

inspire contemporary lecturers of theology to prepare a just as brave but contemporary and updated work on the same topic.

EFREM JINDRÁČEK OP

*Pontifical University of St Thomas, Rome*

**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FOR A SECULAR AGE: DESMOND AND THE QUEST FOR GOD** by Ryan G. Duns SJ, *University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2020, pp. xxvi + 357, \$70.00, hbk*

Lamenting the divorce between ‘academic’ and ‘spiritual’ theology has become commonplace, as has citing Karl Rahner’s prophetic counsel regarding the necessity of a catholicized mysticism for the Church’s survival. Heeding these summonses, though, by proffering a genuinely novel formative and informative text intending the reader’s transformative performance is a noteworthy achievement, and such is precisely what Ryan G. Duns SJ, accomplishes in *Spiritual Exercises for a Secular Age: Desmond and the Quest for God*. Employing Charles Taylor’s narrative ‘mapping’ of secular modernity, Duns leads the reader—or, better, the exercitant—to the receding shores of Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’. In a creative and constructive reading of Irish philosopher William Desmond’s metaxological thought as a spiritual exercise, Duns counterintuitively suggests that the Sea of Faith’s ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ may be but a prelude to a reinvigorated perception of and attunement to being’s great chorus. Duns details the means for cultivating such an attunement in this fecund intermingling of two burgeoning discourses—one pertaining to the recalibration of Christian spirituality for a secular context, and the other to unearthing the immense theological potential subterranean yet ever-operative in Desmond’s thought.

First, an introductory note on William Desmond is in order. Desmond’s distinctive contribution to contemporary philosophical discourse is his development of ‘metaxology’ (his neologism), particularly as expounded in a trilogy authored between 1995 and 2008. For Desmond (as for Duns), metaxology is a performative discourse which words (*logos*) the between (*metaxu*) in which we always already find ourselves and within which our thinking inexorably takes shape. As both a discourse and a disposition, metaxology serves an architectonic function: it coordinates, calibrates, and chastens the respective competencies and totalizing pretensions of univocal, equivocal, and dialectical thought. We are beings in (the) between and in (the) flux, and metaxological metaphysics—with *meta* meaning both ‘amidst’ and ‘above’—engages in an open-ended dialogue with (because

inextricably amongst) the order of being. The coincidence of finite being's constitutive non-necessity with its irreducible, astonishing, and overdeterminate *that-it-is-ness* bespeaks of a primal givenness from and a porosity to a 'more'—a Transcendent 'Other', an Agapeic Origin—whose call amidst being opens us beyond being.

In *Spiritual Exercises for a Secular Age*, Duns stretches and theologically supplements this discourse as he directs 'metaxology's mystagogical impulse' to its ecclesiological and Christological *telos* in a way Desmond refrains from (but, given the Foreword, assents to) doing (p.234). Like Desmond, Duns is attentive to the complex existential-aesthetic space of encounter *between* reader and writer, and the book conducts a performative poetic and musical ensemble through its plurivocity of genres, allusions, metaphors, neologisms, and etymologically de-and-re-constructed familiar terms made strange (e.g., 'idiocy' and 'aesthetic'). He fashions Taylor as a 'cartographer' to which Desmond stands in relation as an 'excavator' or 'archaeologist': Taylor charts the breadth of secular modernity's spiritual terrain while Desmond offers pilgrims tools to unearth the living water through the cracks of this arid landscape. His chief contention is that, when not simply *understood* but *undertaken* as a spiritual exercise (*askesis*), metaxological metaphysics is *mystagogical*: it capacitates a mystical transformation of perception through the exposition of the 'crack' in everything—the porosity between immanence and transcendence, the natural and the supernatural, the finite and the infinite—so that one can see and therefore be otherwise.

The book proceeds by Duns ably undertaking a succession of daunting endeavours: recapitulating Taylor's *A Secular Age*'s complex, circuitous, and protracted narrative and multivalent mode of argumentation (Chapter 1); *précising* the key insights and themes of Desmond's thought, afterwards proposing that metaxology is uniquely suited to facilitate a rapprochement between metaphysics and theology, one capable of warding off the spectre of ontotheology's rationalized domestication of divinity and conceptual idolatry (Chapter 2); proposing and elaborating metaxological philosophy's potential as a transformative spiritual exercise (Chapter 3); proffering a series of 'indirections' *towards* (rather than univocal, apodictic proofs *of*) God through, for example, reconfiguring Aquinas's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 'ways' and Anselm's ontological argument (Chapter 4); and offering constructive proposals for metaxology's contributions to theological method while Christologically specifying its inchoately mystical *telos* (Chapter 5). All the while, the distinctively Christian facets of this metaxological, metaphysical, and mystical vision are slowly introduced, unfolded, and integrated as Duns negotiates the (admittedly porous) space 'between' philosophy and theology.

The reader can be forgiven for expecting the work to bear more structural similarities with or references to Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. They make precious few appearances, none of which involves substantive engagement. As detailed in Chapter 3, the 'spiritual exercises' to which the title refers are the ancient philosophical *askeses* detailed and

holistically recontextualized by Pierre Hadot in his landmark *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Duns proposes metaxological philosophy as a way of life replete with exercises of its own. As an exercise in metaphysical *ressourcement*, metaxology undertakes a return to the *existential* sources of metaphysical thought: astonishment and wonder at the gratuitous happening of being in all its *haecceity*, contingency, porosity, and incarnate *that-ness*. Astonished and awakened to that in which we are implicated and by which we are mysteriously summoned to self-transcendence, we are newly attuned to what always already was. This attunement is born of metaxological contemplative practice, chief among which is the ‘return to zero’: a purgative exercise wherein we meditatively experience the all-encompassing *nihil* (nothingness) of a thoroughgoing nihilism. On the far side, we are born again and reconstituted with ‘posthumous mind’, able to ‘taste and feel and hear and see and smell the elemental goodness of the *to be*, of *our* being, and we behold the *metaxu* anew’ (p.161). Though never denominated as such, these might be termed ‘metaxological senses’ that are analogous to the mystical tradition’s ‘spiritual senses’. Rightly calibrated, they engender a disposition of joyful ‘ontological vigilance’ (p.72). Chapter 4 treats the various ‘indirections’ to God which this newfound watchfulness enables, and Chapter 5 Christianly specifies it as ‘epiphanic attunement’ (Duns’s innovation)—attunement to everyday epiphanies and disclosures of the divine through the ‘crack in everything’; attunement to the epiphanic (and ultimately theophanic) nature of being; attunement to the inbreaking of the revelatory ‘godsend’. For Duns, the resurrection is the paradigmatically paradigm-altering godsend of the kenotically sent God. In the crucified and risen Christ, an irruptive divine *inbreaking* proceeds to *break down* extant modes of perception, capacitating a graced *breakthrough* unto right perception (for which Duns uses, ‘orthoesthesia’). He masterfully deploys Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation’ to illustrate this point. It is worth noting a tension in the text between the godsend’s ‘irruptive suddenness’ (described as something ‘Barth would laud’, p.243) and the otherwise seamless (‘porous’) transition from the metaxological to the Christian theological. He characterizes metaxological exercises as ultimately *mystagogical*, as ‘akin to a philosophical prayer arising in response to natural religious wonder’ (p.125), as the means to enable the existential appropriation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (pp.195-198), and as natural-theological ‘preambles of faith (*preambula fidei*)’ (p.229) wherein ‘the *logos* of metaxological philosophy may be recognized as the *Logos* of revealed theology’ (p.285). In which case, one questions how ‘irruptive’ Christian revelation can be between constitutionally porous disciplines.

Relatedly, the disciplinary *metaxu* Duns describes wherein philosophy and theology ‘are separated not by an insuperable wall but a porous threshold’ remains nebulous (p.145). Before Duns commences explicitly Christian theological reflection (something from which Desmond prescinds), the result of metaxological *aksezes* (exercises) is nonetheless rather

‘Christian’: an astonished awakening to an Agapeic Creator God who is the source, sustainer, and gratuitous giver of being, who is the guarantor of its intelligibility, and whose prevenient summons from and to Transcendence capacitates our responsive questioning-turned-quest. In which case, Duns’s work might be characterized as a theologically oriented and consummated metaphysical meditation aimed at the spiritual-existential appropriation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. For, as Duns himself notes, ‘*creatio ex nihilo* is not an arid statement of fact but a condensed exclamation of wonder at being at all...it is a passage, a mystagogical opening, enticing us into a rekindled sense of awe’ (p.198).

Duns was roused into action by what he terms Charles Taylor’s ‘Narnian insight’: just as the children in Lewis’s *Chronicles* cannot enter Narnia through the same door a second time, so too have pathways to transcendence accessible in ages past become obscured or obstructed in our secular age (p.38). By the end of his formative, informative, and performative text, Duns hopes the reader comes to see that, metaxologically perceived, being itself is this door to Narnia, a door constitutively cracked open and through which the Agapeic Other calls to us. Through undertaking these spiritual exercises, Duns hopes that they be graced with the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

ANTHONY J. SCORDINO

*University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA*

**ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY** by Émile Perreau-Saussine, translated by Nathan J. Pinkoski, *University of Notre Dame Press*, 2022, pp. 228, \$40.00, hbk

Originally published in 2005, Anglophone audiences have eagerly awaited Pinkoski’s translation of Perreau-Saussine’s (1972-2010) prize-winning biography of Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-). Termed specifically *An Intellectual Biography*, Perreau-Saussine’s text competently negotiates the complex tapestry of MacIntyre’s critical engagement with the intellectual components of liberalism and individualism, antiliberalism and communitarianism, while relating this discussion to his varied personal history of association with the British Communist party in the 1940s, the New Left in the 1950s, Trotskyism in the 1960s, before converting to Catholicism in 1983 where ‘he ended up a disciple of Thomas Aquinas’ (p.10).

Pinkoski’s translation follows an initial English translation by Perreau-Saussine of a section of the book and it is understood that a full working translation was a task considered by the author before his death in