

*The Weight of Love: Affect, Ecstasy, and Union in the Theology of Bonaventure.* By Robert Glenn Davis. New York: Fordham University, 2017. Pp. vii + 195. \$28

At its widest horizon, I read this book as a significant contribution to a more robust doctrine of Incarnation (a term not included in the index), fueled by the postmodern drive to reclaim the body, the affections and the cosmos in our understanding of the “spiritual.” It is a fine example of turning to the tradition with new perspectives and questions to glean insight and grounding for contemporary interests. In the Introduction, Davis surveys recent scholarship on *affectus*, noting his debt to Michelle Karnes, Amy Hollywood, Mark Jordon, and, more remotely, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Acknowledging the importance of *affectus* to contemporary scholarly treatments of medieval “lay piety, vernacular spirituality and women’s religiosity” (6–7), D. offers a fresh, capacious approach to the topic.

In particular, D. suggests a complex connection in the work of thirteenth-century Franciscan, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, between the medieval fascination with imaginative, affective meditation, on the one hand, and intellectual reflection on *affectus* on the other. D. proposes that Bonaventure’s affective, interior, ecstatic journey into God “coincides with the brute, inanimate body” (127). As the soul progresses toward mystical union, “its activity is increasingly conceived in physical terms; spiritual progress is, ultimately, the becoming-body of the soul” devoid of intellect and will (11). Referents for this body are the real, historical bodies of Jesus Christ crucified and his imitator, Francis of Assisi. The path of the soul described in the *Itinerarium* is out of itself and into the body of Christ. D. reminds us that no genuine spirituality can ever “leave behind nor rise above Jesus’ humanity” (133). The intellect plays a key role throughout, but in the end, mind is abandoned in ecstatic union. D.’s theses and arguments resemble an intricate, complex mosaic made up of tesserae too numerous to treat adequately in this brief space. I can but highlight a few salient considerations in this excellent work.

D. frames his argument with two visual images. The first is that of a dead body, an exemplar in medieval Franciscan piety of a yielding, pliable, obedient soul. The second is the image from Isaiah 6:2 of the six-winged seraph, attested as the agent of Francis of Assisi’s stigmata and a key to the structure of Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. Then D. traces the subtle, but significant changes Bonaventure introduced into an inherited affective tradition going back to the eleventh century prayers and meditations of Anselm of Canterbury and John of Fécamp.

D. examines the complex image of the seraph, the link Bonaventure used to connect the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius with the life of Francis. D. traces the historical roots of these medieval discussions—the preaching of Gregory the Great; the ninth century translation of Hilduin; Bernard of Clairvaux’s commentary on the Song of Songs; Hugh of St. Victor; and Bonaventure’s teachers, Alexander of Hales and Odo Rigaud. Especially influential was Thomas Gallus, whose thought on *synderesis* Bonaventure sought to integrate into the broader scholarly conversation (53).

Chapters 3 and 4 examine motion and union; hierarchy in the *Itinerarium*; and the exemplary bodies of the *Legenda maior*—suggesting that these two texts be read in tandem, each shedding interpretive light and meaning on the other. To establish his

thesis that this affective movement is embodied, D. explores the medieval understanding of the metaphor of “weight” from Aristotle’s metaphysics. Weight involves an embodied motion that takes place in the cosmos as well as in individual souls. Both matter and spirit possess *appetitus*—“the love of God is as natural to the soul as downward or upward motion is to stones and flames” (76). The peace Bonaventure seeks encompasses all of reality. As unifying fire, love infuses a similar dynamic toward consummation of the soul’s interior journey and the exterior movement of the cosmos.

Echoing Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure presents the reflective content of the *Itinerarium* and the *Legenda maior* as means to effect holiness in the reader through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Through a detailed analysis of the meaning of “hierarchy,” D. posits that in the *Itinerarium*, “a single conception of hierarchy underlies Bonaventure’s philosophical speculation and his devotional program” (91). The result of this process of “hierarchization” is a union that involves “the ecstatic erasure of the boundary between nature and grace, interior and exterior, action and passion” (88). The life of Francis (body and soul) is offered by Bonaventure as an exemplum “of what a soul carried along by desire toward God looks like” (117). It renders desire visible (124).

*The Weight of Love* uncovers in a new key the contours of Bonaventure’s hermeneutic of a coincidence of opposites. Loving and knowing; desire and vision; practice and theory; possession and dispossession; cataphatic and apophatic; body and spirit; visible and secret; “other” and immanent; moving and being moved; cross and resurrection—all are held together in creative tension. Bonaventure sees this paradoxical logic in the mystical death, or “becoming body” of the soul at the cross, and in the suffering body of Francis that is transformed at death into a resurrected body (129). In focusing on these tensions, D. corrects a consensus about Bonaventure that emphasizes only harmony and integration. D. attributes to the intractability of affect itself “the distinction between the cognitive and the affective [that] pushes, pulls and twists (yet never fully breaks) Bonaventure’s theological synthesis” (49).

This treatment of Bonaventure’s thought on the mystical journey is careful, thorough and nuanced. D. examines a wide range of texts, and builds his case by making creative connections from disparate aspects of Bonaventure’s thought. Scholars of theology, spirituality and mysticism, philosophy, history and literary studies will be rewarded by a close reading of the text. This strength, however, is also a weakness—the number and range of sources and the complexity of argumentation can be dizzying. On the one hand, *The Weight of Love* might be compared to poetry inasmuch as it packs numerous provocative insights into a compact space. But the style mirrors the dense, exhaustive, detailed approach of the Scholastic theology/philosophy it studies, not the soaring expression, the tender emotion, or the outpouring of tears associated with affective spirituality. This is a small quibble for a book that is thoughtful and erudite—a welcome contribution to Bonaventure studies, the Franciscan tradition, and the role of *affectus* in medieval spirituality. It will provoke new questions and discussions for a long time to come.

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