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# Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology, by David S. Cunningham

John E. Thiel

Fairfield University, [jethiel@fairfield.edu](mailto:jethiel@fairfield.edu)

## Peer Reviewed

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S. is quite convinced, of course, that with the doctrine of Aquinas in the West and Gregory of Nyssa in the East one has clear proof that God is by nature infinite. Yet the review of the history of the doctrine provided by S. allows one likewise to see that what one means by infinity is context-dependent. As S. himself admits (543–46), for someone like Anaximander who gives priority to becoming over being, an intrinsically indeterminate reality like *to apeiron* is more perfect than the determinate entities to which it gives rise. Similarly, like Duns Scotus one may question Aquinas's assumption that matter or potency limits form or act. Since form represents an objective intelligibility, it is apparent that form determines the matter into which it is received. But it is not apparent (at least to me) why potency, which is in itself purely indeterminate, should necessarily limit act, unless by potency one implicitly means a concrete subject of existence which can exercise the perfection in question. But this gives rise to the further question whether God as the Supreme Subject of existence is limited by the presence and activity of still other created subjects of existence. These questions notwithstanding, S.'s splendid work on the history of the doctrine of infinity provides excellent resource material for reopening the question of infinity.

*Xavier University, Cincinnati*

JOSEPH A. BRACKEN, S.J.

**FAITHFUL PERSUASION: IN AID OF A RHETORIC OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY.**  
By David S. Cunningham. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991. Pp. xviii + 312. \$29.95.

Dissatisfaction with the direction of modern theology has led many theologians to propose postmodern alternatives to the theological task. Some of the new approaches, e.g. deconstructive theologies, do not count faithfulness to the tradition of Christian belief a virtue. Cunningham's book, the recipient of the 1990 Bross Prize, sketches a postmodern approach that does so by proposing the method and practice of rhetoric as a way of configuring the theological task. Understanding theology as persuasive argument, C. contends, heightens an appreciation for the embeddedness of rhetorical interests and strategies in all forms of the linguistic construction that theology is, particularly in the ontologies and hermeneutical theories that classical and modern theologies respectively have employed to promote their interpretive aims.

C. invokes both ancient and contemporary rhetorical theory to stress the extent to which conviction is claimed, recognized, criticized, and reformulated in the argumentative relations that ensue between rhetor, audience, and speech. Theology, like all forms of argument, is misunderstood if seen as the valid deduction of formal logic. Rather,

theology is a thoroughly rhetorical enterprise, an intricate web of persuasive efforts molded by Christian belief and practice. C. examines the richness of this contextuality by devoting three central chapters to the theological reception of Aristotle's triadic division of rhetoric into *pathos*, "which is concerned with the audience," *ethos*, "which is concerned with the character of the speaker," and *logos*, "which deals with the arguments themselves" (18).

Encouraged by Enlightenment assumptions about the universality of explanation, modern theology, C. observes, has lost sight of the particularity of its audience, as well as the importance of that particularity for what, how, and why theological arguments are made at all. Modern—or better, postmodern—theology can be responsible to its task only by recognizing that the audience is a rhetorical construct that shapes the theological arguments by which it is in turn shaped. Persuasion to Christian faithfulness occurs within the mutuality of relations between theologian and constructed audience. For C., the personal character of the theologian is an important influence brought to bear on the persuasiveness of argumentation and the conviction it yields. He commends to theologians the rhetorical standard of cogency reached by expanded modes of reasoning that stress the value of ad hoc inference from ecclesially shared commitment. To this end, he proposes that the traditional sources of theology—Scripture, tradition, and experience (including reason)—are best understood as the vocabulary of theology's language of persuasion, to be invoked in any number of ways when they serve the purpose of cogency.

This book is an important contribution to theological method and one that deserves a wide reading. C. has explored a dimension of theology that has been almost entirely overlooked in the history of its disciplinary self-understanding, and he offers imaginative suggestions for the implementation of the approach he commends. Theologians would do well to heed his calls for understanding exegesis as persuasive argument and for the need to reassess the history of theology from a rhetorical point of view. In these respects his work is nothing less than ground-breaking.

I would offer two criticisms. First, C. does little more than acknowledge the negative side of the rhetorical approach. It is not at all clear, e.g., how a rhetorical theology would be capable of self-criticism if its primary commitment is to persuasion. In his efforts to persuade the reader of the value of a rhetorical approach, C. does not consider how cogent persuasion embedded in the Christian tradition itself (and not just in the character or arguments of particular theologians) has advanced false or even evil views (e.g. anti-Semitism and misogynism). To understand theology exclusively as persuasive argument might fos-

ter an uncritical regard for one's own assumptions and the assumptions of one's audience. Second, while a traditionalist rhetoric permeates C.'s book, it is never exactly clear what "faithful persuasion" is faithful to. C. would say that theology's rhetorical proclamation is faithful to God's rhetorical activity in revelation, the word faithful to the Word. And yet, C.'s proposal that Scripture, tradition, and experience be regarded as the ad-hoc vocabulary of, rather than as sources for, theology threatens their authority as revelational modes for encountering God's Word. It is helpful to consider theological authority in terms of persuasion, but treating authority exclusively in such terms raises questions about the object of and context for Christian faithfulness. These criticisms, however, intend to identify points in need of clarification and should not detract from a book that ventures and offers much.

*Fairfield University*

JOHN E. THIEL

**MYSTIC UNION: AN ESSAY IN THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MYSTICISM.** By Nelson Pike. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1992. Pp. xiv + 224. \$29.95.

Since the rise of logical positivism and linguistic analysis earlier this century, mysticism and religious experience, especially in their Christian forms, have often fared badly at the hands of English-speaking philosophers. However, new philosophical studies, more carefully rooted in the primary texts of the Christian mystical tradition, have now begun to appear. Among them, Pike here offers one of the most important and fully developed defenses of the possibility of phenomenologically theistic mystical states.

In Part 1, Pike attempts to "provide phenomenological analyses of several states of union as . . . described and explained in the classical primary literature of the Christian mystical tradition" (xiii), not only "to achieve clarity for its own sake," but also "to provide some hedge against the possibility that the subtleties of the Christian mystical literature might go undiscovered and thus unappreciated in the philosophical discussion of mysticism now in progress" (170). And so he examines in detail: three classic contemplative states (prayer of quiet, prayer of full union, and rapture) described by St. Teresa; some variants on such states, including the occasional blossoming of full union or rapture into the experience of "union without distinction"; the traditional doctrine of "spiritual senses"; and the "bridal" and "nursing" imagery found in many of the primary texts. He quotes from Augustine, Bernard, Angela of Foligno, Julian of Norwich, Suso, Teresa, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, and many others. One may quibble with