

BOOK REVIEWS

Virginia BURRUS, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019

Ancient Christian Ecopoetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things is an erudite study consecrated to the theology of the holy things in the late ancient Christianity. Written by an eminent scholar, namely Virginia Burrus, this book is a fascinating and welcome contribution to the field of late Christianity. The volume begins with an introductory within Virginia Burrus seeks to explore the potential and constructive dialog between current ecological thought and ancient Christianity. By situating key monastic insights in the context of ecological theory, it aims to advance a better understanding of Christian practices.

Its thesis is that late ancient monastic piety can be understood as a “contemplative ecology”, so that its book situates itself in the trajectory of the relationship between theology and ecology. From this perspective, Virginia Burrus presents a provocative thesis that should encourage scholars to rethink their readings of late monastic literature.

The book is divided into three major chapters. Chapter one (“Beginning Again with Khora”) opens with a contextualization of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* that emerges in late antiquity. In this sense, the starting point is the Platon’s *Khora*, more exactly the Khoric resonances of the Christian and Jewish Cosmology. In this chapter Virginia Burrus describes the ancient cosmology (Plato’s *Khora* from *Timaeus*, Philo of Alexandria, Origen, *On First Principles* and *Against Celsus*, Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation of the Word* and Augustin of Hippo, *On Genesis*) as a fundamental feature of the late cosmotheology. Strictly speaking, in ancient Jewish and Christian doctrine God appears as maker and father of the cosmos.

Chapter 2 (“Queering Creation: Hagiography Without Humans”) covers the topic of the queer in the late ancient saints’ *Lives*. More exactly, the central thesis of this chapter holds that late Christian hagiography

can be understood as possible narrative resources for understanding in both a queer and a queerly ecological mode. The point of departure for this chapter is the *Life of Plotinus*. According to Virginia Burrus, Plotin developed deeply the meanings of the queerly ecological, meanings can be tracked across the Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism.

The final part of this chapter argues that the late ascetic hagiography (The *Lives* of Antony, Paul, and Mary of Egypt) can be understood as a kind of queerly ecology. Moreover, the author points out the relationship between late ascetic hagiography and queer human. As Virginia Burrus has remarked, “this might well be the defining characteristic of hagiography – its interest in transgressing the limits of humanity...They are human and then some, we might say; by exceeding normal limits, they may no longer seem to be human at all.” (pp. 106-107).

As we know, the saint is constantly in the process of spiritual self-transformation – of becoming-other – whether human or angel, so that the late ascetic hagiography promotes an explicit deconstruction of the human-nonhuman binary. In this context, Virginia Burrus reiterates the most known examples of the holy desfigurations of Syncretica and the Symeon Stylite as a hybrid of human. Briefly, the holy monks are more and less than human. From this perspective, Christian hagiography “evokes a sensitivity to beauty that is not lavish but austere and withholding, not gentle but jagged and harsh, not scaled to the human but extending and enduring beyond human experience or understanding” (p. 141). Therefore, monastic hagiography undermines any understanding of natural order of the human because the behaviour of monks is unnatural.

In chapter 3 (“Things and Practices: Arts of Coexistence”) Virginia Burrus develops a deeply theology of the holy things. Much part of this chapter is devoted to the Christian things (relics, reliquary, bone, wood, blood, oil, wax, metal, glass and so on) from a nonanthropocentric perspective. The author starting the major premise that in Christianity “tactile *things* are imbued with holy power”, makes a few remarks that we render below: firstly, ancient Christians participate in “a world of active materials” because “in the making of holy things, human craft colludes with the ongoing flow of divine creativity, as the vital power of materiality traverses the boundaries between human and nonhuman, creature and god” (p. 163). Secondly, late ancient Christians through their connection with these holy things open themselves to a wider world of lively, tactile, and irreducibly relational *things*. From this perspective, “a nonhuman thing may be encountered as a supplement for a human, while a human may

equally be encountered as a supplement for a nonhuman” (p. 164).

The next pages concentrate particularly on the “feeling things” (relics and icons), “situating things” (architecture, landscape, and cosmos), “speaking things” (rhetoric and performativity in Basil’s *Hexameron*), and “desiring things” (contemplation, creation, and God in Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius).

In the final chapter (“Things and Practices: Arts of Coexistence”), Virginia Burrus’ analyses, which are in dialogue with contemporary discussions of the ecology, are both persuasive and full of insight. This chapter is a fascinating analysis of the relationship between holy things and social practice of late ancient Christian piety. In this context, Virginia Burrus argues that the one of the most important ways in which late Christians cultivate relations with nonhuman things is through the cult of saints. As we know, the holy power and presence of a saint might be transferred to a holy thing (fragment of wood or rock, icon, and so on), so that the saint is transformed into thing. This point is well expressed by Virginia Burrus: “the body-and-spirit of the saint mingles with other materials, and new hybrids emerge. These hybrid things in turn create new relationships with other humans, as well as nonhumans, across many generations in some cases. Such relationships activate and engage the bodily senses and emotions of the humans involved and of the nonhuman things too, through acts of mutual care, shared vulnerability, and riveting love” (p. 213).

What is particularly new in this study, however, is the focus on the understanding of holy things in late ancient Christianity. Briefly, this book represents a comprehensive study of the way in which the line between the living and the nonliving begins to dissolve. In this sense, each chapter tells a kind of story: things are not static but, in conjunction with human agency, as in the case of a reliquary, its become dynamic.

This is an excellent book, which is indispensable for scholars of asceticism in the late Christianity and well worth the attention of a broader audience. Certainly, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things* equally valuable for research and teaching will be a go-to reference for theologians everywhere. Virginia Burrus’ book is a well-documented book, and the index will be particularly helpful to dig deeper in the text. Also, an extensive bibliography makes this book especially useful for scholars.

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