Kevin Corrigan, *Reason, Faith, and Otherness in Neoplatonic and Early Christian Thought*
Reason, Faith, and Otherness in Neoplatonic and Early Christian Thought by Corrigan, Kevin
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While interesting and entertaining, the book's main deficit is that it does not try to view its subject through the lens of a truly religious understanding of sainthood or miracles, nor does it undertake any formal theological or philosophical inquiry by which to try to make sense of these phenomena, nor does it employ any of the sophisticated methodology of the sociology of religion to try to explain the cult of Saints Cosmas and Damian. The result is that the conclusions are rather bland. Without this sort of deeper engagement, the book never achieves the sort of critical edge that might, for instance, question whether the Vatican's reliance on medical experts to certify miracles is not itself an example of the way in which empirical science now quietly exerts its epistemological hegemony even over the Roman Church. Perhaps the somewhat uninformative conclusions that result from this atheoretical approach partly explain why Duffin made the book more of a travelogue. Being on the road with her in pursuit of the twin saints is loads of fun. At the end of the trip, however, one does not gain much insight into sainthood or miracles in the postmodern world. Or perhaps the postmodern conclusion is that the trip is all there is, and we should enjoy it as best we can.

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In our current academic situation, it might be a hard case to make that the way forward leads back to the canon of Platonism, however broadly construed. Still, this volume, which collects some of the most memorable essays of Kevin Corrigan's long career, aims to do just that. As he puts it so provocatively in the final essay here, Corrigan sees Platonism not as some "moribund essence," but rather as a "permutative virus" (XVI, 19), lively and adaptable enough to animate discussions across any number of philosophical and religious divisions. Corrigan wagers that this virus is not only full of life for us still today, but is even able to help us push our own intellectual conversations past their current boundaries and blind spots.

The sixteen essays included in this volume cover a wide range of topics, from harmony in the *Phaedo* to the metaphysics of light in Aquinas and even the meaning of the dialogic for Mikhail Bakhtin. Still, certain authors tend to recur. Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa return to the fore again and again, though always approached from newly insightful angles. Corrigan explores their works (though not just theirs) in order to get at themes that also occur with some regularity. In addition to his general interest in reinvigorating the vivacity and diversity of many so-called Platonic texts, Corrigan is also keen to discuss the way those texts worked through several focused problems, including: the possibility and meaning of personal identity (such as in essay VII); the relation of body and soul (essays II, IV, X, XI, and XIV); and the extent to which receptivity to something outside ourselves conditions our own agency or spontaneity (especially in essays IX, XIII, and XVI).

Corrigan is at his best when pointing out the subtle inflections that make many ancient thinkers harder to categorize than they might at first seem. By emphasizing the close ties between cosmic contemplation and the ongoing embodied cultivation of such *theoria*, he fends off the harshest accusations against Plotinus for supposedly eschewing the body entirely in favor of the soul (XI, 4–7). And by sketching out the concept of "creative recipience" (XIII, 80), Corrigan also works to break down the stale dichotomy between passive prayer and active philosophizing, which can inhibit

our ability to understand late antique thought—Christian or otherwise—before we even begin to approach it.

The best, clearest essay in this volume is probably its thirteenth, which leads the reader swiftly from Parmenides to Anselm in order to demonstrate that ancient thinkers did not have to choose between philosophy or prayer as two distinct alternatives. Rather, they were able to philosophize by praying, acknowledging the way that seemingly spontaneous contemplation could actually be derived from a prior receptivity to something that transcends us (XIII, 81–86). The final essay of the volume is then able to build on this breakdown of dichotomies, showing just how feeble the categories of both "philosophy" and "religion" are when it comes to interpreting late antique thought. Instead of boiling the *Symposium* or the *Enneads* or the *Confessions* down to some set of central commitments, Corrigan argues, we ought to see in Platonic texts an "impetus to transform customary forms of thinking and practice from their own past cultural, social, and religious significations, to suggest possibilities for new understanding, no matter how outrageous for their own times, and to subject such possibilities to continual critical re-examination" (XVI, 18). Approaching texts this way would allow us to escape the stale odor of Platonism—that "moribund essence"—in order to breathe anew the life stored up in the texts left to us from late antiquity.

At times, Corrigan's interest in calling us back to the intellectual energy of these texts and their period leads him toward the realm of hyperbole. In the tenth essay, dealing with the soul-body relation before Augustine, he claims that Augustine "has understood Plotinus more deeply than generations of subsequent scholars, has grasped the total novelty of this thought, and has so thoroughly assimilated that thought into his own creative and original way of thinking that the reality and novelty of his view have erased the traces of their origins in the process" (X, 78). Such a claim would be difficult to defend in any rigorous fashion. It seems to be aimed more at polishing up Augustine's image as a reader of Plotinus than at solving any clearly identified theoretical or practical problem. Likewise, in the eleventh essay, on the conception of the soul in terms of bodily *harmonia*, Corrigan's main purpose appears to be inserting Gregory of Nyssa into the history books as a key cog in the development of a complex, embodied philosophy of mind (XI, 14). That may indeed be a desirable goal, but it fails to resonate with some of Corrigan's more passionate claims about the ongoing intellectual vivacity of the Platonic tradition.

Ultimately, though, this volume contains a number of skillful dissections of the intimidatingly intricate questions that plagued late antique thought. Most of its essays demand a good deal of familiarity with the intellectual atmosphere of that period, with the result that readers who have such familiarity will tend to get more out of these pages than readers who do not. What should appeal to all readers, however, is Corrigan's call for a more open, dialogical reading of the works of Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and so many others. The appeal of such a call does not rest on a general preference for opening up conversations rather than shutting them down with received opinions (though that is a happy by-product). Its appeal lies instead in the possibility that we can still learn from these ancient treatments of topics like prayer, divine love, transcendence, and ascesis. And we can do so in such a way that we no longer have to limit any of these to their specifically religious or philosophical applications. At its best, this volume of Corrigan's essays can serve to spur us on down just this kind of fruitful path of approach to late antique thought.

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