



Reviews

CHRISTIANITY AS A WAY OF LIFE: A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY,
by Kevin W. Hector, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. 308
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“Like all the major religions of the world, Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history.” So Robert Wilkens begins his excellent and influential book, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (xiii). That theology is deeply interconnected with Christian life and worship has been practiced and taught by teachers of the Church, church reformers, lay leaders, evangelists, preachers, and teachers for millennia. But it also it works both ways, a *vice versa* for this opening quote. For Christian theology aims to be enacted in community, and in our lives. Indeed, famously, our Savior taught that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength: all belong together in the love, worship and service of the Holy Trinity.

But we can no longer simply take it for granted that we understand the how and why of this healthy perspective on Christian doctrine and life. The details of just how theology engages and draws upon worship, mission and action (and vice versa) are in question. Enter this new work by the Naomi Shenstone Donnelley Professor of Theology and of the Philosophy of Religions at the University of Chicago. Hector has already authored impressive monographs at the intersection of philosophy and theology (e.g., *Theology without Metaphysics*). Here he seeks a learned and creative analysis of those common practices of Christianity that make it a holistic way of life. Drawing on careful academic learning and thoughtful exposition, Hector shows the many ways that specific Christian practices embody and imply specific Christian doctrines. Among others, he provides insightful discussion of several common practices of the faith that seek transformation of: (a) our orientation to God, (b) our way of being-in-the-world, (c) our way of being with others. Along

the way, in living this kind of life, we ourselves are also transformed by faith, grace and love, for God is about renewing and restoring all things, including each of us.

Examples of these practices include corporate singing, friendship, and “likemindedness;” wonder, laughter, and lament; or activism, forgiveness, and looking for the image of God in others. Even when the actions might look the same when others practice them, Hector expounds the specifically Christian motives, means, and goals of such action (for example, “activism”). Hector rightly understands that practices like these are, if they are indeed Christian, filled with godly and Christocentric significance and drive. They are grounded, funded and surrounded by critical theories and ideas (i.e. core Christian doctrines) that give overall shape, content, and purpose to this praxis. The depth and riches of his presentation lie in the careful philosophical and theological analysis of these practices. In his new work Hector shows himself to be learned in not only analytic and Continental philosophy, but in academic theology. Most of the work is drawn from ideas, theories and terms from both disciplines (as indeed learned Christian theologians always have). Even the title of this book is a gesture to philosophy: it echoes Pierre Hadot’s influential *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*.

The practice of the Sacraments may be rather too easy an example, so let us take up attention and wonder instead. Like Simone Weil, Hector sees *attention* as something more than merely *looking*. Attention is a careful, focused sensing: turning all we are upon the subject of our fascination. Hector rightly notes that it can be a spiritual practice, what the great spiritual writers would call “contemplation.” And he connects that to *wonder*, which can also be grounded in a God-ward faith. But what doctrine does this embody and assume? Hector connects this to “a practical doctrine of creation” in which the believer’s “prayers concerning earthly goods should transform our felt evaluation of these goods, such that we should increasingly relate *all* goods as God’s gifts and thus integrate our concern with these goods into our devotion” (167). This is just a sample of the nuance and fruitfulness of Hector’s exposition of key practices and key doctrines.

This work does exhibit a systems-approach to thinking about Christian life and thought, from the perspective of faith. For Hector uses systematic theology as a way of thinking and learning. But it is not in the *genre* of systematic theology as these are normally written. Hector creates fresh themes for his exposition, from “The Goods of Theology” to “Deliverance from Sin” [the most traditional title] to “Being in the World” or

“Being with Others.” While the chapter titles do match the internal logic of this work, it is only related in the way of a “deep grammar” to standard works in systematic theology as a genre. But one thing it does have in common with recent American systematic theologies like those of Tom Oden, James Evans, or Kate Sonderegger: the text presumes more than a passing acquaintance with ideas, terms, and theories drawn from the great tradition of doctrinal theology, as well as modern philosophy (both Continental and analytic traditions). Yet if the reader is willing to study the arguments in each chapter, willing to work with the sometimes-technical language, they will find the fruit well worth the effort. There is much for the working minister-theologian or student of theology to learn from this new book. Experts in theology, too, sometimes need to remember that it’s not a one-way street from theology to church-life: it works in the other direction as well. I commend it to anyone interested in the many ways in which following Jesus today embodies and points toward that thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history we call Christian theology.

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