

Book Reviews

Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation by James K. A. Smith (*Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009*), 238 pp.

ARE CHRISTIAN Universities distinct enough from their secular counterparts? What would it take for Christian education to be distinctive *as* Christian? These two questions are the central concerns of this book, which is the first volume of a planned three-volume series entitled “Cultural Liturgies.” The author, James K. A. Smith, is a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, and is well known in evangelical circles for his popular-level writing on postmodernism and the “Radical Orthodoxy” movement. Recently he has turned to thinking about the relationship between liturgy and philosophy. This book is one of the fruits of this project, and is written to explore the link between liturgical formation and Christian education.

The book is written more for pastors and general educators than as part of a theological debate, but there are extensive footnotes that point to sources of an extended academic conversation behind Smith’s book. Smith draws together a Reformed theology of worship, recent work on “practices” in contemporary philosophy and theological ethics, and ideas of “liturgical anthropology” found in Orthodox figures like Alexander Schmemmann. This material is presented in a very clear and introductory way, giving this book a wide potential readership. Overall the book is very reader-friendly, employing diagrams and boxes with talking points set off from the regular text. One “side box” for instance asks, “what cultural practices and institutions are bent on forming in you sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?” The structure of the book itself mirrors Smith’s concern to connect academic life with lived Christian faith.

There are also several short subsections in Smith’s chapters that engage with a particular literary work or film. These add an extra dimension to Smith’s presentation and come from a wide range of sources from Walker Percy’s *Love in the Ruins* to Baz Luhrmann’s movie *Moulin Rouge*. Smith’s

reading of the configuration of “embodiment” in Tom Wolfe’s *I am Charlotte Simmons* is the standout example of this for the way it connects to Smith’s ideas about education and the formation of desire.

The driving concern of the book is the observation that Christian education today emphasizes the teaching of a particular “worldview” rather than the shaping of desire towards the worship of God. Smith uses the word “liturgy” beyond its usual ecclesial sense to describe a set of practices that form people into desiring or loving certain things. The book proposes that Christian colleges and universities are allowing their students to be formed by “secular liturgies,” enacted in places like the shopping mall, rather than being shaped by Christian worship. Are places of Christian education merely giving students *ideas*, in the form of a particular worldview, rather than forming them to be disciples?

The presentation of this question and the offer of a solution form roughly the two halves of the book. The first shows how “liturgies” and practices form human behavior, and the second shows how Christian worship can fit into this context for the formation of students. In the first part Smith brings together philosophical and theological reasons for calling human beings “liturgical animals.” Drawing on Augustine through the lens of Heidegger (pointing to some of Smith’s previous academic work), Smith notes that humans are defined and shaped, for good or for bad, by what they love (50). He helpfully describes practices as “love’s formation,” and shows concern that university students are being shaped by practices that may be inimical to the Gospel. In other words, university students are being formed in various good and bad ways by “secular liturgies.”

University life from freshman initiation rituals to academic testing is a powerful “liturgical” setting that shapes lives in particular ways. Smith laments that Christian schools, even of a conservative kind, tend to form students “liturgically” in essentially the same ways as secular schools. Smith asks not only what vision of the “good life” a Christian university teaches, but also “what rituals and practices are present in the university to teach students to desire this vision?” He places a special focus on student life, noting that the “information” taught at even Christian schools is “not nearly as potent as the formation we’ve received in the dorm and frat house, or the stadium and dance club” (117). Christian educators or ministers must learn how these “secular liturgies” shape people. Two concrete examples Smith gives are Victoria’s Secret stores at the mall (they know how to form desire) and the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance in elementary schools. Both of these examples “liturgically” form persons into having particular desires or identities. The idea is that the people composing “secular liturgies,” such as the layout of a shopping

mall or the cadence of patriotic events, know how to form human wants and desires better than Christian educators do. They know humans are embodied. They know how ritual and repeated “practice” cause habits or desires. They know how to play on the affective dimension of human choice and cognition. Those who try to intellectually form Christian students into a particular “Christian worldview” while neglecting affective and liturgical formation have missed the point. Smith diagnoses Christian universities and colleges with a lingering Cartesianism that separates the teaching of Christian convictions from their embodiment in Christian worship and ritual practice.

The second half of the book is a “practical” reading of Christian worship itself. Mirroring his anthropological work on practice, liturgy, and love in the first half, he places a special focus on symbolic and ritualistic aspects of Christian worship. For example, he describes the impression made on his young children by the use of darkness at a Good Friday service, children who could otherwise understand very little in terms of theological *ideas* (137). He uses examples like a Tenebrae service not only to shore up his point on education, but also as part of a more general concern of the book to further convince Protestants of the importance of these aspects of worship. Smith rightly notes that the Protestant emphasis on message, cognition, and worldview in their worship services tends to pass over children and mentally challenged adults. It is interesting to think with Smith that a thicker, more “sacramental” worship may be a significant part of the effort by churches to make themselves accessible for those with cognitive disabilities.

To provide some further concreteness to his idea that liturgy forms our love, Smith reads each of the various practices in a worship service through this lens. Smith goes through all the various parts of a worship service from greeting, to prayer, to confession, scripture reading, baptism and Eucharist, up to even giving a rather profound account of the taking up of offering. His account of the worship service deals more explicitly with Christian theological concepts than previous chapters, and lays out some of the theology that has been in the background of the book. Smith’s account of the Image of God is particularly important. The Image of God in human beings means that humans are God’s representatives and agents in the world, and the word that best summarizes this agency and representation is “culture” (163). “Culture” here is meant to connote both “cultivation” and “cultic” worship. Gathering for worship is a fulfillment of this Image and a participation in Jesus’ work of reconciling the world to himself.

Smith says that Christian universities should not only focus more on the wealth within Christian ritual and liturgy, but additionally calls for

creative thinking on how to imagine how to enact the “social imaginaries” contained in Christian worship practices beyond Sunday. He gives a few examples of this, like noonday communion offered by urban churches, or his own weekly gathering with Christian friends as a kind of “shadow” extension of the Lord’s Supper. He mentions university chapel briefly but wants to more strongly emphasize students being a part of a local church. It seems to me that some creative thinking involving ways a university chapel could be more involved in university life would be a useful “practical” addition to the book.

There are things in the book theologians from different confessional perspectives may quibble with (like Smith’s understanding of “Sacramentality,” 141–43), but these may be tempered upon recognizing Smith’s own understanding of *Desiring the Kingdom* as a “*précis*” or “abstract” to a longer project (12). One could indeed read this book as, among other things, an engagement in Evangelical–Catholic dialogue specifically on issues of liturgy and the Church–world relationship. Although he nowhere cites this text, Smith’s reading of “secular” and “Christian” liturgies and his focus on embodiment finds a clear parallel in one of Aquinas’s arguments for the necessity of the Sacraments, in which he says that the Sacraments were necessary in order that human beings might be offered “bodily exercise” whereby they might be “trained to avoid superstitious practices, consisting in the worship of demons, and all manner of harmful action, consisting in sinful deeds” (*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 61, a. 1).

While the book is mostly written for those involved in education, Smith’s reflections on the power of “secular liturgies” to shape desire would make useful bible study or sermon material. His recommendation of a more “embodied” and “sacramental” pattern of worship also may be useful to Pastors and others wanting to think about how to live out the things they do and say in worship “beyond Sunday.” Smith’s book successfully forces the question of Christian education outside the box of the “worldview model.” The first half of the book suggests that this model is failing to form students as disciples of Jesus Christ. The second half of the book provides enough theological material and concrete examples to start several conversations about how Christian educators or parish workers can better form students to be worshippers of God and witnesses to the Kingdom. N V

Matthew Archer
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio

The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas by Joseph Pilsner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xi + 273 pp.

AQUINAS'S account of the specification of human actions, what it is that makes this particular action an action of this kind rather than of some other kind, is notoriously confusing and yet indispensable for all of his later claims about the good and bad actions of human life. We have good reason, then, to be grateful for Joseph Pilsner's fine new study of specification in Aquinas, whose purpose is to show that, "in spite of apparent difficulties, Thomas's teaching on how end, object, circumstance, matter, and motive contribute to a human action's specification possesses a fundamental coherence" (6).

This is a careful and thorough study, and Fr. Pilsner draws on Thomas's entire corpus to present the reader with all the various puzzles and difficulties that face those of us who wish to draw a coherent account of specification out of Aquinas. Fr. Pilsner eschews all controversy over anything but strict interpretative questions, commenting only that if he succeeds in his study, this will bring some "clarity" to the debate between proportionalism and Thomism.

After an introductory chapter, chapter two gives an overview of Aquinas's moral theory, and chapter three some background into two related types of specification, that of natural corporeal beings and of natural actions. Then chapters four through eight take up the five elements of specification in turn: end, object, matter, circumstance, and motive. Chapter nine returns to a problem about proximate versus remote ends, and the concluding chapter draws things together. I will focus here on the most important elements of specification: end, object, and matter.

Chapter four opens with a persistent trope in Aquinas's writings: "Moral acts properly receive their species from ends" (47). In the case of natural corporeal creatures, their substantial form determines what they are—if they are to be anything at all, they must possess a particular form which places them in a particular species. Likewise, "unless people conceive of some end—to run, to pray, to embezzle, or something—and bestir themselves to pursue this end, they will do nothing at all. Consequently, the very existence and character of every action depends on that end which the agent determines" (51). So the role of (substantial) *form* with respect to a corporeal species is analogous to the role of *end* with respect to a human action, and the end is as it were the (substantial) form of human action.

Fr. Pilsner returns to ends in chapter nine with a puzzle about proximate and remote ends. "On some occasions, Aquinas seems to contend that the proximate end is crucial for specification, while the remote end is inconsequential. On other occasions, however, he appears to assert just the

opposite: he holds not only that a remote end gives a species to a human action, but also that this species has greater formal influence than the species from a proximate end" (218–19). If ends as such specify actions, and any one action is typically performed for more than one end, which end specifies?

Fr. Pilsner's solution is that we can consider what happens from two perspectives. When we consider an action in itself, in abstraction from the concrete circumstances of a lived human life, we consider it "*secundum suam speciem*" (234) and as such we do not consider its relationship to any remote ends or other circumstances of the agent. So what I am doing now is an act of purgation, simply speaking, or an act of picking up a straw, or borrowing, and so on. But in every human life, every particular action is in fact linked together with a series of remote ends that eventually leads to one's final end. For this reason, the end of charity "endows [the] proximate end with a certain formal quality" (237). *What* I am doing, when I purge, is in part "making possible my charitable activity," and so when we take the larger perspective of the agent, remote ends can specify insofar as they are joined with the proximate end in an overall unified pursuit of the final end.

I suspect there's less of a difficulty here than Fr. Pilsner seems to think. He works to solve the puzzle of how one action can possess two specifying forms (one from the proximate end and one from the remote end), but I see no reason not to admit that there are two actions here: an act of purging, specified by the end of purging and taking as its matter the various tools, body parts, and activities required for purging, and an act of charity, specified by the end of union with God and taking as its matter, among other things, the intentional action of purging. A remote end as such never specifies; it can specify only insofar as it imparts its own formal character to what I am up to, and as such it becomes a proximate end and form of a new action that includes in its matter the previous action (or series of actions). So "purgings" is considered formal in one sense but material in another.

But if Aquinas often refers to the specifying role of the "end," he even more frequently refers to the specifying role of the "object" (and does so more often and in more of his writings than any other single moral determinant [71]). The "object" of an action is that thing towards which the power of acting is directed, as the object of sight is "a colored thing." With respect to sight, we can consider two aspects of its object: there is a material aspect, the "something" which is colored, and a formal aspect, the color. It is the formal aspect, the color, that most properly specifies "sight." Sight is what it is because it is directed towards color. Likewise, a will act, like an act of seeing, is specified most properly by the formal aspect of its object; the will is directed towards the rational good, and so the "formal

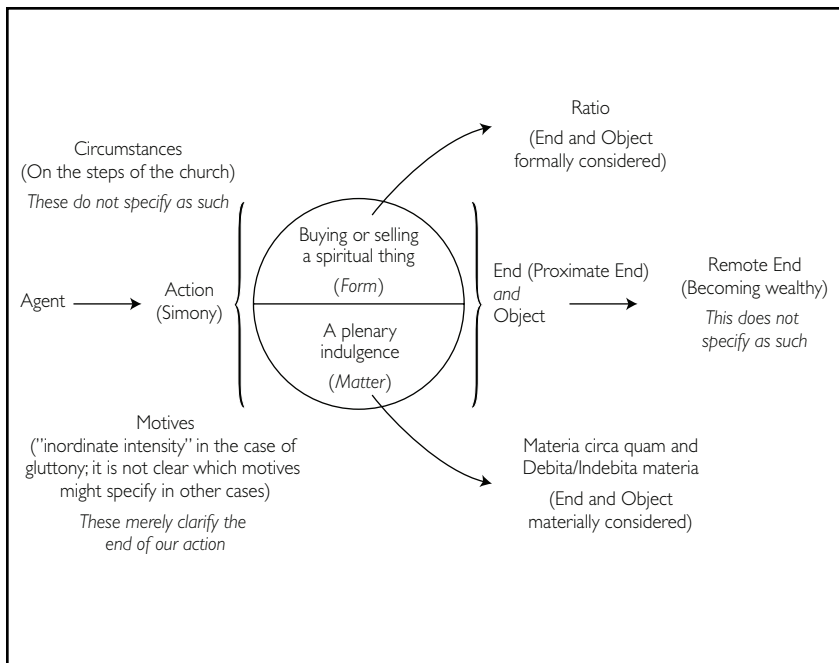
aspect" (Fr. Pilsner's translation of *ratio*) of an activity is the activity's relation to right reason. The formal aspect, and therefore what specifies, of the act of intercourse with this woman is that she is "not one's own wife" (104); this specifies the act as one of adultery. So "object" specifies what I am doing by picking out the formal aspect of the end for which I am acting, the end I am related to as an intentionally acting agent.

The treatment of "end" and "object" both emphasized the formal aspect of our action, but sometimes Aquinas also claims that *matter* specifies. The matter of an action that specifies is either the "matter about which" (*materia circa quam*), or else "due" or "undue matter" (*debita or indebita materia*). Both the end and the object of an action have both formal and material aspects; the formal aspect is the *ratio*, but the material aspect is the *materia circa quam*, "that reality to which an action is specially related" (147). Just as the object of sight is a colored thing, which requires the formal aspect of color and the material contribution of something that can be colored, so any particular action has both a formal character and matter that can bear that character. So the *materia circa quam* of fire burning is the wood, and that of "buying and selling" is "one's own thing," or "a spiritual thing," or "someone else's thing," and the like. Aquinas sometimes refers to this very same material reality as due or undue matter when he means to "suggest that a certain kind of matter is 'suitable' or 'unsuitable' . . . for a certain kind of action from a moral point of view" (152). So the combination of "buying and selling" with the undue matter of "a spiritual thing" results in an act immoral in its species: simony. But since both the formal and material elements of a thing, abstractly considered, determine species (so the species "man" is determined both by "rational soul" and "flesh and bones"), Aquinas can say, as he frequently does, that the *materia circa quam* or the *debita* or *indebita materia* specifies an act. We know what kind of act we have when, already knowing that it is an act of buying or selling, we discover that it was an act of buying or selling a spiritual thing.

Of circumstances, Aquinas says both that "a circumstance, as such, does not give the species to a moral act" and that "every circumstance is capable of changing the species of sin" (173). Fr. Pilsner's explanation of this is surely the only way out: "Thomas, on some occasions, speaks about properties of actions strictly and, on other occasions, loosely. When he is speaking strictly, circumstances do not specify human actions. . . . But when Aquinas is speaking loosely, however, circumstances can (after a fashion) be said to specify. Certain properties which are circumstances when actions are considered apart from reason provide critical differences when this comparison is engaged" (197). Likewise, although Aquinas remarks that "wherever a different motive for sinning is present, there is another species

of sin" (199), "motive," as specifying, refers to the final cause of the action, which is the end, and so motive specifies an action as its end; a "motive" is what "moves," and in voluntary action, it is the end that moves. So when the glutton eats too quickly, consuming his food with "inordinate intensity" (209), he acts from the too intense desire for food, and in doing so reveals that his end is "consuming this food as quickly as possible."

I have tried above to bring things together in the simplest possible fashion, but it is no idle remark that specification in Aquinas is confusing. I am not altogether sure that Fr. Pilsner's own final account draws things together as I have done, and I waited in vain for a helpful picture relating the various elements. Nevertheless, here is the picture that seems right:



I have little to add in the way of criticism besides the obligatory nitpicking. The complexity of the subject matter is sometimes further burdened by cumbersome language; why not simply "Aquinas's approach is more cogent and defensible than at first appears," instead of "Aquinas's approach can be shown to be more cogent and defensible than may first appear to be the case" (7)? The introductory account of human action is straightforward, but includes some odd claims that are surely false; he reminds us that for Aquinas *intentio* consists in "the willing of an end as acquired by means," but then concludes from this that "an end cannot be intended unless a means has been found. . . . Intention can only begin,

then, once a viable means has first been found" (12). But certainly I can form the intention this instant to throw a party, even if I haven't yet thought about ways to do it; what is required is a reasonable belief that a means can indeed be found (I cannot intend the impossible), and that I know how to look for the means, not that I have already found one. To *intend* in this way is to aim at something knowing that it must be achieved by means of something else without necessarily having deliberated yet about the something else.

But I have not done justice to Fr. Pilsner's patient work in thinking through Aquinas on the problem of specification. *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas* will be an excellent resource for some time to come, and for that we must indeed be grateful. N V

Raymond Hain

The Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology by Michael Fishbane (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008*), xiv + 238 pp.

MICHAEL FISHBANE'S *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* is a personal memoir of what theology and life might mean in the face of the onrushing current of everlasting annihilation. Fishbane, now in his late sixties, describes the book as his effort to pass on a "spiritual testament" to his descendants: "A certain urgency has now claimed me: to make my thoughts clear to myself, for honesty's sake in due season; and to provide my family with a spiritual testament of my values and worldview" (211).

In his preface, Fishbane depicts modern Jewish theology as a Kafkaesque nightmare: "Like Kafka, we prowl aimlessly around the debris of old Sinais, in a wasteland of thought. The tablets of despair are strewn everywhere. Old beginnings do not work; they are a dead end" (ix). In the midst of this spiritual darkness, however, Fishbane thinks that he has discovered in "natality" (a term he adapts from Hannah Arendt) the "route to transcendence—to the many forms of otherness, ever present and ever beckoning, all around" (x). What is natality? It is awareness of "the spring of beginnings," awakening to the beauty, fragility, vastness, and mystery of existence (ix). Attunement to this "spring" enables us to glimpse the transcendent through the immanent. The task of theology is to attune us in this fashion.

Like the world, the Bible should be interpreted with the goal of attaining such glimpses. When one reads biblical stories as "paradigms of perennial matters bearing on divine presence," their transcendent truth can be unveiled (xi). Similarly, modes of biblical interpretation should be evaluated

not primarily for how they retrieve information but for how they attune to reader to attend to transcendent truth: "Textual study thus becomes a discipline of ethical and spiritual self-cultivation" (xii). It is not the text itself, but the experience that becomes possible through practicing attunement via the text, that is primary. Our reading of the text and of the world must be performed in alertness and attentiveness to the inbreaking of transcendence. Fishbane comments: "The call of God (through all expressions of reality) may everywhere break the veil of our daily stupor, and then natality overcomes mortality. This is an ecstatic transcendence of mortality in a (specific) fullness of time, without denying the finality of death and dying" (xiii).

On this view, the fact that death ends human existence does not give death the power to stamp out "transcendence of mortality." On the contrary, we transcend mortality in our experiences of natality, which we can cultivate by means of attunement or "vigilant attentiveness" to the transcendent resonances that pierce through the immanent realm (xiii). The key is continually re-fashioning the self so as to find, in oneself, the self-transcendence figured by Sinai. Fishbane describes his blending of interiority and exteriority by noting that in our moments of natality or self-transcendence through attunement to the source, "Sinai is reborn in the mind, and one must humble oneself to oneself—all ears" (xiv).

In humbling oneself to oneself so as to listen for transcendence, can one rely upon any tradition-formulated truth? For Fishbane, the answer is no. The formulations that we receive from others cannot meet our needs, because reality is new at every moment. Indebted to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Fishbane holds that we have to break through the temptation to rely upon others' words. Instead we must focus on our own experience or lack thereof, at the present moment, of "God" (2). Yet this does not mean that we simply get rid of old texts. On the contrary, adapting them to our purpose and our experience, we bridge opposed discourses (such as Greek philosophy, or medieval Kabbalah or Kant, and Scripture) and build a living theology by "the alembic of hermeneutics" (6).

Yet the modern Jewish theologian faces the difficulty of what contemporary discourse to bridge with Scripture, as well as why to privilege Scripture. If truth is simply a cultural construction, why choose one contemporary discourse rather than another? And why privilege Scripture, when most humans today do not live in a biblically formed worldview? Moreover, why bother to do "theology" at all?

As noted above, Fishbane's answer lies in the quest for self-transcendence; theology at its best attunes us the moments when the veil of ordinary life is ruptured and "the pervasive superflux of existence" is revealed (19). Such theology is prefigured by the impact of the natural world and

by the creations of the aesthetic imagination, and indeed theology integrates the two in search of “the numinous qualities of unsayable origin inhering in every moment of existence” (34). This “unsayable origin” is what Fishbane means by “God.” God is “the heart and breath of all existence”; the theological life is attuned at all times to this primordial reality beneath the real, transcending everything (35). Every existent manifests and actualizes God, and the human person’s task is “to become a fit vessel for modes of God’s realizations on earth” (38).

Engaging both words and persons, theology promotes this task by an ever-new attunement to natality in the present moment and by a corresponding reinterpretation of past tradition in ways that enable self-transcendence. This work is redemptive to the degree that it attunes us to the “effectivity” of God and expands the experience of others (43). Jewish theology does this work by particularly engaging Jewish traditions, sacred writings, and practices, which means attending to God through the hermeneutical lens of Sinai, approached via the various senses of Scripture—*peshet*, *derash*, *remez*, and *sod*—which Fishbane treats at length.

Fishbane finds particularly significant the name that God gives to Moses in Exodus 3:14, which he renders as “I shall be as I shall be,” an indication of God’s transcendence of every name. He goes on to describe “God’s Absolute Transcendence” (53–55). Here the de-personalization of Israel’s God becomes particularly noticeable. Throughout the book Fishbane scatters references to God that suggest an impersonal divine agency: “God, the ultimate effectivity of all world-being and a modality of its actualization” (98); “the pulsations of God throughout world-being” (113); “The divine pulse of giving and care is the eternal truth of Sinai” (129); “this Torah [*torah kelulah*] bespeaks God’s absolute gift and giving of world-reality” (158); “The divine ‘Let there Be’ is the vital impulse in all existent Being” (159); “Everywhere, it seems, there is a coming forth of Godly presence—a vast and voluminous advent of color, and texture, and sound, and rhythm” (200); “the vast Mystery of Being, which shatters every pretension to a transcendent human comprehension” (202). A properly awakened “God-consciousness” (97) will both find God in everything and refuse to reduce God to any finite thing.

It is clearly one thing to be the Creator, and quite another to be an “effectivity” or a “modality.” It is one thing to be the covenantal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose glorious deeds liberate Israel from Egyptian slavery, and quite another thing to be a “pulse” or an “impulse.” Despite Fishbane’s effort to insist upon radical divine transcendence, his “God” appears to be circumscribed by immanence, as a pulsation is circumscribed by that in which it pulses.

It does not come as a surprise, then, to find Fishbane depicting covenant theology as “a heroic theology” that has more to do with confronting the void than with a living, personal, covenanting God (175). Covenant theology “strives to transcend the amoral vastness” (175); covenant theology is a way of overcoming, in our lives, the “howling emptiness all around” (173). On this view, Jewish theological experience is lived out within this howling emptiness and amoral vastness—east of Eden—despite the pulsing of God’s presence in the world. God gives the Torah “in the desert—in a place where darkness and the demonic predominate, where emptiness and terror prevail” (175). Fishbane identifies home, synagogue, and homeland as forms of building up precarious areas of safety within the howling emptiness, but his lack of personal names for God makes these realities, good as they are, seem hardly up to the task.

On the one hand, Fishbane affirms that “[w]hat fills the world is God’s Glory, in all its infinite world-being” (193). Yet on the other hand, when he describes how we live in the world, there seems to be little space for God’s providential and redemptive activity. Rather, he emphasizes the ways in which “moral space is humanly constructed: it is a realized or transfigured space, rising up out of the primariness of human settlement, threat, or sustenance” (190). When he describes the prophetic “word of *shalom*,” for example, he mentions human activity but not God’s.

Does Fishbane hold out any hope for life after death? Given his portrait of God as a life-force rather than as a free Creator and Redeemer, Fishbane has few resources for envisioning death as anything but annihilation. The diminishment of God’s ability to act personally in our lives is reflected in Fishbane’s view that “death cannot be overcome” (204). Love neither diminishes nor erases death; no human can evade the permanent grip of death, “not now; not ever” (204). When we die, we simply replenish the earth by our bodily decay.

Fishbane does propose, however, that our “souls” in some sense live after us, or “ascend” as “memorials of values achieved through spiritual travail” (191). Thus we live on in the memories of others and in the impact we have had on others. For Fishbane, our “spiritual travail” consists preeminently in an imitation of God’s giving: we must “become a giver in every sense” (197). Our attainment of values requires that we give help rather than ask for God’s help. Fishbane carefully delimits any appeal to a redemptive God: “One must not call upon God’s aid and mercy, but must oneself be merciful and kind” (198).

Fishbane attempts to recognize death as inextricable from the beauty of life, like the autumn leaves. Indeed he goes so far as to praise death as

“the truth of each breath and silence, of each disruption and break, and the completion of each act of joy and love” (198). If death is linked with truth, joy, and love, is everlasting death a good? Fishbane deeply grieves the death of others (see 212), and he has a strong sense of the futility and emptiness that seem to go hand-in-hand with everlasting death. Yet he calls upon us to recognize in the “final caesura” of death the presence of the divine pulsation of Being, which requires the giving and the taking of life, and which demands our praise (204). Although death may seem to be linked with futility and emptiness, Fishbane suggests that closer inspection reveals death’s unity with life. Only the combination of life and death expresses finitude’s participation in infinity. As Fishbane puts it, “Life and death are one—dual portions of God’s truth” (204). When we recognize this, we attune ourselves to God’s truth and thereby “effectuate divine reality” by “bringing God to a human presence through ourselves, just here in the midst of the vastness” (209).

Fishbane argues that those practiced in attuning themselves to the mystery of being that underlies ordinary experience can attain God-consciousness or God-mindedness in the here and now, and that this attunement to Being’s pulse suffices. Two problems seem particularly difficult for Fishbane’s position. First, although Fishbane associates God with giving and he calls upon us to imitate God by giving, God’s giving here is the “giving” of a force of nature rather than a covenantal, historical, and personal God. If we were to give to other persons in this way, we would seem callous. It is no wonder that we cannot petition this impersonal deity for help (by contrast to our friends, whose help we often request). Could such a God truly be loved by us? The only personal being who receives significant attention in Fishbane’s narrative is the self.

Second, Fishbane’s argument regarding the ultimate unity of life and death presses too far his point about covenantal theology being “heroic.” Fishbane is deeply aware of what he calls “the vapors of futility” or “the dissonances which rupture our sense of significance” (xiii). In his effort to affirm the significance of human life, he argues that we take part in making God present in the world when we attune ourselves to the unfathomable gift that all existence is. Such mystical experience enables us to live not only without despair, but indeed with real appreciation for the mystery in which our lives participate. Theology—and the religious texts, traditions, and practices upon which it relies—helps us to give particular voice, in our cultural space and time, to the wonder of existence (which transcends finite expressions). When we experience this wonder, we experience attunement to God. Yet as he recognizes, the pattern or pulsation of existence includes not only life but death. It

follows that he has to valorize death. But can the annihilation of persons actually be the “completion” of love? An impersonal God, whose pulsation includes life and death, tends toward the depersonalization of the human as well. Love for particular persons is replaced by love for a depersonalizing cosmic rhythm. N V

Matthew Levering
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio

Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship by Eric Gregory (*Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008*), 417 pp.

LET ME BEGIN in the most hackneyed way possible, in a way bound to depress many: A book on Christian ethics and politics that makes no mention of, never mind stakes a position on, abortion can be neither terribly interesting nor helpful. I know many would rather talk about other things, and some get frustrated that this topic keeps getting raised, but I raise it, here, because I’m just not sure what this book is about at all. This volume is super wordy yet refuses to take a position of anything of significance. Gregory is fascinated with making distinctions, trying to show how his position doesn’t collapse into that of John Milbank or isn’t quite the same as John Rawls, or Nussbaum, yet avoids making substantive claims that would really enable us to know this. Of course, *Politics and the Order of Love* is a thoroughly professional book: Rich in footnotes and talking about a lot of contemporary contributors to questions in liberalism and theology, the book is a genuine product of the modern academy.

It really is a significant shortcoming of the book that no real moral and political positions are staked out. Gregory wants to show skeptics on both left and right that a rigorous theology can play an affirmational role in liberal politics. He wants to convince people on the left that Augustine can be a stern friend of liberalism. Augustine’s theory of love will provide a soul craft about which liberalism is all too often indifferent (believing that social peace rests on an aloof proceduralism) and also provide a social justice sensibility that will help liberalism foster its goals of greater equality, respect for difference, and personal autonomy. Most basically then, Gregory wants to chide liberalism a little and convince liberals that theology is “safe” by saving Augustine from his reputation as illiberal, and isolating him from contemporary illiberal readings by people like Milbank. Of course, what everyone wants to know on this account is: To what am I committing myself? Liberals will want to know what they have to give

up—e.g. unlimited rights to abortion?—and conservatives want to know what they have to swallow—e.g. an affirmation of gay marriage in public education? No indications are given on any such topics because no clear theoretical commitments are made. If a book about ethics and politics is not about these sorts of things then what is its point?

If the book is not about ethics and politics, perhaps its interest lies in its theology? Though literally dozens upon dozens of thinkers are mentioned in the book, some not mentioned tell us much. Liberalism needs theology, we are assured, and while someone like Thomas Aquinas is not suitable, Augustine's probing of subjectivity and his realism about sin but affirmation of love and hope suits the liberal mood, troubled as it is by anyone overly dogmatic, institutional or bureaucratic, judgmental or harsh, normative or law-bound. Appealing to Augustine, therefore, does not mean appealing to the rich Augustinian tradition. Giles of Rome's scholasticism, Malebranche's radical passivity, Pascal's subtle abrasiveness, Scheler's objective value hierarchy, Kolnai's accusation that liberalism is totalitarian in origin and ambition, this tradition of Augustinianism is nowhere discussed, and these intellectual giants nowhere contended with. Gregory wants to rely on an *already American* version of Augustine, one deferential to Niebuhr, and even Rawls. It is a curiosity of the book that there is no real engagement with the European tradition of philosophy, theology, or political theory. True, early Arendt plays a role, and perhaps an odd Continental name amongst the many dozens of Americans is mentioned here and there, but just as the great intellectuals of the Augustinian tradition are avoided so too the giant European critics of liberalism. In fact, liberalism itself is presented as a monolith. There is no discussion of diverse strains of liberalism in Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Adam Smith—all of whom commit you to very different politics—never mind critics who have never been answered, the likes of Carl Schmitt, for instance.

I do not introduce all these strands of thought never mentioned in the book by way of simply saying more should have been done. Rather, their absence raises the question of what is the quality of the argument: How good a quality could it be if the giants of the Augustinian, liberal, and counter-liberal traditions are not seriously engaged?

The book wants to convince Christians that although not all is well inside modern liberalism, much good remains. This, of course, is Maritain's argument and I am not sure Gregory takes us any further conceptually than Maritain. At times Gregory is aware that a lot of convincing needs to be done, at other times not. Like Maritain, he thinks we all sort of agree that human rights and the extension of rights thinking and

language in law over the last half century is a good thing (384). Why would he say this? He mentions Bob Kraynak, Milbank, and MacIntyre, yet they could not have made their position more clear as to the matter of rights. It is for sure true that the greats of the Augustinian tradition never thought in terms of social order and rights, nor do the most interesting and speculative writers in theology today, people like Milbank and Rowland. Thus he is dismayed that John Milbank actually wonders aloud that liberalism is totalitarian (369, n. 14). Milbank's position is mentioned in a footnote and no reply is offered; Milbank, we are meant to believe, I suppose, is just obviously wrong. Gregory is right that Christianity can tolerate liberalism. Of course. But, as Bob Kraynak points out, it can tolerate illiberal regimes, as well. There is no sense in Gregory at all that Christianity might look on the passing of empires, even liberalism, as events worthy of note but not utterly demanding of attention. Again, no effort is made to argue with Kraynak about whether this is an accurate Christian sensibility.

These arguments are never engaged and thus we must conclude that Gregory sees Christianity as a mild corrective of certain shortcomings in liberalism which at its core is perfectly healthy. Any Christian theologian must explain how this can be true given liberalism's encouragement of abortion. I actually happen to share Gregory's sense that the illiberal critics of liberalism are somewhat churlish in their blanket criticism of liberalism. His project is not a senseless one. Something similar is attempted in the tradition of Catholic social thought but nowhere are any of the documents of this tradition mentioned: and it would be another churlishness to deny that this tradition is the most sustained, complex Christian reflection on the contemporary political order. Gregory is obviously a talented reader of texts and my basic concern is that Gregory is too diffident, theoretically and politically. Like a John Milbank, he should come out of his corner, state his case, and let the chips fall where they may. N V

G. J. McAleer

Loyola University Maryland
Baltimore, Maryland

The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture by J. Todd Billings (*Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010*), ix + 235 pp.

MOST ADVOCATES for the theological interpretation of Scripture understand that if this vision of biblical interpretation remains only a topic of academic inquiry without actually becoming embodied within churches,

the enterprise undermines its own basic conviction that scriptural interpretation is fundamentally an ecclesial practice. J. Todd Billings's *The Word of God for the People of God* helps ensure that this is not the case. This book is best understood as providing access for pastors and students into the technical discussion surrounding theological interpretation, ultimately in hopes that such interpretation will take root in church practice. In Billings's own words, he seeks to wed "theory and practice, biblical studies and theology, critical methods and practices of prayer and worship." This is not an introduction into secondary literature, like Daniel Treier's excellent *Introducing Theological Interpretation*. The term "entryway" in the subtitle is important, for Billings actually practices theological interpretation and makes claims about God and Scripture throughout his work.

In chapter 1, Billings reflects on why so many Christians yearn to hear a word from God in an environment where the Bible is readily available. The reason, he writes, is that there is more required for encountering God's word than "cognitive understanding of written or spoken words." Rather, God the Spirit is needed for the word to bear its transformative fruit, and the Bible is God's instrument of transformation. Billings sets forth on a transformative, participatory journey of reading the Bible, situating his approach between the "blueprint-building block" approach, in which the reader understands particular scriptural passages as self-contained propositions (i.e., building blocks) that are then organized into a particular system (i.e., a blueprint), and the "smorgasbord" approach, in which there is no order to Scripture—tradition thus "hides" the real meaning by providing a "map" of interpretation—and everyone is welcome to "help themselves" to whatever meets the "appetites, questions, and needs" of the reader. Billings's transformative-participatory approach uses a theological hermeneutic in which interpretation is understood as being transformed into the image of Christ as the interpreter participates in Christ the living Teacher through the Spirit. But, Billings rhetorically asks, what are we to make of a theological *hermeneutic*? Shouldn't we simply derive our theology from the Bible rather than bringing theological assumptions to the Bible? Billings counters this assumption, that "nontheological" readings more accurately engage Scripture, by arguing that there is no such thing as a "nontheological" reading. This is demonstrated not only by what one intellectually holds to be true, although theological reasoning is foundational, but also one's "functional theology," that is, how one lives in practice. The real question is: which theology should be determinative for reading Scripture? Billings's guide for his "Trinitarian-shaped journey" is the "rule of faith," which Billings explores in the face of the principle of *sola scriptura* and the authoritarian nature of a "rule."

But if the focus of reading Scripture is theocentric—and Trinitarian at that—is the proper approach to Scripture wholly unique from non-theological accounts of reading texts? In chapter 2, Billings engages general hermeneutics and biblical criticism, arguing that general hermeneutics must necessarily become theological in character, that is, understood as the special Trinitarian hermeneutic of God's redeeming work through Scripture. The Bible, then, cannot be read like any other book, and those who use only a general hermeneutic will not be able to see the Bible as truly one book with a unified message of God's work in Christ. But Billings does draw from general hermeneutics based on the broad conviction that "all truth is God's truth," so that the legitimate insights of non-Christians can be assimilated by Christians when reading Christian texts. Christians must be careful to use general hermeneutics in an "ad-hoc" fashion. Billings explores the proper hermeneutics for reading Scripture by drawing on the specialized notions of "understanding" and "explanation" in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. With regard to biblical criticism, Billings believes that it, too, can also play a positive role in understanding the Bible, but only if "critical methods [are] *recontextualized* within a theological framework: that is, they need to be evaluated and used according to terms that refuse to treat the Bible as nothing more than an object of historical inquiry." Billings is especially helpful when he attempts to "overcome" the Enlightenment prejudice against preunderstandings while at the same time highlighting the role that tradition plays in supposedly "no tradition allowed" interpretive locations such as the "conservative" dispensationalism and the "liberal" Jesus seminar, both of whom consider themselves as going "straight to the Bible."

If the Bible is the word *of God*, Billings believes that theological judgments must be made that will have import into the practice of scriptural interpretation. In chapter 3, Billings addresses these theological judgments but in a way that seeks to avoid "collapsing" different approaches to God's word into a "boring, shoulder-shrugging act of saying, 'I guess we come from different backgrounds.'" Instead, Billings posits two sets of "either/or's" that are "unavoidable": (1) a grounding of revelation *either* in inherent, universal human capacities *or* in the particularity of God's actions with Israel and in Jesus Christ; (2) a hermeneutic that is *either* Deistic *or* Trinitarian. The first either/or, which draws heavily on Kierkegaard and Barth, turns out not to be as dichotomous as it may seem, since Billings grants the plausibility of a "natural theology." What Billings wants to avoid, however, is a purely natural religion, one in which the totality of Christian truth is rooted in universal, natural reason along the lines of Kant and Lessing. Instead, individuals need, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, the "sixth

sense” of faith to apprehend knowledge of God in the particularities of God’s interaction with Israel and in Jesus Christ. God’s triune involvement with humanity further necessitates the rejection of a Deistic hermeneutic, which accounts for the inspiration and canonization of Scripture in purely immanent terms of self-projection and power, while a Trinitarian hermeneutic understands inspiration and canonization as God’s noncompetitive salvific involvement within human activity; inspiration and canon are ultimately theological, not anthropocentric questions.

In chapter 4, Billings addresses the contextual nature of interpretation and strives to maintain the tension between recognizing and celebrating the variegated embodiment of God’s teaching within different contexts without necessarily affirming the validity of all interpretations. Important to Billings’s account is the Spirit’s role in the “conversion” of cultures, since all cultures embody the marks of human sin. The Spirit both indigenizes Scripture within different cultures as well as transforms those cultures into the “bounded truth” that is in Christ. Billings presents different ways to “spiritually discern” whether scriptural interpretation is indigenizing and transforming or has bowed to its “cultural idols,” including the insufficiency of direct appeals to experience, the role of communal interpretation, and suspicion toward one’s own cultural situation. Billings concludes, however, that Scripture itself acts as the ultimate point of authority for discerning the Spirit’s work within a particular context.

In the libraries of many modern pastors, one can regularly find commentaries from the NICOT, NICNT, Pillar, or Word commentary series, but more rarely does one find commentaries from Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, or Calvin. Billings believes, however, that premodern exegesis should have a place in the modern pulpit. In chapter 5, Billings seeks to recover premodern “instincts” toward the Bible as Scripture, while also appropriating “in a discerning manner” premodern insights into particular biblical texts. Against the notion that premodern interpretation is esoteric and irrelevant, Billings argues, drawing on John Webster, that if Scripture is understood as God’s word for the church, “modern critical commentaries may be more likely to be esoteric than premodern commentaries are.” Billings then draws on Matthew Levering to get to the heart of uniting premodern with modern readings of Scripture: a proper understanding of history as participatory in God. Billings seeks to move beyond attempting either to construct a history accessible outside or “behind” the text that is then used to judge the text or to approach the text as but a projection of theological ideas that have no referent to a linear history outside the text; the key to avoiding these pitfalls is to understand Jesus Christ as the meaning of all history. How one understands Christ’s salvific work, moreover,

affects one's reading of Scripture: whether one thinks of salvation as "getting to heaven" or becoming an ethical person or deification (Billings's preference), one's reading of Scripture will reflect this soteriology. Billings concludes his book in chapter 6 with a synthesis of the previous chapters and further reflection on concrete reading practices in the church.

In setting forth his approach to theological interpretation, Billings displays a unique sensitivity to ecclesial life (e.g., his example of a small group bible study spiritually reading Genesis 12:1) that illuminates the fact that theological interpretation is the ongoing practice for many Christians, even if they cannot articulate the technical language and theory. Billings's sensitivity also enables him to posit and answer questions unique to the minds of pastors and students. By ending each chapter with a concrete example, Billings helps clarify the theory presented within the chapter, resulting in numerous "aha" moments for the reader. I do wish, however, in light of Billings's emphasis on "functional theology," that more were said regarding the role of speculative theology in biblical interpretation, which could fit well either in Billings's section addressing the value of "preunderstanding" or the role of tradition. What does Billings make of Calvin's vision of the *Institutes* as preparation for reading Scripture? In general, what is the role of speculative knowledge for being transformed in Christ? Is there a place for the contemplative pastor? With regard to the role of tradition in interpretation, it seems significant that, for example, Baptist and Presbyterian traditions lead to different interpretations of Scripture on infant baptism and church structure. Since Billings wants to avoid a "to each his own" interpretive mentality, do we need to say one tradition is right and one is wrong, and if so how do we decide? Billings's section explicitly addressing traditions seems only to highlight (importantly) that each denomination has them and they affect interpretation, and his use of the "rule of faith" is too broad to address these sorts of questions. These caveats aside, Billings provides a tremendous service to pastors and future pastors who practice theological interpretation but may not know they do it and, on that account, likely do it haphazardly. By addressing such a wide range of topics, Billings provides a thorough account of theological interpretation that enables these individuals to be more intentional, and more accurate and edifying, with their theological interpretation. I hope this book finds its way into the hands of many teachers and future teachers of the Body of Christ.

N V

Charles Raith II
Baylor University
Waco, Texas