoughts in Greek – later translated into Latin by John Cassian (c. 360–435) – including gluttony, prostitution (fornication, lust), avarice (greed), hubris (self-esteem, pride), sadness (*tristitia*), wrath, boasting (vainglory), *acedia* (dejection). John Cassian divided the eight sins into two categories in *Collationes*. One group was six vices in the order of gluttony, lechery, greed, wrath, sadness and *acedia* and the other vainglory and pride. Cassian mentioned that these six sins are linked to each other, whereas the two sins of vainglory and pride are not related to the other six sins. The order of the sins is to be out of the abundance of the first vice gives birth of the second sin (Wenzel 1968: 4). That is to say, one is gluttonous then he will have lechery, then greed will follow, and finally *acedia* will come. According to Cassian’s analysis, one does not become vainglorious or proud when one is affected by *acedia* (Wenzel 1968, 4). What is interesting in Cassian’s order of the six sins, *acedia* was listed at the end, which bespeaks the gravity of the sin. In AD 590, Pope Gregory I revised the eight sins into seven and he put despair (*tristitia*) and sloth together into *acedia*, vainglory into pride, and added envy, therefore the seven deadly sins refer to lust, gluttony, greed, sloth (*acedia*), wrath, envy and pride.<sup>2</sup> After Cassian’s translation of Evagrius’s eight deadly sins, *acedia* was substituted by sloth over time, and by the time of Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604), *acedia* was understood as sloth, or idleness.

Even if *acedia* was understood as sloth, it is still difficult to grasp why it was listed as one of the “deadly” sins. In modern times being lazy is not regarded as deadly sinful. Then, why was *acedia* considered one of the deadly sins while other substituting words for *acedia* such as boredom, or laziness does not sound a major sin even in our busy, highly industrial modern world?

Wenzel’s observation on Evagrian *acedia* seems to offer a key to understanding it in the context of sins: “in the end *acedia* causes the monk either to give in to physical sleep, which proves unrefreshing or actually dangerous because it opens the door to many other temptations, or to leave his cell and eventually the religious life altogether” (Wenzel 1967: 5,

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<sup>2</sup> After Dante Alighieri listed these sins in *The Divine Comedy*, these sins often appear in this order.

cited in Toohey 1990: 341). The only physical comfort which was granted to medieval monks, in order to overcome *acedia*, was sleeping and eating, although Christian regulations tried to reduce even these basic pleasures.

In their pre-set lifestyle, a lack of sleep was a common problem. In the medieval times, people had segmented sleeps that was divided into two or three periods of sleeps (including a daytime nap called *meridian*) each day. Unlike modern times, medieval monks did not have an eight-hour block sleep, and they had to pray during the night between sleeps. Since sleeping time was strictly regulated and fragmented in medieval monastic life, arguably the only physical pleasure that monks could enjoy was eating. This is why hunger was often mentioned as an important symptom of *acedia*. The desire to eat would be monks' attempt to overcome *acedia*, and hunger or self-starvation might have caused *acedia*. Veronika E. Grimm also notes that monks' self-imposed privations often led to irritability, lethargy, depression, forgetfulness and an inability to work, which can be interpreted as symptoms of *acedia* (Grimm 1996: 176).

Then, what had the craving for physical comfort to do with *acedia*? To answer to this question, let us closely look at the symptoms of *acedia*. The following is an excerpt of John Cassian's description of *acedia*:

Towards eleven o'clock or midday, it induces such lassitude of body and craving for food as one might feel after [...] hard toil. Finally one gazes anxiously here and there, and sighs that no brother of any description is to be seen approaching: one is for ever in and out of one's cell, gazing at the sun as though it were tarrying to its setting: one's mind is in an irrational confusion [...] one is slothful and vacant in every spiritual activity, and no remedy, it seems, can be found for this state of siege than a visit from some brother, or the solace of sleep. Finally our malady suggests that in common courtesy one should salute the brethren, and visit the sick, near and far. It dictates such offices of duty and piety as to seek out this relative or that [...] far better to bestow one's pious labour upon these than sit without benefit, or profit in one's cell (Waddell 1998: 163–166).

From the above mentioned observations on *acedia*, it can be inferred that *acedia* was not an empty state of mind, but it was a stuffed and saturated emotional state with dissatisfaction, anxiety, anger and desire for physical pleasure. Hence, *acedia* was not felt passively within oneself, but “actively” compelled monks to seek physical or mental stimuli.

For the monks who had to devote themselves to heavenly works rather than physical matters such as hunger, feeling physical need could be a deadly sin. Craving for food all at once annihilated their devotion and long work for heavenly matters and brought them back to their earthly problems. In the modern sense, it might be called a *spiritual backsliding*. They were supposed to forget their earthly needs, but the time of hunger only confirmed that they were in the end physical beings just as their secular contemporaries. Then, why did they have to stay in the monasteries and devote themselves to their religious belief? When they made a life-long effort to keep animalistic instincts at bay, what would be a bigger sin than to lose faith at once with a simple appetite? Although it still needs to be further studied, the combination of resentment, remorse and guilt (triggered by hunger) would tell the true nature of *acedia*.

### 3 Why Was *Acedia* Called the *Daemon Meridianus* (the noontide demon)?

As *acedia*'s another name, the *daemon meridianus* suggests, *acedia* was the "noontide" demon. It is worth noting that Evagrius thought the demon attacked monks between the fourth hour (the fourth hour from the sunrise, therefore, around 10am) and the eighth hour (around 2pm).

The demon of *acedia* – also called the noonday demon – is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour (Evagrius Ponticus 1972: 18).

If *acedia* was just an emotion, would it be possible to feel a certain type of emotion at a specific time? To understand why *acedia* was related to time, it is necessary to examine medieval monks' daily schedule.

In the medieval temporal system, time was not counted by clock time, but it was counted by canonical hours, of which the first hour started with the sunrise. Thus, the time when *acedia* was felt differed according to seasons and regions, due to the difference in the sunrise. Considering the geography of Western Europe, during the summer, the time that the *daemon meridianus* attacked could be between 8am and 12 o'clock (if the sunrise was 5am). In winter, it could be between 11am and 3pm (if the sunrise was 8am). Why was *acedia* felt during this specific time span, especially before the ninth hour?

Setting the sunrise as Prime (the first hour), monks had strict pre-set canonical hours. The order was Prime (the first hour), Terce (the third hour), Sext (the sixth hour), None (the ninth hour), Vespers (the eleventh hour), and Compline (the twelfth hour). These were monk's main daily prayer times and in addition to these major prayers, there were masses, religious readings and manual labour time during the intervals. As medieval people ate only once a day, although in summer when the daytime was longer, they could eat light supper in the evening, monks were allowed to eat their only meal called dinner after the ninth hour, None (around 3pm). There was usually a time for manual labour before and after the Sext liturgy (around 12 o'clock) (Kinder 2002: 56). It could be assumed that monks engaged in hard physical labour in hunger and, coincidentally, this was the time when *acedia* was felt. Then, *acedia* could be overlapped with anxiety caused by hunger, or *acedia* could be deteriorated by hunger. It is notable that Cassian included hunger in his characterisation of *acedia*: Cassian's *acedia* was characterised by "tiredness, hunger, and the slowing of time, and by a desire to escape oneself through sleep or company" (Toohey 2004: 139).

The fact that the canonical hour None (around 3pm) was shifted to noon (12 o'clock) confirms that the problem of hunger was no easy matter in medieval monastic life. None, pronounced as "nown" became the etymological root of noon. As strict Christian regulations were gradually relaxed, the None prayer began to be adjusted to be conducted at 12 o'clock instead of the ninth hour from the twelfth century on. Although it is not clear whether the mealtime was adjusted by the prayer or the prayer was adjusted by hunger, mealtime was accordingly re-set to 12 o'clock instead of 3pm. Although little research has been conducted on the relatedness between *acedia* and hunger (or mealtime), if *acedia* was called noontide demon, it certainly had a close connection to None/noon and mealtime, and *acedia* might be one of causes of the time shift from None to noon.



Now it becomes clearer that *acedia* was not passive idleness or laziness. Metaphorically speaking, *acedia* was not a drowsy and languid feeling after a big and satisfying meal. It was rather like anxiety in front of food waiting to gulp it down. Monastic regulations defined *acedia* as one of the biggest sins, because it made monks crave for food, dislike the monasteries, and in the end, abandon their monasteries and belief. Therefore, *acedia* was a failure to do one's duty, and it was spiritual idleness rather than physical idleness.

#### 4 Why Was the Meaning of *Acedia* Distorted to Idleness?

Evagrius's concept of *acedia* influenced John Cassian's Institutes, which formed the basis of monasticism. In the process of conveyance from Evagrius to Cassian, the meaning of *acedia* had experienced changes and assumed more importance. Although Cassian in many parts followed Evagrius's definition of *acedia*, but he nevertheless added more to Evagrius's definition, making it resemble idleness (*otium* or *otiositas*), or sloth (Toohey 2004: 139). In Evagrius's description, when the demon attacks, the monk experiences "a dislike for the place and for his state of life itself, for manual labour, and also the idea that love has disappeared from among the brothers and there is no one to console him," and the ultimate goal of the demon, according to Evagrius's observation, is to "to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium" (Evagrius and Sinkewicz 2003: 99).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the purpose of Evagrius's warning against *acedia* was to prevent the monks from leaving the monasteries. How did then Cassian defined *acedia* and what was his goal in warning of *acedia*? Cassian's characterisation of *acedia* is as follows:

When this [*accidie* or *acedia*] besieges the unhappy mind, it begets aversion from the place, boredom with one's cell, and scorn and contempt for one's brethren, whether they be dwelling with one or some way off, as careless and unspiritually minded persons. Also, towards any work that may be done within the enclosure of our own lair, we become listless and inert [...] The blessed Apostle, like a true physician of the spirit [...] busied himself to prevent the malady born of the spirit of *accidie* [...] "Study to be quiet [...] and to do your own business [...] and to work with your own hands, as is commended you" (Waddell 1998, 163–166).

Cassian more focused on the work aspect and his antidote to *acedia* were patience, insistent prayer, the reading, meditation and above all, manual labour. That he suggested work as an antidote to *acedia* confirms that work was at the centre of monastic communities (Toohey 1990: 341). Therefore, Cassian's warning against *acedia* was for prohibiting the monks from being idle or slothful.

Peter Toohey analyses the transformation from Evagrius's concept of *acedia* and Cassian's, based on Wenzel (Wenzel 1967) and Chadwick's research (Chadwick 1968). According to Toohey's argument, the change could be attributed to circumstantial changes in religious life (Toohey 2004: 139)<sup>4</sup>; during the Evagrius's time the life in the North Africa was harsh, thus *acedia* was more related to solitude and deprivation. By the time that Cassian established monasteries in Marseille, after a period of wandering from Palestine to Constantinople to Egypt and finally to Marseilles, idleness was regarded as a danger,

<sup>3</sup> For further reading, see (Michael 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see (Chadwick 1968: 46, Wenzel 1967: 22).

especially when a monastery had to be a self-sustaining unit (Toohey 2004: 139–140). In self-sufficing communities such as medieval monasteries, laziness could be the biggest problem, and since monastic life required extreme devotion from monks, laziness could also weaken monks' faith and will in religious life.

Sloth was not the only term that Cassian confounded with *acedia*. Cassian also confused *tristitia* (often understood as severe sadness) with *acedia* (Toohey 1990: 342–343). Although *tristitia* can be very violent mental derangement, Cassian simply defined it as frustration. Cassian's confusion among *acedia*, sloth and *tristitia* affected the coming generation's understanding of *acedia*. Cassian's characterisation of *acedia* led to Pope Gregory I's seven deadly sins, as Pope Gregory I put *tristitia* and sloth into the category of *acedia*. Cassian and Pope Gregory I's categorisation has caused the meaning of *acedia* to be more confusing.

Peter Toohey provides more classical examples of *acedia* before Cassian's time, which demonstrate that *acedia* should be considered a dangerous illness. Toohey gives an example of St. John's *Exhortations to Stagirus* written in A.D. 380 or 381. St. John tried to help an anchorite Stagirus who suffered athumia, a condition interpreted as *acedia*. Stagirus' symptoms included "twisted hands, rolling eyes, a distorted voice, tremors, senselessness, and an awful dream at night – a wild, muddy boar rushed violently to accost him" (Toohey 1990: 341). According to Toohey's research, St. Jerome (c. 348–420) also offers a different idea of *acedia* from Cassian's:

There are those who, because of the humidity of their cells, because of excessive fasting, because of the tedium of solitude (taedio solitudinis), because of excessive reading, and because day and night they talk to themselves, becomes melancholic (vertuntur in melancholiam). They need Hippocratic treatments (Hippocraticis... fomentis) rather than our advice (Toohey 1990: 344).

Here, St. Jerome finds the cause of *acedia* in the surrounding circumstances such as the poor living conditions and discomfort of lifestyles of the monasteries rather than attributing it solely to the sufferer's self-will. So far, *acedia* was more known as Cassian defined it such as idleness or sloth, but it is evident that Cassian downsized the meaning of *acedia* into idleness, excluding its violent symptoms. As Evagrius said, *acedia* was indeed a very powerful enemy to overcome. He asserted that the person who can withstand *acedia*, through stamina and patience, will be able to overcome all other sins (Svendsen 2005: 50).

## 5 Conclusion

As examined so far, defining the exact meaning of *acedia* might be an impossible task, however, this research, through many documents on *acedia* and various characterisations of *acedia*, has attempted to figure out what it was like. This article has dealt with less asked but important questions in order to understand the nature of *acedia*, including why *acedia* was one of deadly sins rather than a mere emotion, why it was felt during a specific time span and why its meaning has been distorted over time. As a result, this article has attempted to offer a new understanding of *acedia*. It was demonstrated that *acedia* was not as a passive representation of boredom or laziness, but rather as an anxiety coming from physical and psychological dissatisfaction and a mixture of anxiety, guilt and craving for physical/mental stimuli. Although it needs to be further researched, this article has carefully suggested

*acedia* could be affected by hunger by analysing the time *acedia* was felt and the monks' meal time.

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