

Csaba Németh, »Quasi aurora consurgens«.
The Victorine Theological Anthropology and Its
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Casba Németh has written a large and important book that encompasses not just Victorine thought about the capacity of the soul to know God and its transformation in the 13th century. In recent decades there has been no shortage of books about individual Victorine thinkers, reflecting rediscovery of their importance. This revival has involved a major programme of publication of critical editions of Victorine texts, both in Germany and France. Németh stands apart from a tendency to focus on individual thinkers by providing an overview in three parts.

In the first, he surveys the foundations of theological anthropology that had a great influence on the 12th century, principally of Augustine, but also of Gregory the Great. In the second we are offered a series of impressively thorough chapters about individual thinkers, namely Hugh of Saint-Victor, Richard of Saint-Victor, and Achard and Walter of Saint-Victor, with a concluding overview of the Victorine model and its influence in the later 12th century. The third part examines Victorine influence on a wide range of subsequent thinkers, mostly from the first half of the 13th century, but going as far as both Bonaventure and Aquinas, each of whom would draw on this tradition.

In a short review, it is impossible to do full justice to the scope of this monograph. Perhaps its most valuable contribution is to focus not on slippery notions of spirituality and mysticism, but on doctrine or teaching about the capacity of the soul to know God. One of Németh's core themes is that while the Victorine thinkers owed much to both Augustine and Gregory, they offer a vision of human potentiality that is actually quite distinct from that of the Latin Fathers.

In the opening section, he explains that for Augustine, God was always invisible in this life because of the price of sin and that although our re-formation begins with being baptized in Christ, we only see God in a future life at the resurrection. Augustine sees the ecstatic experience of Saint Paul as an exception rather than as a paradigm of human potential. Gregory argues that we cannot see God in this life at all, although we might have limited vision of his light in this life. While Németh does not mention the contribution of Dionysius the Areopagite in this initial section, his significance in offering an alternative perspective focusing on divine unknowability does emerge in the discussions of Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor, even if his influence was still limited compared to what would happen in the 13th century.



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Not the least interesting part of Németh's reading of Hugh of Saint-Victor is his demonstration that while often called a second Augustine, Hugh in fact develops teaching about image and likeness providing cognitive and affective knowledge of God, effectively integrating this into understanding of the sacraments of faith as integral to the process of restoration to divine life. Without denying Augustinian teaching about original sin and our need for grace, Hugh draws on the Celestial Hierarchy to argue that symbols operate both symbolically and anagogically, but in a way that can be felt, although not expressed. Hugh sees the created world as representing one that is invisible, through which we can learn through contemplation about God's attributes. Németh's presentation of Richard shows how he builds on Hugh's doctrinal framework. Rather than claim (as Nakamura and Coulter have done) that Richard gives priority to affectivity, Németh emphasizes that Richard extends Hugh's teaching about the equal importance to both dimensions of human potential. His particular contribution is to develop scriptural *similitudines* as analogies of human experience.

Perhaps more attention could have been given to Richard's interaction with Bernard of Clairvaux, who certainly does highlight the role of affectivity. As Bernard McGinn has so clearly demonstrated the Cistercian played an important role in developing a theological anthropology, while giving this the label of mysticism or monastic theology. Németh's way of reading Richard as a teacher rather than as a mystic offers a helpful corrective, as well as offering a larger way of appreciating his achievement. Drawing attention to the conceptual framework by which Richard speaks of contemplation as »seeing the truth« provides a way of appreciating the distinction between *speculatio* or cognition through representations (such as provided by Scripture) and *contemplatio*, or unmediated cognition. Compared to Hugh and Richard, Achard and Walter of Saint-Victor are much less well-known.

Németh nonetheless demonstrates their fidelity to the teaching of Hugh and Richard. Whether Achard is dependent on Richard or rather helped shape his teaching, not an issue picked up by Németh, can be debated, Walter, less original (and we could add more polemical) in his perspectives, clearly demonstrates a hardening of boundaries between Victorine and so-called scholastic perspectives by the later 12th century.

Admirers of Peter Lombard may not agree with Németh's comment (p. 281) that in his »Sentences« he was »not so much an original thinker as a teacher providing his student with material for classroom work«. In terms of theological anthropology, Németh clearly shows, however, that Lombard does over-simplify Hugh's teaching about the soul by virtue of his fidelity to what Augustine had to say about Adam before the fall. In the Victorine perspective, the focus is not so much on prelapsarian Adam (as it was for Augustine), but in the capacity of the created human being to know God.



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One slightly awkward phrase that Németh uses on occasion is that of monastic theology as distinct from what he calls the school theology of the late 12th century (as distinct from what he calls the scholastic theology of the 13th and later centuries). Such labels are confusing. To describe Victorine as pursuing monastic theology can be debated, as the label tends to impose uniformity on an immensely wide range of thinkers. Such terminology is not central to this monograph, however.

In the third part of this volume, »Rejection, Transformation, Oblivion«, Németh considers how Victorine optimism about the capacity of the soul to know God was confronted by alternative perspectives, shaped by a tradition of commenting on Peter Lombard's exposition of Paul's account of his rapture. He makes the intriguing comment, however, that 13th-century thinkers tended to avoid speaking so much about the impediment of the body, surely echoing a broader shift away from traditional Augustinian perspectives and increased awareness of the importance of senses in the process of cognition.

His major argument is that scholastic analysis was simply incompatible with that of Victorine teaching. Paradoxically, however, the writings of Hugh and Richard continued to be copied, which might suggest that differences between Victorine and scholastic mind-sets were not quite as sharp as here implied. The fact that Alexander of Hales so often introduces Victorine authors, as also Bernard of Clairvaux, into his commentary on the »Sentences« itself signals that these boundaries are not so sharply defined. Perhaps a little more attention might have been given to the debate in the 13th century about the authorship and value of the »De spiritu et anima«, a text of Cistercian provenance, dependent on Isaac of Stella as well as other sources.

Of great value, however, is Németh's demonstration of how Bonaventure effectively rewrites Hugh of Saint-Victor, in his teaching about the development of the powers of the soul. Given the vast importance of Bonaventure influencing subsequently religious writing as a whole in the medieval period, it seems difficult to argue that Victorine thought disappeared. Rather, as Németh explains, Victorine teaching was reinterpreted in what are commonly called »spiritual writings«. Németh is to be congratulated on producing a monograph of impressive scale, that cannot be ignored in any subsequent study of Victorine thought, either in its formation or influence in the medieval period.



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