

Book Reviews

(R)evolutionary Hope: A Spirituality of Encounter and Engagement in the Evolving World. By Kathleen Bonnette. Foreword by Ilia Delio. Cascade Books, 2023. ix + 134 pages. \$22.00 (pbk.)

I live among many women religious who (rightfully?) cringe at St. Augustine's name because they know him primarily as a sexist, sin-centric ogre. For centuries, misguided, selective use of Augustine's work has been a source for egregious sexism and justification of legalistic moral teaching. Indeed, that experience is alive in the Christian world—and beyond. In *(R)evolutionary Hope*, Kathleen Bonnette brings the light of scholarly interpretation of this saint together with her own developing Catholic identity. Amid the complexities of the US Catholic Church, Bonnette brings a refreshing perspective of both a theologian and an “adult convert” to Catholicism who treasures the rich intellectual tradition of the church. She states:

While it was Augustine's influence that first drew me to the Catholic Church, my engagement with women religious in the work for peace and justice drew me more deeply into Catholic faith. . . . They expressed spiritual sensibilities that emphasized encounter and inclusion: their love was ordered, in practice, toward relationship before dogma. Through them, I learned to define Catholicism in terms of wholeness and interconnection, rather than hierarchy. (7)

Bonnette's work consists of six chapters. She invites readers to explore Augustine's question in *Confessions*, 10.8: “What do I love, when I love my God?” It is the exploration of this question that holds value, and she returns to it throughout the book, though its final answer is elusive. Indeed, Bonnette contends, it is the search for the “What” that itself holds meaning. She explores various “loves”—e.g., hierarchy, clericalism, and movement from the negative appropriations of such things and the shift in meaning, through liminal spaces, into mystery.

Bonnette uses personal stories that parallel and help illustrate Augustine's experiences leading to his conversion. These examples add clarity and realism to spiritual developments that might otherwise be difficult to comprehend. Bonnette shows how Augustine's questioning enabled him to come to significant insights concerning knowing who or what and how to love. Augustine's open invitation to

question, and the integration of intellect, emotion, and creativity in his theology, are striking and authentically human.

Bonnette's six chapters emphasize three major lessons from Augustine for today. First, humans are relational beings ordered to relationships with a loving God, and with all God loves. Beginning with an intellectual endeavor, gradually the human heart becomes engaged, and then expands to communion with family and the entire web of life. With this expansion also comes the moral consciousness of the required flourishing of neighbors of all kinds—including humans.

Second, in his *Confessions*, Augustine discovers that failure to love is mostly rooted in the pursuit of domination and control. The desire for stability and control is a hazard of being a vulnerable human being. Augustine asserts that human reality consists in constant need to grapple with vulnerability, and all forms of lust for control and domination close us off from growth and wholeness. Notably, he proves his own case when he asserts the subservience of women to men!

Third, Augustine shows humility and curiosity are necessary for a healthy faith life. He asks very hard questions, searching diligently for conclusive answers, while ultimately remaining open to further revelations of a greater truth.

Bonnette's third chapter flawlessly connects Augustine to notions of cosmic spirituality using science. She begins with a story of teaching her children how to find the Big Bang Theory in the Genesis creation stories. Using terms from quantum theory, she discusses ways to see God in the relationships of both disciplines. The profound mysteries that science reveals are likened to the depth of the mystery of the Trinity. Just as the triune God can be seen as a relationship, so science increasingly understands all of existence, all of human consciousness, and all of reality as an infinite set of relationships in which nothing is truly independent of anything else or of the fundamental forces of creation. Einstein's theory of relativity—that everything is relational—has parallels to Christian theology that defines God as love and love as the product of relationships.

This book is an excellent, fresh exposé of Augustine's work engaging theology and today's science, and a great addition for a church history or spirituality course. Excellent questions for reflection conclude each chapter. The extensive bibliography spans historical, spiritual, theological, and scientific sources at primary and secondary levels. There are wonderfully illustrative citations of poets and artists, clarifying key points. This would be a fine text for upper level or graduate courses, or source for academic writing. It will entice readers to learn more about the work of Augustine.

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