

Review of Ann W. Astell (ed.), *Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

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The title of this volume, which is “grammatically ambiguous and deliberately so,” captures well its grounding intention: to save a fear that is itself saving (1). The pervading uncertainty and disquiet of the present time could make it seem distinctly inapt for salvaging fear from its detractors. For many, at least, the burden of proof will reside with the initiators of such an effort. To add to several long-established concerns about the role of fear in religious life—such as the inhibiting of relationships based on love or the fomenting of irrational, even violent, behaviors—fear seems to surface most prominently today as an emotion to be exploited by demagogic and divisive political leadership. The sixteen essays of this collection proffer no clear consensus on the salutary aspects of fear, and their diverse and divergent perspectives will confirm and challenge every reader’s intuitions. Yet, when taken together, their range gives rise to a certain harmony, eliciting the sense that there is a kind of fear that is redemptive and worthy of being saved.

The volume also manifests the hand of a seasoned editor. Ann W. Astell has not only collected articles from several preeminent voices in diverse areas of theology, but their pieces are skilfully arranged and balanced. While organized principally by historical period, from the biblical and patristic era into the twenty-first century, the essays are juxtaposed to evoke a sense of dialectical conversation. The section on modern theology, for instance, features a beautiful essay from Julia Lamm on the common theological logic that Julian of Norwich and Schleiermacher derive from the principle that God is love, thereby casting out every fear while engendering a reverent, *softe dreade*. But this essay is followed by a striking comparison of Newman and Kierkegaard, both of whom, Cyril O’Regan recollects, distinctly commended fear and trembling before God not only as integral to biblical faith but as a crucial guard against rationalist manipulation.



A similarly conversational dialectic courses through a string of essays situated in the twentieth century. The God who brings a fearful justice for the oppressed has been both a consolation and an impetus for liberation for countless victims, Pieter G.R. de Villiers recollects, citing the sermons of Desmond Tutu against Apartheid and the hope given to Eastern Europeans resisting communist rule. The same thread reappears in a stirring essay from Todd Walatka on social sin and liberation theology, whose exegesis of Jon Sobrino and Oscar Romero concludes that it is the God who “hears the cry of the poor and oppressed” who provides the true basis for Christian love as well as fear (374). Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, Walatka’s reflections are coupled with a probing exposition by Anstell herself of the apparition narratives from Fatima, in which an awe-filled fear before supernaturality is conjoined with the imperative to avoid the hellishness that war and oppression bring to earth. In the same historical period the pen of Léon Bloy was exposing the hellishness that forms the “underside of bourgeoisie modernity,” elucidates Brenna Moore, such that a Christian faith of mere consolation proves unavailing if it cannot confront the fearful nightmare that so many victims of modern life—child laborers, exiles, “the insane, the poor, prostitutes”—endure (298).

Perhaps the most familiar distinction in theological tradition regarding the fear of God hails, as might be expected, from Augustine, who contrasted a servile fear that “dreads divine punishment” with a pure, or chaste, fear that is compatible with love (76). Such was the principal tool he used to work through the paradox of a biblical text that alternately lauds the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom (Ps 110:10; Prov 1:7, 9:10) yet declares there to be “no fear in love,” for “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Even as servile fear has its usefulness for fallen beginners, only chaste fear ultimately remains as love approaches perfection. In a sweeping yet penetrating survey of several Augustinian texts, John Sehorn illustrates how Augustine ultimately integrated the diverse aspects of this distinction in one christological movement; in the kenosis of the Incarnation and the agony of the passion, Christ assumes and transfigures servile fear so as to render it a pathway to humility and love. Christ thereby “threads the needle” such that what begins as a servile fear finishes only with what is purely knit into love (93-95).

The patristic and medieval sections also contain rewarding historical analyses from Donna R. Hawk-Reinhard on Cyril of Jerusalem, Catherine Rose Cavadini on the *timor Dei* in Cistercian commentaries on the Song of Songs, and Joseph Wawrykow on the fear of Christ in Aquinas. Ephraim Radner sketches an intriguing existential and christological spirituality in his exegesis of Pascal, in whose *Pensées* the fear and love of Christ conjoin paradoxically to touch and comprehend both our quotidian anxieties and joys. There is also a delightful essay by Wendy M. Wright on the love of God that dispels and purifies fear in Francis de Sales, whose spiritual counsel on working through inner anxiety toward love is echoed later in a concluding case study from Anstell on spiritual direction.

The abiding questions that recur throughout this book are strikingly similar to those Augustine originally tackled: How are the types of fear to be distinguished? Which of its aspects are truly worth preserving? How are they to be integrated with love? Comprehensive as the volume may be, it inevitably has many lacunae, even within its singular focus on Christian spirituality. With some exceptions, such as a brief essay by Ralph Keen on the wrath of God in reformed theology, the collection leans Catholic. There is little engagement with other disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, and the hard sciences, not to mention postmodern and critical thought. This is not a book in which to look for an analytic study of religious fear in contemporary perspective or even systematic theological development. But as a broad and balanced collection of focused historical theological essays, it fulfils what it promises, proffering a splendid resource for research and reflection on saving fear in the Christian spiritual tradition.