

REVIEWS

Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of the Souls. Revising a Classical Ideal*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 17, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2010, ISBN 13:9780268033217, XVIII, 342 p.

In this book, Paul Kolbet studies one of the major aspects of Augustine's homiletical practice: his never-ending concern to provide guidance for the souls of the people who were entrusted to his pastoral care as a priest and later as bishop of Hippo. Paul Kolbet in this book argues that Augustine's concept of pastoral care was rooted in the classical tradition of *cura animarum* in which sophists presented themselves as physicians using psychagogic techniques as their medicines and instruments. Psychagogy in this study refers to "to those philosophically articulated traditions of therapy – common in Hellenistic literature – pertaining to how a mature person leads the less mature to perceive and internalize wisdom for themselves" (p. 8).

The first part of the book surveys the variety of forms of psychagogy in classical tradition: Plato and the sophist Dio. Kolbet highlights the roots of rhetoric in sophistry and points to the dependency of both Plato and Augustine on this tradition. Paul Kolbet concludes this overview of the classical and rhetorical roots of Augustine's reflection on the *cura animarum* with a description of the Hellenistic refinements that changed the practice of psychagogy. The book mainly focuses on the Hellenistic exegesis of Plato's dialogues (second sophistry) and on the rather detailed advises on guidance of the soul which emerge from the written works of Seneca. Despite the rejection of poetry as a pedagogic instrument by Plato and other philosophical schools, Paul Kolbet correctly signalizes the significance of (epic) poetry in formation as an introductory exercise into philosophy.

The second and main part of the book is devoted to the study of Augustine's revising and recontextualisation of the classical concept of therapy. Kolbet takes the chronology of Augustine's biography as a lead. Starting with an exploration of social and intellectual influences which might have influenced Augustine in his choice for a career as an orator, Paul Kolbet deliberates on the influence of the bishop Ambrose on the young ambitious Augustine. Here again, the author stresses the psychagogic function of sermons in liturgy. They "brought him into a process of gradual conversion where the convictions informing his life

decisions at the time were first brought to mind with clarity and then whittled away" (p. 76). It helped Augustine to overcome his resistance to the stylistic simplicity of Scripture and revealed to him how to cope with an imperfect world which he discovers being an image and not reality itself.

The fourth chapter describes Augustine's process of Christianizing the classical concept of therapy. Kolbet's analysis of Augustine's concept of Christian philosophy and the cure of the soul focuses on two aspects: the social acceptable tradition of *otium liberale* which formed the background of Augustine's retreat at Cassiciacum and on Augustine's concern with words in their psychagogic function. In what follows Paul Kolbet extensively quotes from *De beata vita*, *De ordine*, *Contra academicos*, *Soliloquia* and *De musica*. A close reading offers the reader a rich insight in discussions and pedagogical situations where Augustine shows his genius as a teacher and writer.

The subject of the next chapter is Augustine's catechumenate and the immediately following post-baptismal period. It is studied in the same way by close-reading mainly Ambrose and Augustine's *De animae quantitate*, *De genesi adversus Manicheos*, *De magistro*, and *De vera religione*. It is in this period that Augustine moved back to Africa and founded his community in Thagaste. Kolbet points out that Augustine's concern is to make clear that in his opinion "the Church in its liturgy and Scripture taught the truth about the soul authoritatively" (p. 108). Kolbet observes that Augustine's questions in these period remained largely the same as during the retreat at Cassiciacum. New literary genres emerged: the rule for his community and commentaries on Scripture. Paul Kolbet concludes this chapter stating that five years after his conversion, Augustine "had both permanently abandoned his teaching of secular rhetoric and thoroughly revised the very traditions he used to teach by systematically integrating them into a particularly Christian understanding of the universe" (p. 117).

Chapter five inquires for the new context for classical therapy. Kolbet considered that Augustine's priesthood showed him the limits of his previous skills and it provided him with the impetus to recontextualize the fruits of his retreat in Cassiciacum. In order to gain insight in this process, Paul Kolbet quotes extensively from the anti-Manichean *De utilitate credendi* which leads to the conclusion that the Manichean spiritual direction "falls short of therapeutic imperatives established since classical antiquity" (p. 128). A second aspect of the recontextualisation of the heritage of Cassiciacum after his ordination is Augustine's controversies over the cure of the soul with (stoic) philosophers, but also with Pelagius. Augustine's *Confessiones*, *De*

civitate Dei and Pelagius' letters to Demetrias are the *obiectum materiale* for this inquiry. It leads the author to the conclusion that Augustine was more focused on the embedding of humanity in flawed (ecclesial) communities as a source of weakness than with individual sin.

The next chapter (six) concerns signs eliciting love as a hermeneutical criterion coming from Scripture itself. In order to understand and interpret the Bible, human language and human guidance are necessary. Augustine provides his reader with his knowledge on signs and hermeneutics in *De doctrina Christiana*, which is, together with *De catechizandis rudibus* studied in this chapter. Paul Kolbet points out that Augustine in *De doctrina Christiana* becomes increasingly conscious of the limits of human guidance. The divine Word itself cures whoever studies Scripture. Its study exercises the soul of the student to discover the quality of signification inherent in all material things. Augustine seems to be more pragmatic in the application of hermeneutical criteria in *De catechizandis rudibus*. In this work Augustine advises to teach in the format of a narration and to stay close to the Scriptural text, for God's love cures the pride of those who tend to reject the humble style of the Bible.

The last part of the book concentrates on Augustine's homiletical practice. In chapter seven Kolbet studies the continuity of Augustine's preaching with the classical rhetorical tradition in the analysis of several sermons from the fictive perspective of the orator Apuleius who enjoyed a similar popularity as the bishop of Hippo. Kolbet states that Augustine in his sermons used familiar material from the psychagogic tradition, such as the *Christus medicus* metaphor. These and other rhetorical devices were part of Augustine's critical skills that enabled him to build and educate the Christian identity of his flock. Augustine's preaching was intended to involve his audience in a reflective process, a common exercise in scriptural interpretation in which the Word cures human weaknesses. Once the illnesses are cured, Augustine continues to constructive guidance in order to strengthen and to stimulate an ascent of the soul of his audience in his sermon.

The book closes with a chapter on therapy and society. Paul Kolbet highlights that Augustine as an orator and author participates in the classical tradition of formation of the soul by reason and eloquence. Kolbet states that the sermons have a special psychagogic function in extending the text of Scripture and to exhort the audience to follow its lead. In the final conclusion Paul Kolbet reminds us that in the West platonic ideas were often transmitted in their Augustinian form. Similarly, Augustine revised the classical psychagogic tradition

because he felt this tradition lacked the means to realize its highest ideals. Augustine, on his turn, helped his flock in Hippo to find a Christian attitude that "would enable them to participate in corrupt society without being defined by it" (p. 208).

This book provides the reader with a rich insight in the classical roots of Augustine's rhetorical psychagogy. Kolbet's analysis of the relevance of Plato and sophists for Augustine's practice of cure of the soul shows that Martha Nussbaum missed an opportunity to understand the nature of the relationship between early Christian theology and classical view on cure of the soul, when she dismissed the Platonic ascent of the soul because it would limit political action and this-worldly striving.

Kolbet's working definition of psychagogy (p. 8), however, seems to limit the concept of cure of the soul to human guidance where Augustine extends his therapy to a synergy between the divine Word and a human preacher or spiritual director. It is therefore a missed opportunity that Kolbet did not explicitly re-evaluate his working definition in his conclusion.

In part two of the book, Paul Kolbet quotes extensively from Augustine's texts. This offers the reader a view on the many-faceted rhetorical talent of Augustine as a young orator and as an aged bishop. The picture that is emerging from his reading of these texts shows the importance of the metaphor of cure and therapy for Augustine. It exposes also his capacity to transform the heritage of classical culture.

The wide range of primary texts read by Paul Kolbet shows Augustine's creativity, but simultaneously complicates the analysis because of the differences between the literary genres of the texts used as *objectum materiale* of this research project. The sermons Kolbet promises to focus on in his book, are discussed without extensive reflection on their oral character and analyzed in the same way as (the majority of) the texts discussed, such as the Cassiciacum dialogues. The latter were apparently designed as written texts.

Kolbet's reading of Augustine's texts opens the treasury of Augustine's rhetoric. His extensive quotes show also to the reader who is not familiar with his oeuvre the importance of the classical psychagogic tradition for early Christian theologians such as Augustine. Although this book contains almost hundred pages of endnotes with references to a rich variety of primary and secondary literature, quotations of the Latin text often are limited, which sometimes is a temptation for the impatient and curious scholarly reader.

Paul Kolbet shows in this book that Augustine's texts have the potential to initiate a transforming psychagogic process, which does

not negate the weaknesses of the human soul, but rather integrates them in a universal hermeneutics of love and charity.

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Giulio D'Onofrio, *Vera Philosophia: Studies in Late Antique, Early Medieval and Renaissance Christian Thought*, Nutrix 1, English text by John Gavin, Brepols, Turnhout, 2008, ISBN 978-2-503-52546-4, 406 p.

The book is based on a collection of reworked and revised articles and studies written by the author in the last twenty years and dealing, as he explains, with the origins and constitutive conditions of Christian philosophical-theological thought in Late Antiquity, early Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Postfatio, p. 357). It is a good overview and analysis of these periods without completely neglecting the High Middle Ages either. However, this period is mentioned just in passing. Had it had a separate chapter on that, the book would have been more unitary. The main characters, whose views and works seem to influence, according to D'Onofrio, numerous later authors and trends, are Cicero and the authors also providing the two suggestive mottos of the book: Augustine (*vera philosophia* is the *studium vel amore sapientiae* – *Contra Iulianum* IV.14.72) and John Scot Eriugena (*vera philosophia* is *vera religio* – *De praedestinatione* 1.1). Other relevant authors are especially Boethius, Anselm of Canterbury and Nicholas of Cusa.

The first chapter of the book deals with what D'Onofrio calls 'converted thought' and starts from a few ideas of Cicero and of the Stoics, later to be either adopted or criticized by Augustine. It is the most complex chapter offering not only the theoretical premises of the book, but also concrete examples for these theoretical premises in late antique philosophy. The rest of the book relies on this chapter and often refers back to it. Thus, while having virtue as its main topic, late antique philosophy seems to answer questions regarding both individual happiness or ethical norms and social life and its laws. In Cicero's view, philosophy is defined as *vitae dux*, responsible for the formation of human beings, their education, their capacity of distinguishing between good and evil and also having a consolatory component at the same time. Moreover, philosophy is described not only as a formative discipline for human beings, but also as mediating humans' relationship with the divine – it is *scientia divinarum*