

BOOK REVIEWS

## Kevin W. Hector, *Christianity as a Way of Life: A Systematic Theology*

(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), pp. xv + 308. \$40.00

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Kevin Hector's newest book interprets Christianity in such a way that it is perceived to have wisdom to offer those pursuing the good life. The book is subtitled 'a systematic theology', and yet much of its aim and its style is plainly apologetic. Its argument is that Christianity contributes or adds value in areas that matter greatly. But its aim is not reducible to the apologetic. It argues systematically, showing the way in which such benefit comes.

In particular, the book connects the language of doctrine with the lived reality of spiritual practices. Drawing inspiration from the work of Pierre Hadot – whose *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (ET 1985) seems to have found many imitators this year – Hector says that 'we can understand Christianity as a way of life in just this sense, namely, a set of practices designed to transform one's way of perceiving and being in the world' (p. 2). Varied practices come in for examination, but all are transformative in some aspect, whether of one's relation to God, or to the world, or to others. Further, all have potential to add wisdom and understanding to the lives of Christians.

Surely a highlight of the book is the way that Hector begins not with the way of Christianity, but in chapter 2 with 'the way of the world' or 'worldliness' (p. 29). That language no longer holds the spectre that it once did. Now talk of 'worldliness' sounds esoteric and possibly gnostic. Hector, however, shows the significance in identifying misdirected or disordered love of the world, 'as if it were ultimate', to be 'worldliness' (p. 30). The identity of the conundrum relates closely to the nature of the repair. 'The antidote to worldliness, accordingly, is not to oppose or flee the world but for our relationship to the world to be included in and oriented by our devotion to God' (p. 31). Such misfiring love might take varied forms, of which Hector depicts three: 'disordered love', 'misplaced trust' and 'the absolutization of worldly standards' (p. 46). While some might suggest these are radically different definitions of sin (with influence from Augustine or Luther or feminist thought), Hector wisely shows that they nonetheless manifest common concerns (which this reviewer might think is predominantly a triumph of the explanatory range of the Augustinian account he first considers).

In the face of such worldliness and its consequent brokenness or corruption, Hector turns to chapters on deliverance from sin (chapter 3), being reoriented (chapter 4), being in the world (chapter 5), being with others (chapter 6) and the end (chapter 7). In each case Hector brings together spiritual practices and doctrinal conceptualisation. At times he engages in biblical description – though never really shifting so far as to offer what might be called biblical exegesis *per se* – and sometimes he limits himself to strictly

doctrinal verbiage. Always he invokes the language of social practices exercised in the spiritual and religious sphere.

It is most telling also when Hector considers the end. He argues that eternal life is conceptually fraught in a range of ways (owing to the unique epistemological challenges based on a non-eternal being seeking to know and speak of an eternal reality). One nonetheless might move forward productively, wisely, beneficially with a 'vision of eternal life that might endlessly fulfill one categorical desire, namely, the desire for communion with God' (p. 247). Worldliness is challenged here in that the world's end comes from beyond.

Readers can ask whether that frame of the book matches its central account of Christianity. Its beginning warns of worldliness, and its end suggests that communion with God may and should characterise the eternal end. In both regards, Hector strikes a note for theocentrism and for invoking language of God not merely as cipher for worldly concerns but as real, metaphysical claim and, still further, for inter-personal engagement with that triune Lord. Central chapters on creaturely being, however, fix sights predominantly – at times exclusively – upon human spiritual practices. Here the book particularly develops a textured sketch of acquired virtue, and one might wonder to what extent infused virtue also plays a role. Is this a case of an extrinsic frame (in chapters 2 and 7) being matched by an immanent middle (particularly in chapters 4–6)? How might a more fervent account of the workings of the Spirit mark that core section of the Bible? Hector might turn to a Reformed approach to the so-called means of grace, by which God effectively imparts his gifts; or he might turn to any number of sacramental approaches developed in varied communions; or he might invoke the lexicon of apocalyptic theology as a means of attesting divine provision here, too. At one point he aims to attend to Schleiermacher's account of both Christ and Spirit, but the latter immediately pivots to the topic of imitative practice. We are subjects of verbs – the Spirit does not do much (though he is 'carried forward through a chain of imitation', p. 141).

The book's tone largely makes sense of Christianity in a way that will enable it to convey value to a wider reading public. There's rather less concern given to exploring controversies or debated points internal to the Christian theological tradition (though the discussion of love and faith as focal lenses for discerning 'worldliness' in chapter 2 is a great exception here). In one sense, this approach opens the book up to questions as to the extent to which it depends on the concerns of the moment. In another sense, the discussion of worldliness as problem and of eternal life as communion with God in Christ does gesture to values which supersede the merely immanent.

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## **Matthew Levering, *Reconfiguring Thomistic Christology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2023), pp. x + 331. \$110.00**

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It is no secret that academic theology has become largely compartmentalised. The reasons for which are well-documented. The explosion of information in the past