

Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology, Joseph Stephen O'Leary, University of Notre Dame Press, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-268-03740-6), xviii + 401 pp., pb \$49

Some authors become well known, justly or not, for the volume of monographs they may produce over a decades-long career. Others, in contrast, find notoriety with a few exceptional monographs that manifest slow and reflective study, a leisurely approach that privileges quality over quantity of output. Joseph O'Leary's publishing career fits the latter paradigm. His most recent work is the third volume of a trilogy (it began with the widely-read *Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in the Christian Tradition*, 1985). But the many decades of theological reflection that produced *Conventional and Ultimate Truth* shows up in the maturity of the book's subtlety, nuance, scope, and overall argument, one that systematic theologians, philosophers of religion, comparative theologians, students of biblical hermeneutics, scholars of Buddhism, and patristics scholars could learn from.

In *Conventional and Ultimate Truth* O'Leary often speaks as a masterful virtuoso, with a minimalist approach when it comes to footnotes. This makes for an eminently readable text, in which O'Leary's voice remains front and center. The book, no doubt a harvest of decades of scholarship, is a joy to read, stimulating and hard to put down. In complete control of his source material and of his overarching thesis, O'Leary advances a narrative exquisite in detail while never letting the 'big picture' recede from view. In fact, the overall thesis is maintained and emphasized throughout, so much so that its urgency is felt in the mind of the reader from beginning to end. The selective engagements with primary texts, when they do appear, are demonstratively illuminating and always constructive. Whether he is describing and applying Buddhist principles about conventionality to Christian dogma or reading Rahner and Jean-Luc Marion (very) critically or retrieving the apophaticism of Gregory of Nyssa, O'Leary crafts each chapter with synthetic brilliance.

The thesis of the book is at once profound and straightforward: fundamentalism or dogmatism is a pathology of theological judgment that can be cured by hermeneutical awareness. What is hermeneutical awareness as O'Leary understands the expression? It intends to highlight the ineluctably conventional nature of all theological claims, that is, the imperfect and provisional nature of 'every historical structuration of religious vision' (p. 17), for to do otherwise is to succumb to dogmatism, to an obsession with orthodoxy, a 'kind of bureaucratism' (p. 20) of discourse itself.

Theology and indeed 'fundamental theology' belong to the human process of making provisional statements about reality, whether it be the everyday reality of sense objects or ultimate reality itself. And dogma itself, the category of 'Christian doctrine', never may be

dismissed as antiquated, for it serves a purpose. Sitting down in the school of Christian dogma ought not lead to dogmatism. Take Chalcedon, the gold standard for Christology. Its logic of 'two natures joined in one person' may correct, O'Leary suggests, those who indulge in speculative distortions, but the Chalcedonian formula itself may too become a speculative fetish if we are not on guard against its metaphysical solace. Language of Christian dogma is pragmatic; for once put in context, the Chalcedonian creed used the technical vocabulary of the day so that it may express information found in the biblical witness. O'Leary will ask the obvious question, how can the word 'nature' be used in the same way or equivalently when it refers both to humanity and God? (p. 356). The creed, in O'Leary's framework, therefore cannot subdue Christ into a synthetic theory. The issue here, then, is not so much about the content of Christology as it is more about how to use Christian sources that are centuries old. O'Leary describes the discipline of fundamental theology as that style of inquiry that focuses more on method and less on the content of Christianity's form of theological judgment (p. 48). Fundamental theology teaches us how to handle or use dogma thoughtfully: theology is fundamentally hermeneutical. Here we turn to O'Leary's treatment of how the conventional modes of discourse that make up theology relate to its claims to ultimacy.

Before assessing the indiscretions of so many theologians who write under the banner of postmodern theology and who labor in the Spirit of Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida to overcome onto-theology and metaphysics, O'Leary first undertakes an analysis of Buddhism's twofold truth about reality and how it may appeal to hermeneutical theologians (which we should apply to everyone since for O'Leary judgment as such is a human, and thus, interpretive task). Madhyamak Buddhism argues that there are two truths, the ultimate and the conventional. The latter is the basis for access to the former realm of truth. In other words, 'the lighting up of ultimate reality' is connected to 'the skilful deployment of a given conventional set up' (p. 49).

The question I immediately ask is how can we know ultimate reality at all if we are embedded forever in a patchwork of conventional and pragmatic realities? O'Leary appears to pass over the question 'how do we really know or have access to the thing itself, to ultimate reality?' He asserts flatly that the ultimate truth we seek represents that which all may recognize as unsurpassable, incomparably real, supreme, and undeniable. The conventional forms of life of religion may serve as vehicles designed to communicate this ultimate truth, thus 'ultimacy comes into view in function of the conventional setup that stages its emergence, so that if it transcends the connections, it does so in a way that is intimately related to them' (p. 54). A convention, O'Leary suggests strongly, is no mere subjective idiosyncrasy. Conventions point to what O'Leary calls the 'irreducible bedrock of reality' (p. 54).

This statement of O'Leary's formulates the closest thing I can call a response to the epistemic question of how we may know or have access to the ultimate. The ultimate, as a paradigm of reality that is most 'real' and 'bedrock', is asserted as in irreducible realm of religious reality, which reflects a kind of theological realism concerning truth. That is, truth must rest on a free-standing bedrock or foundation that is independent of the mind, language, or culture. O'Leary insists, of course, that we only know the divine bedrock reality as a reality that is mediated in a conventional set of skills or a particular language game (pp. 141–43). But how so? How can we know ultimate reality is truly ultimate if it we are never granted access to it apart from any given time-bound language? The most obvious answer is that we do not know any such thing O'Leary names the ultimate. We do not know or have access to or have an intuition about this bedrock reality, for if we did, then we would be permitted to transcend our contingent reality of being-in-the-world and apprehend a timeless truth from another world (as Michel Henry or the Gnostics advise us to do).

Hence all that may have in our possession, I would argue, is a set of conventional pointers that we 'hope' in fact point to the divine and thereby adjust our vision toward the divine, however ultimate the divine may be said to be by that given tradition on which we rely (Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc.). Revelation, therefore, serves as this conventional pointer or map. But O'Leary begins to trigger in my reading of hermeneutics a feeling that he is overreaching just where he should not be. For him revelation is a 'subtle, transcendental notion', that at the same time is a 'mere pointer' to ultimacy (p. 73). Further, revelation is not so much conservative as it is subversive, in that revelation is functional and open to development and fresh hermeneutical interventions. I agree. But, how, then, may we reconcile the pragmatic nature of revelation with its transcendental status? Again, O'Leary supposes we can achieve a god's eye point of view and declare that revelation is transcendental, in touch with the ultimate. Religious language, he argues suggestively, may hold within its logic a hidden force through which the ultimate may be invoked (p. 74). What is this hidden force and how do you know it is there, I would query? Christianity, for example, talks of the mystery of redemption and the force of the Spirit, but we cannot know for certain we are in touch with it, not least that it is a bedrock reality, if we do not have direct access to it (which O'Leary says we do not in the first few chapters). I would argue we can place O'Leary's fundamental theology within the parameters of transcendental Thomism given voice by Lonergan, Marcelhal, and Rahner, all of whom he rejects on the very grounds that they claim we know too much about ultimate reality (p. 143ff).

What of the mystics? Does religious experience as such put one in touch directly with the divine, with the ultimate? I would expect O'Leary to say that language shapes this and every other kind of experience all the way

down. Once more, I would expect him to remind us that hermeneutics informs fundamental theology at the most basic level. But he refrains from such a train of thought. Instead he says that religious experience is somewhat immediate but not purely immediate, for that would reduce the experience to an 'impossible abstraction' (p. 179). Religious experiences can be therefore 'autonomous in respect to the context of their manifestation' (p. 179). We can be in touch with the noumena entirely apart from the phenomena? If O'Leary thinks we can 'get in touch' directly with the divine via experience, then it follows one may ask what phenomenological character does experience reveals itself to have? Is the divine a special kind of object posited in consciousness? Do I undergo God as the taste of the infinite, in a realm locatable underneath conscious reflection and language? How do you discriminate between veridical experiences and delusions? What of the long tradition of non-experience and emptiness in the Christian tradition? Fuller rejoinders to these questions and others would be welcome in O'Leary's book.

O'Leary invokes the famous religious experiences Augustine undergoes at Milan in *Confessions* Book 7 and at Cassiciacum in Book 9, in order to stipulate the manner of givenness of a religious experience that also yields to and becomes controlled by metaphysical speculation about the nature of the divine those experiences puts Augustine in touch with. Is Augustine's saturating experience of the numinous a perennial 'that which is' (*Confessions* vii. 23) or a product conditioned by his biblical formation and reading of Plotinus (p. 207)? The close reading of Augustine's experience of 'Johannine ultimacy' (p. 215) on the topic carried out by O'Leary is well-versed and fascinating, and it unfurls richly over several pages. For O'Leary the conventional themes of contemplative ascent and intellectual inquiry that seek out the ultimate are like antennae for picking up the signal of the ultimate. As a result, the integration of theory and experience here remains holistic and thereby finally indivisible. O'Leary will not deny that Augustine shows a mastery of conventional techniques of contemplation to seek the ultimate, but somehow it may lead to the 'immediacy of the breakthrough to ultimacy' (p. 215). But I ask once more: how is such an experience immediate if it is mediated in the form of conventional skills and vocabularies?

In this ambitious book, O'Leary closes with chapters on inter-religious dialogue and on the uses and functions of dogma in Christian theology. A vast array of figures and debates is covered and all to the benefit of the reader. Having lived in Japan for over 30 years, O'Leary's lived exchange with the otherness of Buddhism and Shintoism informs his reading of the 'parity of religions'. No longer is inter-religious dialogue a sub-discipline to be studied by a few scholars and doctoral candidates but should rather constitute the very atmosphere in which theology must breathe. All religious traditions, one could argue, combat facile relativism in that they make claims that ring with ultimacy (p. 310). This must be respected by

all parties involved. Attending critically to certain Vatican documents, O'Leary will ask: how can one locate the 'Truth', ultimate as it may be, in one tradition to the exclusion of others? Justified from a Christian point of view, O'Leary helpfully reminds us that the parity of religions is divinely based, for it is impossible to deny that God is always 'granting his light and grace to those who open up to God, so that no religion can remain barren' (p. 312). A Christology from below enables the self-disclosure of God to all modes of discourse and experience; ultimacy figures in the very life narrative of each of us, for God is not a 'thought' or 'substance' reified in proposition dogma, but an apophatic mystery by which contemplation is nourished and from which lives can live more freely and agapically.

The skillful means of contextual judgment, learned from Buddhism, appears frequently in the book. Even if fundamental theology aims 'not to construct a Christology but to explore the conditions under which doctrinal construction labors today', (p. 368), it nevertheless holds onto the biblical witness as indispensable. The chief contribution to fundamental theology lay in this interchange between Buddhist critiques of metaphysical substantialism and Christian *intellectus* inform by the Judeo-Christian scriptural narrative. While Christian theology will always remain 'theological', and focused on the person of Christ, the benefit Christians may enjoy from an encounter with Buddhism is both intellectual and spiritual. We are indebted to O'Leary that Christians can now add the Buddhist critique of God-language to their list of therapeutic techniques of purgation (in addition to apophatic and Carmelite self-critiques). While God, Christ, the Church, scripture, and even Augustine's accounts of spiritual vision may be loci of ultimacy, they remain vehicles of that which we never may master but only attest to in the conventions of our particular vantage point.

Joseph Rivera
Dublin City University



Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism, Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter, Bloomsbury, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-567-24328-7), x + 328 pp., hb £24.99

In this book, Perdue and Carter offer a comprehensive survey of imperial periods of control over Judea/Israel. While such reviews of Ancient Israel have been done in the past, however, this work reads history