

Christ and the primacy of the call to love God and love neighbor. Von Balthasar argues that true love requires a definitive commitment: a self-giving in a concrete way. This leads him to develop a three-dimensional view of vocation that holds together: first, the primacy of the baptismal call to love; second, a commitment to a particular state of life; and third, our day-to-day work or employment. Thus, Goulding sets the scene for the third and final part of this book, 'discerning vocation today'.

Part Three includes essays on the religious life, priesthood, and marriage, as well as some notes on the psychology of a vocational journey and the importance of fostering a 'culture of vocation' that helps young men and women to become disciples of Christ. This book then offers a helpful overview of the kinds of historical, theological, and practical issues at stake when it comes to the theology of vocation and the fostering of a culture of vocation in the wider church. As such, it is a useful resource for spiritual directors and vocation promoters, as well as those listening out for the call of Christ in their own lives.

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**Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine,**  
John Peter Kenney, Oxford University Press, 2013 (ISBN 978-0-19-956370-8), xi + 191 pp., hb £45

John Peter Kenney's latest book is an account of how the interpretation of scripture became a quotidian practice of contemplation for Augustine. While he styles *Contemplation and Classical Christianity* as a prequel to his *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (2005), 'prequel' undersells the novelty of Kenney's 'study in Augustine'. Some of the contours of Kenney's approach are not unique. While there are scant references to the scholarly literature, two debts seem particularly salient. First, he seems, at least tacitly, to accept Carol Harrison's narrative of continuity: Augustine was decidedly a *Catholic* Christian very soon after his conversion and any modification took place within that tradition (e.g. p. 44). Second, and again only tacitly, Kenney seems to follow certain strategies pioneered by Lewis Ayres and Michel René Barnes' 'Pro-Nicene' or 'New Canon' readings: Augustine is informed by a previous Latin Catholic tradition whose theological heart pulses with the blood of scripture (p. 164). Kenney's turn in these sometime conflicting trends is to follow Augustine as a Catholic

Christian indelibly marked by the transcendence he learned from Platonic monotheism. Yet, Kenney is no Parisian. His Augustine is ultimately informed by his engagements with scripture. Augustine's contemplation is contemplation of *scripture* as 'the principle medium of that divine disclosure and the means for the soul to find what it otherwise lacked' (p. 123). This result will be, Kenney hopes, an account of contemplation that is, in turn, quotidian and transcendent.

Transcendence is the golden thread sewn throughout *Contemplation and Classical Christianity*. And it is ultimately the transcendence of the 'ascent at Ostia' (cf. 9.10.24-5) that puzzles Kenney, for it is this 'mystical' episode that cannot be accounted for in strictly Platonic terms. However, Platonism is where Kenney thinks we must start if we are to have any hope of understanding it. In the first two chapters, Kenney provides a guided tour through the thickets of Pagan philosophical monotheism, a theme he has expertly expounded since his first book, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology*. In many ways, the first two chapters are a summary of his early work. But Kenney provides fresh insights into the monotheism of Plotinus, the pagan monotheist most relevant to Augustine. One particularly instructive result of this account is that there is no prayer to the One (p. 20). Rather, the business of living spiritually for Plotinus occurs at a meta-level, where one makes the choice to live at the higher or lower level of the soul. To elucidate this concept, Kenney introduces the 'cursive self', a metaphor drawn from contemporary computer discourse. 'The cursor is a movable marker that allows the user to choose a software function or to mark a place within a document' (p. 23). For Plotinus, the soul's prior descent leaves within it a 'gnarled root' of misplaced desire and a capacity to choose the higher self. It is left to the soul to move the cursor to the higher part in order to transcend its immediate conditions. In this capacity of the soul, Augustine glimpses a ray of light. But dark clouds are on the horizon. Augustine will soon find the soul's inherent power increasingly suspect.

The transition from Platonist-dependent to Platonist-appropriator beguiles Augustine's interpreters. 'Suffused with ideas of Platonic origin, [Augustine's theology] can easily be mistaken as Christian Platonism, an effort to present Platonism in the language of Christianity. But Augustine's theology was not Platonism baptized' (p. 11). Not surprisingly, much rests on the role played by the *libri Platoniorum*. Kenney rightly points out (following David Sedley and James O'Donnell) that Augustine's reported engagement of the *libri Platoniorum* would not identify him as a member of a Platonist school (p. 41). Rather, Augustine's encounter with Platonism was a moment of 'creative appropriation' (p. 9), through which he imbibes 'deep architectural patterns' (p. 41). Yet, in *Soliloquia* 1.4, Augustine articulates a new understanding of divine omnipresence that more deeply

challenges Plotinus' strictures of the One's remoteness and indifference to the cosmos. Omnipresence 'is extended to incorporate direct knowledge of created individuals by God' and 'is perhaps the most salient aspect of Augustine's newly adopted theology and his most striking revision of Platonism' (p. 54). The critical difference between Augustine and Plotinus is thus God's care and attention for creation.

Augustine is best read, then, not as a cypher to lost schools of late antiquity, but rather as a 'new departure beyond classical philosophy' (p. 61). From the third chapter, the possibility of progress in knowledge becomes central, and it will provide Kenney with a theme on which he provides many rich variations. The soul's epistemic advance is possible, according to Kenney, through the reformation of the soul supplied by faith, hope, and love (p. 79). The model of contemplation (found in both *Soliloquia* 1 and *De ordine* 2) prioritizes the moral condition of the soul. Simply put, an impure soul cannot epistemically advance. But Augustine holds out hope – or rather, at this point, simply believes – that a pure soul can make epistemic advances. *Soliloquia* 1 and *De ordine* 2 provide the backdrop then to 'Augustine's pre-baptismal efforts to achieve direct knowledge of transcendence' in *Confessions* 7 (p. 85). Yet, in *Confessions* 7 the *limits* of contemplation begin to emerge. While the soul discovers its contingency and the certainty of truth, it must also come to terms with the episodic character of contemplative knowledge, episodic because the 'soul's moral condition determines the extent and degree of its epistemic advance toward being' (p. 88).

But does moral character (or lack thereof) fully account for the episodic or 'failed' nature of the efforts in *Confessions* 7? This question begins to emerge as critical for Kenney's study. In Chapter 4, 'Early Catholic Treatises', we encounter *De quantitate animae* 33.70–76. Kenney perceptively identifies this text as 'the high watermark of spiritual optimism in Augustine's early accounts' (p. 101). Although he will never deny the soul's *capacity* for intellectual vision of God (see, e.g., *ep.* 147), Augustine seems to appreciate the sheer scale of the soul's moral limitations. This is the chief reason, according to Kenney, for the curious shift from contemplation as an ascent through the powers of the soul (e.g. *De ordine* 2) to contemplation as ascent to God 'grounded in the soul's ethical advancement' (p. 106). Kenney sees this new ethical ascent most clearly on display in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 25.43 (p. 107). But it is *De vera religione* that provides the crucial pivot. The conceit is no longer a 'cursive self', which can choose between higher and lower souls, but rather that of the 'old man', in whom humans persist until the age to come, when they will put on the 'new man'. The perspective here is more sanguine. 'Uncertainty and moral recidivism are now endemic to embodied life and exposed by contemplation' (p. 111). The consequence: the transcendence discovered in the failed mystical experiences will be carried over into reading practices of scripture. 'Scripture has

now become central and dispositive to Augustine's account of scripture' (p. 122).

Christian transcendentalism is, for Kenney's Augustine, no longer a rarified practice for sages and savants alone, but neither does it stray too far from its Platonist provenance. While the contemplation of scripture is not without its techniques and mysteries, Augustine is not willing to allow the matter to settle into the give-and-take of his *contradictores*. Despite certain pleas, metaphysics are not so easily dispensed. So *what* is it that Augustine and Monnica come into contact with in their ascent at Ostia? Despite his more seasoned attitude toward contemplation and its travails among the 'old man', Augustine is still haunted by the Platonist caution of a God spoilt by the direct contact of those whose knowledge is intrinsically changeable. The latent repugnance of mutability draws out one of Augustine's more creative interpretations. Augustine and Monnica 'experienced' (if that's the right word) not God directly, but the *caelum caeli*, the 'heaven of heaven', the first product of divine generation. *Caelum caeli* is 'both distinct from the only begotten son – the divine wisdom – and also from the physical and the visible heaven' (p. 138). Not eternal yet not in time, *caelem caeli* occupies a 'middle zone of contingent temporality' (p. 142), which provided the 'unmediated understanding at Ostia' (p. 143). Kenney thus never lets even quotidian practices loose from the reins of Platonism.

Kenney has provided a spectacularly persuasive story of continuity that neither concedes too much to North African Catholic Christianity nor invents a suitably eligible Platonism. But the reader is left with a few loose threads regarding the possibilities of a Platonist monotheism that is neither overwhelmed by its lack of control over its moral development nor astonished by a false sense of spiritual optimism. However, I am still puzzled whether human knowledge can make any progress within a morally recidivistic anthropology. Augustine's problem seems more than simple moral failure in *Confessions* 7, and moral success seems to play little (if any) role in the 'successful' ascent at Ostia in *Confessions* 9. Augustine's reflections on the limits of contemplation were not a counsel of despair or a 'lost future', but a recognition of reality. This reality is more than could-have-done-better attempts. Rather, it is a recognition that, to some extent, the game was rigged. 'Failed morality' then somewhat misses the mark. It is ultimately *humility* that was lacking. Yes, Augustine's lusting was a problem. But it was a problem because it was a kind of pride, for Augustine was in effect saying, 'I know my own good'. Until Augustine followed the Incarnate Word in his humility, he was hopelessly stymied in his attempts at transcendence. Yet, his post-baptism efforts were not exactly what he expected either, prompting a revision of his psychology. For Kenney, Plotinus' 'cursive self' is captured by Augustine's *pondus* (p. 126), a weight of the soul that does not so much enslave reason, but leaves the

soul with limited capacity for growth in knowledge. However, would it be more accurate to say that the soul's *pondus*, when aligned with God as a carpenter's plummet settled on gravity's nadir, inverts the 'cursive self'? The conscious following of Christ's descent is not an abasement of the soul's capacity, but rather the imitation of humility that divests the soul of idealized matter, choosing instead the affirmation of the world and God's care for creation. This does not seem to reveal any more possibility for the growth of knowledge. But maybe it reminds us that the question of knowledge is not found for Augustine in the morally tuned experience of knowledge, and that the scholarly emphasis on virtue in Augustine obscures more than it reveals.

*Contemplation and Classical Christianity* is an important contribution to a 'galloping bibliography', one that should not be ignored by either Augustine specialists or those interested in the formation and development of the Western contemplative tradition. Kenney proves that when we slow down and walk with Augustine through his texts we can learn much about a transcendental monotheism fitted for life in the *saeculum*.

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**The Mystery and Agency of God: Divine Being and Action in the World**, Frank G. Kirkpatrick, Fortress, 2014 (ISBN 978-1-4514-6573-0), xviii + 163 pp., pb \$39

Frank Kirkpatrick's *The Mystery and Agency of God* offers an insightful defense of the idea that God acts in history in dialog with a broad range of philosophers and theologians that should spark important conversations among scholars concerned with philosophical theology and metaphysics. The work is also written in clear enough form to be able to encourage new understanding among educated laypersons. Kirkpatrick has succeeded in opening a new line of enquiry in the question of divine agency in the world.

*The Mystery and Agency of God* consists of a theologically informed philosophical core bookended by two theological discussions: a survey of the possible ways theology has related God and the world, and a discussion of how theology might discern divine acts in history. While the more theological components of the work provide some interesting insights, the philosophical contribution is most likely to have lasting impact, so this review will focus on Chapters 2–5 in which this