

BOOK REVIEW

Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 276 pp. ISBN 0521870038 (hbk), \$96.00.

For all that academics talk about interdisciplinary research, rarely is it so successfully performed as in Kristen Johnson's *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*. Whether Johnson is a theologian with an unusual grasp of political theory, or a political scientist well-versed in theology would be hard to discern from the book (the latter, as it happens). Her project works not only because she moves between such different disciplines so easily, but because she is not the least apologetic in pairing Christian and secular writers. Not many authors would dare juxtapose footnotes to Rawls, Rorty, and Ephesians. Johnson dares, and it works.

The topic of her book is easy to state; her conclusions less so. She argues that Augustine provides a sounder basis for understanding difference and diversity in political community than do either of two camps: proponents of toleration and proponents of the politics of difference. First, she examines the trajectory from Locke to Rawls, which responds to diversity by privatizing it and thereby eliminating it as a public voice. This has been much critiqued, including by many secular writers (Sandel, Galston), both because it elides difference rather than respects it and because it depends upon a confidence in Enlightenment rationalism that is now suspect. Second, she examines proponents of the politics of difference, which she associates with writers such as Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly, with doses of Rorty and Fish thrown in. These writers reverse the Rawlsian course, seeing difference as a fact of political life. While Johnson appears more sympathetic to the politics of difference than toleration, she ultimately finds them both inadequate compared to her own Augustinian account of difference.

It is the turn to Augustine that makes this book as good as it is, precisely because the move is so implausible. Without even the least hint of understatement, she writes, Augustine provides "a vastly different picture of the nature of reality and human being than... political liberals and post-Nietzscheans" (176). Drawing on a variety of his works, but especially *City of God*, she shows that he sees reality as (the aesthetic element is important) *beautifully ordered*. This order values difference; it does not hide it behind a veil of ignorance. But Augustine realizes that order is set at a distance from us and certainly at a distance from our political communities: "the Heavenly City is the only place in which difference can be fully recognized, respected, and embraced." This both raises and lowers our expectations. The way beyond the liberals and the post-Nietzscheans "can be found, according to Augustine, but not in our current political society or any earthly city" (175).

As noted, Johnson's conclusions are harder to state than her topic. Her readings of Rawls, Rorty, and so on (in the first half of the book) display a brilliant clarity; we are shown exactly where each departs from the last and how the various voices fit together as a whole. These sections deserve to be endlessly photocopied by political science instructors (whether secular or religious) to introduce students to the nuances of the Rawls and post-Rawls debates. The book's second half is very different. It is neither systematic nor analytical, and perhaps a little too conversational. For all the problems with Rawls and Locke, one at least knows their conclusions. To be fair, Johnson did not set out to produce a theory of justice but, as in the title of her final chapter, to move "towards a theology of public conversation." This conversation must include a place for Augustine; indeed, we ought to invite him to guide our conversation.

But I suspect that she ultimately wants more for the Bishop of Hippo than a seat at the table and, if so, the chapters on Augustine may prove either too much or too little. Either her Augustinian conversation turns liberal theory so thoroughly upside-down that it would make Locke's head spin or, alternatively, it is not so far from Locke after all—a difference of degree rather than kind. Let us consider the former first. She writes, "The very language of the individual, standing alone, conceivable apart from social existence and a common *summum bonum* is foreign to Augustine's understanding of the way humanity ought to be" (178). The order defined by this *summum bonum* is not one of homogeneity, but a "community between differentiated persons" (180). The possible problem is that *that* difference—difference under order—is nothing remotely like difference as understood by liberalism. Is not the rejection of a common greatest good the founding insight of liberalism? As Locke writes (in one of the rare times he is as pithy as Augustine):

Every mind has a different relish, as well as the palate and you will as fruitlessly endeavor to delight all men with riches or glory, as you would to satisfy all men's hunger with cheese or lobsters; which though very agreeable and delicious to some, are to others extremely nauseous and offensive. Hence it was, I think, that the philosophers of old did in vain enquire whether the *summum bonum* consisted in riches, or bodily delights, or virtue, or contemplation. They might have as reasonably disputed whether the best relish were to be found in apples, plums, or nuts, and have divided themselves into sects upon it (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.21.56).

But for Augustine, there is a best "relish" and if some find it "nauseous and offensive" then so much the worse for their palates. Only with training in virtue can we come to love what is lovely. If we downplay his willingness to say this, we only confirm how much more we are Locke's children's than Augustine's. This is not evidence against Augustine's position, but it is a reminder of how radical the position will seem to many that Johnson hopes to include in her Augustinian conversation. It is hard to know whether this is a conversation that could ever get off the ground.

Yet on the other hand, perhaps Johnson is using Augustine to say something radical. Even if the heavenly city knows and loves the greatest good, the earthly

city aims only at the lower good of earthly peace. This is a good higher than Rawls's view of justice as fairness, but still far short of the justice of the city of God. If so, then perhaps Johnson belongs together with the many others who have pressed for a "thickening" of Rawlsian justice by means of this or that admixture: Michael Sandel's "liberal republicanism" or William Galston's "liberalism without neutrality" or Richard Dagger's "republican liberalism."

So does Johnson's Augustine ultimately prove, as I have asked, too much or too little? If it is the former, if she offers us an Augustine who rejects Locke's "relish pluralism" out of hand, then she is not so far from Stanley Hauerwas. Indeed, she quotes Hauerwas with a fair measure of approval (though not uncritically). If, on the other hand, she offers a less radical Augustine—one who presses the earthly city to a higher justice without naively expecting it to become the heavenly city—then she is not so far from Reinhold Niebuhr, someone who is oddly and unfortunately absent from these pages. This might demonstrate a problem with the book, but then again, it may show its strength. Caught between Hauerwas and Niebuhr is not at all a bad place to be.

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