Kevin Hector. *Christianity as a Way of Life: A Systematic Theology*. Yale University Press, 2023. 328 pp. $40.00 (hbk).

Leigh Vicens
Augusta University

I wasn't sure what to expect when I began reading Kevin Hector's *Christianity as a Way of Life: A Systematic Theology*. If Christianity really is a "way of life" in the sense that Pierre Hadot characterized ancient philosophical schools of thought—a set of spiritual practices designed to orient us to some fundamental truth (10) or to bring our lives into conformity with a commitment to some value (27)—then what need is there for a systematic theology? Wouldn't a how-to manual, in the vein of Epictetus's *Enchiridion*, do the trick? Hector answers this question in Chapter 1: because theology is "a practice of reflecting on what such conformity looks like and on the extent to which one's life exhibits such conformity" (13), theology can help to bring our lives into greater conformity with our commitments—and so itself "qualifies as a spiritual practice" (14). Since I find much systematic and analytic theology too speculative, I was pleased by this beginning and excited to read through the rest of the book, expecting that theologizing alongside Hector might be a spiritual practice for me as well. I was not disappointed, as Hector discusses a number of practices that make sense in light of his interpretation of Christianity and that form a compelling vision of the Christian faith as a way of life. Yet the theologizing in the book goes far beyond what is needed to determine how to practice Christianity. Hector devotes considerable attention to the more theoretical aspects of Christian doctrine and does not always show how these are applicable to a way of life; and sometimes his focus on the theoretic comes at the expense of the practical. Below I offer a chapter-by-chapter summary of the book's contents before suggesting in conclusion what is the book's most significant accomplishment.

After setting out, in Chapter 1 ("The Good of Theology"), his vision of Christianity as a way of life and showing how theology has practical value by contributing to this way of life, Hector moves on to an account, in Chapter 2 ("The Way of the World"), of the old, sinful orientation from which Christianity is meant to free us. He reviews accounts of sin as disordered love, misplaced trust, and the absolution of worldly standards, inspired by Augustine, Luther, and James Cone, respectively, before settling on a more general account of sin as treating the world rather than God as ultimate. Hector proposes that the antidote to sin is "not to oppose or flee the world but for our relationship to the world to be included in and oriented by our devotion to God" (31). His conception of sin is crucial to understanding the spiritual practices that follow, but I'm not sure exactly what it amounts to or whether I agree with it. In explaining Luther's view, for instance, Hector writes, "(a) our god is whatever keeps us from worrying or provides us with reassurance when we do; (b) God alone should play this role; and (c) we are sinful insofar as anything else does" (36). Suppose I worry, after every school shooting, that my children's school could be the next target—but then I reassure myself that my children's school has securely locked doors. Am I being idolatrous? Hector later notes that our trust in modern medicine (and, one might suppose, secure school buildings) "can itself be an expression of trust in God" (37), suggesting that my reassurance would not count as sinful if I thank God for locked doors. But what if I continue to worry—because, say, I notice the doors are sometimes propped open—would I then count as sinful for my failure to trust in God to provide security? In fact it

10.12978/jat.2024-12.110407210818
© 2024 Leigh Vicens • © 2024 Journal of Analytic Theology

seems we should not expect God to provide security, since we know God sometimes does not (e.g. in Uvalde). So I am left with the question of what orienting ourselves to God as ultimate amounts to and whether this should be expected of us mortals. In this chapter Hector also attempts to account for how all of us cannot help but sin, and in what sense we are subjected to the power of sin. While I do not find his account of sin's inevitability (given our responsibility) convincing, I also don't see why such an account is needed to orient one's life to God. It should be enough to note that we are indeed bound to sin and in need of a liberator.

In Chapter 3 ("Deliverance from Sin"), Hector offers an account of how liberation from sin is accomplished. Here he expounds the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity before offering his own interpretation of the Atonement. This chapter, containing technical language and many numbered syllogisms, is perhaps the most theoretic of all, despite Hector's warning that non-specialists might want to skip (only) Chapter 1 (x). The following remarks on the Trinity are fairly representative:

- "A helpful way to make sense of this idea is to think of God's acts ad extra as a repetition of the act in which God eternally subsists" (77).
- "On this approach, then, we can say that the Father is eternally begetting a Son who is a perfect reflection of the Father and with whom the Father wholly identifies" (77-78).
- "This is a very rough sketch, to be sure, but it should already help us see how the Spirit would act to redeem us precisely by repeating this eternal being-in-act ad extra" (81).

This sort of theologizing does not seem to be a matter of reflecting on what conformity to a particular value system looks like. I suspect that reflecting on the Gospel stories of Jesus's life in the manner of Ignatius's *Exercitia Spiritualia* would be more effective toward the goal of self-transformation than trying to understand the relations between the persons of the Trinity; and the spiritual practices Hector outlines in subsequent chapters do not seem to require any deep understanding of Trinitarian theology.

The end of Chapter 3 turns to spiritual practices aimed at allowing practitioners to hear God's judgment and know we are liberated from sin: baptism, confession and forgiveness, friendship and self-narration. Hector notes that while a person new to the Christian faith might at some level accept the Gospel message as "the fundamental truth about ourselves and the world" (95), still this acceptance may not take immediate and total effect. He offers an interesting analogy to the experience of living through World War II and then being told, one day, that it is all over. One might immediately accept the news, but not so immediately adjust one's life to it, for the old way of living—rationing, worrying about and praying for one's children overseas, focusing attention on the evening news, etc.—may be so deeply ingrained. One may need to be reminded, repeatedly, that the war is over, before slowly coming to reappraise one's various habits, intentions, and values in light of this fact. Thus the practices outlined in this chapter are ways of internalizing the fundamental truth of what God has done for us in Christ. Baptism and the proclamation of forgiveness following our confession of sins confirm that we are released from bondage to sin and raised with Christ to new life, and that guilt does not have the final word. Similarly, spiritual friendship and our own practice of renarrating our life in light of the Gospel are key to overcoming shame and seeing ourselves as God sees us, as beloved children of God.

The ideas about baptism, confession, and forgiveness seem fairly straightforward and familiar, though self-narration and spiritual friendship raise some questions for me. In particular, I wonder how, concretely, one is supposed to renarrate one's life so as not to "leave the rest of one's identity behind… but to see grace falling over one's entire life" (115-116). Hector gives an example from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila*, in which the title character renarrates shameful aspects of her life "in light of a more capacious sense of eternity, and so, to see her shame as covered by grace" (116); but I am unsure what such renarration actually amounts to. And while I see how having friends who reiterate God's forgiveness and love for us can help us internalize these foundational truths, it would be nice to have more details about what the *spiritual discipline* of friendship looks like.

Chapters 4 ("Being Reoriented), 5 ("Being in the World"), and 6 ("Being with Others") describe sets of practices that orient one toward God, transform one's way of being in the world, and transform one's being with others, respectively. In Chapter 1 Hector lists the practices that orient one toward God as imitation, corporate singing, commensality, friendship, and working to become like-minded with others, though in Chapter Four, the list is not as clear cut. He begins with the image of Christians as away from home, exiles in a foreign land, and then describes a number of "homemaking practices" designed to help us experience a fit between ourselves and our true home, to anchor our identity in our homeland and resist the formative power of the world, and to experience respite—a "taste of home" even on our sojourn (124). These practices all involve church participation, including singing, communal eating, and sabbath-keeping. "Imitation" involves both emulation, "which is the sort of imitation that is triggered by admiration" (135) and mimicry, which is "the way that we more or less automatically imitate or mirror the people around us" (139). Finally, the section of Chapter 4 called "Becoming One" contains a discussion of the metaphysics of plural agency, and notes that imitation as well as spiritual friendship and forgiveness can all contribute to like-mindedness—so there does not seem to be a new practice introduced in this section.

Chapter 5 offers an account of how petitionary prayer shapes us by changing our relation to earthly goods. When we articulate our concerns to God, we sometimes come to see that these are inappropriate, and so revise or renounce our petitions. For the rest, petitionary prayer is a practice of entrusting our concerns to God so that if they are not answered, we are left in a state of trust—either "trustful resignation" which seems to mean that any disappointment we feel is tempered by the conviction that God will provide, or "trustful defiance," which involves both trust in God and the recognition that things are not as they are supposed to be. While I remain confused about the trust issue first discussed in Chapter 2, Hector's explication of how petitionary prayer fosters the perception that all our provisions are a gift is helpful and suggests further spiritual practices to cultivate gratitude, such as blessings (164).

Hector next introduces the practice of "attention" discussed by Simone Weil; he writes, "to practice attention is to loosen the grip of our preconceptions in order to see a particular object in all its particularity" (168). Here he offers the most concrete suggestions for implementing a practice, with examples of how the photographer Yasumi Toyoda assigns herself projects such as to photograph instances of a particular color, or "seams and joints, or corners, or corrugation," so that "she notices more and more of the richness and texture of her surroundings" (170). I find this practice both fascinating and amenable to the work of philosophers who are already trained to slow down and consider whether things are really so ordinary or obvious as we take them to be. Hector explains how the practice of attention inspires the attitude of wonder at the glory of God manifest in the world.

Following Robert Adams, Hector next proposes the practice of vocation as a solution to the problem of how we are to choose what goods to care for in a world of infinite goodness (179). He suggests that discerning one's vocation requires attending to the fit between one's values and aptitudes (181), and that vocation "can transform the leading of one's life into an act of devotion" (177). This all seems right but this section was also a bit short on details regarding what a spiritual discipline related to this conception of vocation would look like. Chapter 5 ends with a discussion of two practices useful in the face of suffering: laughter and lament. Laughter helps us "resist the would-be-finality of our circumstances" while lament "can help us hold on and hold ourselves together" in the midst of suffering. Chapter 6 concludes the discussion of spiritual disciplines with a focus on those that cultivate love toward others, where "love" is understood as caring about others for their own sake, seeking their good, and appreciating what is good about them. Hector notes that acts of beneficence toward those we do not yet care about can motivate first-personal investment in them. He also describes the practice of "looking for the image of God" in others, which relates to the practice of attention, since it involves seeing past stereotypes to the particularity of the individual before us. Proleptic vision—seeing how people are *meant* to reflect God's goodness, and Kierkegaard's "mitigating explanation," are also discussed. The chapter ends with further discussion of forgiveness as well as three kinds of Christian activism: prophetic critique, noncooperation with evil, and "embodying an alternative" (240).

Chapter 7, called "The End," is not a conclusion, but a presentation of Hector's eschatological vision in response to arguments of Bernard Williams and Samuel Scheffler that eternal life would be boring or without value for us. I was suspicious that this chapter would involve more speculation unconnected with the interpretation of Christianity as a way of life. But ultimately I found the discussion helpful for answering a question that might plague someone practicing Christianity: what, after all, is the point of all these spiritual disciplines? N. T. Wright (2010) has argued that what happens in the "here and now" matters insofar as it builds our characters, because it is our characters that last into the eschaton. So, perhaps, I run because doing so builds perseverance, which is a virtue that will remain with me. One might wonder, though, what perseverance will be needed for in heaven—and anyway, is the character trait produced really the only important thing about running? Hector provides (for me) a satisfying answer to these questions in his vision of eternity: "in eternal life, each person loves God in their own way, where this includes caring about certain goods in order to receive them as God's gifts, to put one's characteristic stamp on them, and thus to present them as a sort of offering to God and others; this is a kind of vocation, even in eternal life" (254). Hector gives examples of people's heavenly vocations evolving and changing, inspiring others' vocations, and being experienced as "newly fulfilling" as the experiencers have grown and changed. We can see in this picture how not only the character traits that our current activities produce in us, but the activities themselves, matter in eternal life. A runner may, for instance, continue to enjoy running in God's good creation and also continue to develop her athletic abilities. This makes the discernment of our vocation, and the practices that orient us toward the natural world, other people, and God, of prime importance to our eternal lives, because we may expect to continue these vocations and practices in the hereafter.

Hector articulates in his introduction two aims of the book: "to offer a clear, understandable interpretation of Christianity" and "to highlight some of the wisdom that Christianity, so interpreted, has to offer about how to conduct one's life well…" (ix). In the final pages of Chapter 7, he points to the ways that the spiritual disciplines he has outlined can be recognized even by those outside the faith as worth practicing. For instance, "If it is good to become the sort of person who cares about others, who is benevolent toward them, and who appreciates that which is good about them, then there is obviously something good about practices that help us become such persons" (259). Moreover, Hector argues that the attractiveness of his eschatological vision is further reason "to see wisdom in Christianity as a way of life"; for, he reasons, "if I am trying to decide whether to adopt a training regimen… then I might consider whether that regimen is reliably connected to certain results: if it is, and if those are results that I want, then I have good reason to adopt the regimen" (262). Of course, we do not know if the training regimen he has outlined in the book is indeed reliably connected to eternal life—this is a matter of faith! But insofar as the regimen produces results in the here and now in the form of fruits of the Spirit, and insofar as this vision of the eschaton makes sense and seems at least possible and so something we can hope for, I would say Hector has accomplished his purpose of explicating Christianity as a tradition of practical wisdom.

References

Wright, N.T. 2010. *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. HarperOne.