

Non-Thematic

The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology. Mark McIntosh. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 217.
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Mark McIntosh was an Anglican priest, scholar, and author of multiple books on the history, study, and practice of Christian mysticism. His latest book, published just before his death in October of 2021 due to complications resulting from ALS, is titled *The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology*. In this work he addresses what he argues is a key component of mysticism in general and Christian theology in particular: the divine ideas tradition (abbreviated throughout as DIT). This tradition, more broadly identifiable as the Augustinian illuminationist tradition, holds that in God's "eternal knowing and loving of Godself, that is, in the eternal begetting of the Word and breathing forth of the Spirit, God also knows and loves all the ways in which creatures might participate in God's life through God's gift to each creature of existence" (12). McIntosh's text, following the work of scholars like Bernard McGinn and Douglas Hedley, is aimed at exploring this relational dynamic. By way of a robust appeal to analogical thought, McIntosh deploys an exemplarist theology that builds upon the writing of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Scotus Erigena, St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, and Thomas Traherne among others. Rejecting commonplace critiques that see in the DIT a Platonic intrusion to the Gospel message, McIntosh argues that the epistemological, ontological, and spiritual elements of this tradition are ingredients to the Christian religion. McIntosh, however, goes further and asserts

that the DIT is not only fundamental to Christianity, but also offers resources to combat a host of issues that he sees facing the modern world.

McIntosh's work is divided into five chapters with a short introduction. His introduction establishes the aims of his text and argues for the importance of a hermeneutic that sees God as the sustaining ground of all phenomena. To accomplish this, McIntosh seeks to unpack a set of metaphysical claims, i.e., "explaining how things come to exist as they are," as well as a set of noetic claims, i.e., "explaining how the truth of things can be known" (4). In light of these two themes, McIntosh's text seeks to show the Christological and soteriological foundation of the DIT.

In chapter one, McIntosh unpacks the historical discrepancy between a classical conception of an idea and a modern one. In many classical contexts, ideas approximate something like an archetype which pre-exist within the mind of God (18); while in modernity – i.e., a post-Cartesian framework – an idea has come to be understood as a mental representation located solely within the mind of the thinker. The parameters established by the former position, McIntosh argues, assumes that an idea's intelligibility signaled its participation within the divine mind (19). McIntosh goes on to assert that this classical epistemological framework provided early Christians a means by which to posit a connection between their own finite existence and God's infinite spiritual reality (23). Indeed, according to McIntosh, it was via the conceptual resources found within the DIT's notion of an idea that doctrines such as the trinity were given shape by the early Church (26).

In his second chapter, McIntosh reflects on modern issues such as the looming environmental crises and the theme of disenchantment. He argues that only the sacramental attitude expressed by the DIT can confront these issues. Drawing on

Origen, Maximus the Confessor, and St. Bonaventure, he argues that a properly sacramental attitude extended towards creation sees in nature a “beautiful expression of God’s inexhaustible goodness and truth, an expression worthy of human joy, wonder, and care” (44). He finds in this sacramental attitude a possible remedy to an ecological crisis that he argues can be traced to a worldview that sees nature as a mere instrument (55). Here following Hans Blumenberg and Louis Dupré, McIntosh draws a direct line that connects the impulses brought about by a late-medieval nominalism which saw in nature mere extended objects cut-off from their divine ground, the utilitarianism of modern capitalist society, and the ecological crisis. In nominalist thinkers like Scotus, he argues, not only was nature perceived to be disconnected from a realist metaphysics, but, God, too, was absolutized and conceptualized as utterly alien to the created order of things. The outcome of this process was that any sense of God’s self-communication with finitude was denied (63). For McIntosh, only the DIT imbues nature with a fullness that engenders respect and awe – attributes he argues are necessary to a proper ecological movement.

In the third chapter, McIntosh demonstrates the Christological foundation of the DIT. McIntosh’s position is that what underscores this tradition is the self-giving revelation he argues was innate to Christ’s message. This Christological focus hinges upon a relational ontology in which the fullness of God, shared through Christ, is met via the subject through prayerful and contemplative acts (89). Through an analysis of pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus Eriugena, Aquinas, and Bonaventure, McIntosh hones in on three key issues in the DIT. First, ontologically, he sees in the Word an overflowing creative abundance from which arises a relational dynamic between the Being of God and the becoming of humanity (91). Second, epistemologically, he sees in Christ the

illuminative source through which the comprehension of, and loving participation with, all things arise (91). Third, Christologically, he argues that when one fully shares in the death and resurrection of Christ, one's own isolated suffering is transformed and made generative in their identification with the Word. For McIntosh, because the ground of all creatures is sustained in and by Christ, then the "return and re-creation of all creatures" to a state of wholeness emerges only via a fidelity to Christ (103).

In Chapter 4, McIntosh reflects on the nature of the paschal mystery via an adhesion to the thought of Augustine and thinkers like Traherne. As he does throughout his work, McIntosh shows here the vast influence that Augustine has had on the DIT. He deploys Augustine's illuminationist theory as a way to continue his critique of nominalism. Here, repeating themes he touches on throughout his work, he turns to Augustine's *On The Trinity* as further evidence of the unification of the mind of the subject with God (120). However, in this chapter, he argues that the liturgical act and symbol of the paschal mystery contains within it a means by which to more fully experience God, and the self-communication of God, via the imaginary impulse that the death and resurrection of Christ signifies. In a rather novel discussion, in which Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is engaged to again think through the tension of disenchantment and modernity, McIntosh appeals to the imaginative resources exhibited in the writing of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. McIntosh argues that Tolkien and Lewis offer a way in which to think about the value of myth and religious thought in disenchanted modernity – both writers offer a means of re-enchanting a cosmos that has become subordinated to a utilitarian logic (131). Finally, via a discussion of Traherne's contemplative vision of nature, McIntosh argues that a mythical framework saturated in a paschal vision which sees

Christ as the unifying centre of the cosmos is the only way past these modern tensions.

In his concluding chapter, McIntosh revisits and restates his text's central theme: that in God's self-knowledge arises an "eternal act of self-knowing" which is the ground of truth itself, *Scientia dei causa rerum*. From this act arises, McIntosh writes, "the beatitude or happiness that is the very life of God" (167). The awareness of this theological claim, abstracted from sensible experience signals, McIntosh notes, a salvific reality that he argues is at the heart of the Christian message (171). In this final section, too, McIntosh discusses a sub-theme that runs throughout his book: the status of truth in modernity. He argues that the rise of "fake-news," ongoing issues surrounding racism, environmental crises, and the "untruths and obvious denials of fact" regarding the pandemic all stem from a worldview that denies the sacrality of the human experience in their communion with God (181).

McIntosh's text, in summary, provides a clear and focused historical overview of the DIT, mysticism, and Christian theology. Certainly, his is a biased perspective; he is roundly sympathetic to the claims and assertions made by those within the DIT. His text thus does not provide a critical account or analysis of the tradition. This lack of critical analysis does not, I would argue, hamper the excellence of the historical insight his text provides into a rather long and complex theological history. This latter theme makes his text valuable for scholars of theology in general and of mystical theology in particular.