

John Peter KENNEY, *Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (Oxford Early Christian Studies), 206 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-956370-8, £53.00.

John Peter KENNEY [= K.] is one of the greatest specialists in the field of contemplation and mysticism in ancient philosophy. Apart from his broader monograph on the Platonic tradition¹, he has published an important book focused on Augustine's *Confessions*² as well as several articles about the bishop of Hippo³. His new book about Augustine is partially based on the set of earlier articles published by K. over the last several years. In the first chapter he also includes some material from his previous studies on Platonism. Nonetheless, the book remains an important follow-up to his monograph on the mysticism of the *Confessions*, providing a fruitful synthesis of his work on Augustine.

The book consists of five chapters and is rather meagre in size (one hundred seventy pages, not including the bibliography and indexes). In the "Introduction" K. presents his main purpose, which is to study the relationship between Platonic contemplation and Christian philosophy in Augustine. He points out both the "revolutionary" aspects of Christianity with respect to the previous philosophical and cultural tradition as well as the desire of Christian intellectuals to use those aspects of Platonism that appeared invaluable and acceptable to them. For example, he recognises "the inherent ambivalence of Augustine's creative appropriation of Platonism: both his respect for its transcendental monotheism as well as his disdain not just for its acceptance of pagan cult but also for the soteriology of the Plotinian school" (p. 9). The pivotal notion of K.'s assessment of Platonism is its "transcendentalism", entailing real knowledge of the spiritual reality provided by Platonic contemplation, which is perfectly compatible with the Christian revelation.

The first chapter ("Contemplation and Pagan Monotheism") tries to summarise the most important characteristics of Platonic contemplation, with a special emphasis on the views of Plotinus as the founder of Neoplatonism. K.'s understanding of *Plato redivivus* is both profound and fresh, even though he is not what might be called a particularly "Plotinian scholar". In his summary, he emphasises both intellectual and trans-intellectual aspects of Plotinus' attitude to contemplation as well as his crucial concept of the fall of the soul or, more precisely, of the self, which includes an intriguing idea, later rejected by other Neoplatonists, that there is a part of the soul that does not descend and remains "anchored" in the noetic realm. K. mentions the most important aspect of Plotinus' concept of contemplation: that beyond a noetic (non-discursive) intuition of the intelligible world there is also a "hypernoetic"⁴ contemplation of the One, which consists in a "not-knowing", in, as K. reminds us, "a presence beyond knowledge".

In chapter two ("Transcendence and Christian Monotheism"), K. tries to grasp and describe the appeal that Platonism had for Augustine and attempts to delineate those changes which the later bishop of Hippo had to make in order to integrate what he learnt from Plotinus' works with his Christian faith. The most important elements here, according to K., are (1) abandoning Plotinus' idea of the highest Principle as *epekeina ontos* (beyond being) and replacing it with the notion of God as being, (2) an emphasis on the view of God as personal or rather "relational" (that is,

¹ *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology*, Providence–Hanover 1991.

² *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the "Confessions"*, New York 2005.

³ *Confession and the Contemplative Self in Augustine's Early Works*, Augustinian Studies XXX-VIII 2007, pp. 133–146 or, more recently, *God as Being*, Augustinian Studies XLIII 2012, pp. 77–88.

⁴ Term suggested by G.J.P. O'DALY (*Plotinus' Philosophy of the Self*, Shannon 1973, p. 84).

actively interested in individual human souls) in contrast to a more “detached” concept of divinity in Platonism. The latter element plays a crucial role in spiritual practice, since Augustine’s God is believed to be actively helping the soul in its return to him, unlike the Plotinian One (which, we ought to say, also attracts the soul to itself, but by means of its beauty and *charis*, not by personal care).

The third chapter (“Contemplation at Cassiciacum”) deals with Augustine’s early dialogues, written in Cassiciacum, in the villa belonging to his friend Verecundus, near Milan, after his conversion in 386. K. focuses particularly on early dialogues: *Contra academicos*, *De ordine* and *Soliloquia*, demonstrating that Augustine’s appropriation of Platonism was from the very beginning based on the important changes he had made in Neoplatonism (described in chapter two). K.’s strong (and open to debate) thesis is that “[f]rom Augustine’s first catechumenal treatise, *Contra academicos*, contemplation of God is relational, a form of intimacy initiated by divine intention towards the soul” (p. 61). He also emphasises that Augustine, unlike Plotinus, considered the fallen soul as too weak to return on its own to God. That is why it so desperately needs confession and grace.

In chapter four (“Early Catholic Treatises”), K. briefly analyses the descriptions of the contemplative ascent of the soul, which can be found in Augustine’s treatises written a bit later than the first Cassiciacum dialogues (such as *De utilitate credendi* or *De vera religione*, probably around years 390–391), concluding that his recognition of the shortcomings of Platonic contemplation had developed further. In these treatises, contemplation as such is seen by Augustine as “ambivalent”, in that it gives insight into the nature of God, particularly his transcendence, and, at the same time, into the soul’s fallenness and weakness, its need for help.

The fifth chapter (“Christian Transcendentalism”) focuses on the intriguing concept of the *caelum caeli* in Book Twelve of the *Confessions*. Augustine develops the idea of the “intellectual creature”, the community of angels and souls contemplating God. For the bishop of Hippo, the existence of the *caelum caeli* is also a justification of the possibility of Platonic contemplation in this life and even, as K. suggests, of the very authenticity of his vision at Ostia, shared with his mother, Monnica. The communal, dialogical aspect of the Ostia experience is linked by K. precisely to the idea of the *caelum caeli*.

In the “Conclusion” the author summarises the greatest difference between the Platonic and the Christian in Augustine’s understanding of contemplation. For Plotinus, contemplation is both epistemic and salvific: not only does it provide direct knowledge of spiritual reality, but also brings about a transformation of the soul through its intimate connection to the One. For Augustine, on the other hand, contemplation still remains *epistemic*, but is no longer *salvific*. It provides Christians with a sound and secure knowledge of God’s existence as the highest Being as well as of the whole order of reality, created by God, but Augustinian contemplation also results in a pessimistic insight into the miserable state of the fallen soul. K. reminds the reader that the spiritual, transcendent concept of God as pure intellect is not directly derived from the Bible, Jewish tradition or Jesus’ teachings for that matter, but is rather a path that was taken by educated Christians who wanted to understand the revelation in terms of Platonic philosophy. Not only Tertullian and Manichaeans, but many ancient Christians would imagine God just like Augustine did in his youth: as an omnipotent and omnipresent, but still *material, corporeal* being, without feeling unfaithful to the Bible and the Apostolic faith in the slightest. A purely spiritual understanding of God and the soul is a Platonic inheritance within Christianity and Augustine was one of the most influential advocates of this view.

The book is written in a very clear and precise style, without many bibliographical references or polemics with other scholars. The initial doubt of the reader as to whether K. is not simply repeating what he had already said in his previous book on Augustine is dispelled towards the end, when it becomes clear that the author is trying to reconstruct “the way to the *Confessions*” (and its mature view of contemplation) as well as to show the previously mentioned, profound continuity existing in Augustine’s thinking.

If we consider the book as a whole from the perspective of Augustinian scholarship, it seems obvious that K. wants to distance himself from the ongoing debate about the interplay of “Platonist” and “Christian” elements in Augustine’s thought. He attacks the very concept of “Christian Platonism” or rather defines it narrowly as “an effort to present Platonism in the language of Christianity” (p. 11). Even though he tries to avoid the controversy, his thinking is actually centrally placed in it and he presents a very strong position of his own. There are of course equally strong voices opposing the views for which K. tries to argue for. One can mention Philip CARY’s excellent work: *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self*, with the telling subtitle: *The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford 2000), which is a (successful) attempt to demonstrate that Augustine was, in fact, a Platonist philosopher throughout his whole life. Or, more recently, Brian DOBELL’s book with a equally telling title: *Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge 2009). Unlike CARY, DOBELL argues that Augustine started as a Christian Platonist, but with disappointment abandoned the Neoplatonic understanding of contemplation and spiritual life during his “Pauline revolution” in the mid-390ties.

We can try to see K. as standing in between those views to a certain degree. For him, there was no revolution, Pauline or otherwise, in Augustine attitude towards Platonism, but rather a slow *evolution* and development of the insights which had somehow been there from the very beginning. In my personal view, K. makes matter easy for himself by defining “Christian Platonism” in such a biased and narrow way: if it was only Platonism expressed, for some reason, in Christian language, neither Augustine nor even Origen could be honestly called a “Christian Platonist”. But few scholars would venture to defend such an extreme view, namely, that Augustine merely translated Platonic concepts into biblical metaphors. Robert J. O’CONNELL at times might have given that impression in his iconoclastic fervour, but I do not think that the scholars like Philip CARY, Roland TESKE or Joseph TORCHIA, who believe that Augustine was a deeply Platonic philosopher, trying to subordinate his Platonism to his Christian faith, would ever embrace such a simplistic view of the complicated and always evolving mind of the bishop of Hippo.

K., therefore, makes things easy for himself, but this does not mean that what he says is incorrect. On the contrary, he makes an important contribution by studying, in a profound and elegant way, a particular aspect of the complex relationship between Platonism and the biblical revelation in Augustine, namely, contemplation and its role in the spiritual life of Christians. His demonstration of the differences between Augustine and Plotinus in this respect is valid and clear. Even more important is that he shows that it is precisely the “relational” or “intentional” image of God which hides behind Augustine’s views of contemplation. Perhaps, what is lacking in K.’s argument is reference to an actual evolution in Augustine’s attitude to Platonism. He is so concerned with showing the (existing) continuity between the “early Augustine” and the “mature Augustine”, that we find little about the differences between those two Augustines, which are quite convincingly demonstrated by DOBELL in the book I have referred to above.

I realise that looking for what is missing is not a very good way to write a review. But I cannot help wondering why K. decided to leave aside some broader discussion of the concepts used in the book (such as, to begin with, “Christianity”, “Platonism”, “contemplation”) and especially some discussion of the dominant views in the field. Of course, this might be discouraging for a more general audience and K. seems to want his thoughts to be accessible not only to Augustinian specialists, but it would be quite helpful for Augustinian scholars who are painfully conscious of the vague and ambiguous status of such concepts.

For example, we do not learn whether K. believes that Christianity was for Augustine one of the schools of ancient philosophy or something completely incomparable to them, something that was radically new. The impression that the reader might get from the book is that K. sees Platonism and Christianity as somewhat competitive or even contradictory systems. But K.’s thinking seems to indicate that he recognises that there is a difference between “Platonism” as a theory of reality and “Platonism” as a soteriological system, therapy of the soul or a contemplative path. The problem is that Augustine at some point clearly rejected “Platonism” as a self-subsisting soteriological

and therapeutic system in favour of his own synthesis of Christianity and Platonism. But he never rejected Platonic theories on the whole, even though, towards the end of his life, the bishop of Hippo was criticising with increasing zeal those Platonic doctrines which were incompatible with the Christian view of the human being and his salvation.

However, a great and laudable achievement of K. in this book is both the clarity of the thesis presented and how it is rooted in the reading of Augustine's texts. It will prove equally fascinating and thought provoking for those who study Late Antiquity as for those who are interested in reflecting on Christian spirituality and its sources.

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