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Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages by
Michelle Karnes (review)

Kevin Hughes

The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, Volume 79, Number 1,
January 2015, pp. 166-169 (Review)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2015.0027>

THE THOMIST®		
A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA		
ARTICLES	REVIEWS	BOOK REVIEW
166-169	170-171	172-173
Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages by Michelle Karnes	Review by Kevin Hughes	Review by Kevin Hughes
174-175	176-177	178-179
180-181	182-183	184-185
186-187	188-189	190-191
192-193	194-195	196-197
198-199	200-201	202-203
204-205	206-207	208-209
210-211	212-213	214-215
216-217	218-219	220-221
222-223	224-225	226-227
228-229	230-231	232-233
234-235	236-237	238-239
240-241	242-243	244-245
246-247	248-249	250-251
252-253	254-255	256-257
258-259	260-261	262-263
264-265	266-267	268-269
270-271	272-273	274-275
276-277	278-279	280-281
282-283	284-285	286-287
288-289	290-291	292-293
294-295	296-297	298-299
300-301	302-303	304-305
306-307	308-309	310-311
312-313	314-315	316-317
318-319	320-321	322-323
324-325	326-327	328-329
330-331	332-333	334-335
336-337	338-339	340-341
342-343	344-345	346-347
348-349	350-351	352-353
354-355	356-357	358-359
360-361	362-363	364-365
366-367	368-369	370-371
372-373	374-375	376-377
378-379	380-381	382-383
384-385	386-387	388-389
390-391	392-393	394-395
396-397	398-399	400-401
402-403	404-405	406-407
408-409	410-411	412-413
414-415	416-417	418-419
420-421	422-423	424-425
426-427	428-429	430-431
432-433	434-435	436-437
438-439	440-441	442-443
444-445	446-447	448-449
450-451	452-453	454-455
456-457	458-459	460-461
462-463	464-465	466-467
468-469	470-471	472-473
474-475	476-477	478-479
480-481	482-483	484-485
486-487	488-489	490-491
492-493	494-495	496-497
498-499	500-501	502-503
504-505	506-507	508-509
510-511	512-513	514-515
516-517	518-519	520-521
522-523	524-525	526-527
528-529	530-531	532-533
534-535	536-537	538-539
540-541	542-543	544-545
546-547	548-549	550-551
552-553	554-555	556-557
558-559	560-561	562-563
564-565	566-567	568-569
570-571	572-573	574-575
576-577	578-579	580-581
582-583	584-585	586-587
588-589	590-591	592-593
594-595	596-597	598-599
600-601	602-603	604-605
606-607	608-609	610-611
612-613	614-615	616-617
618-619	620-621	622-623
624-625	626-627	628-629
630-631	632-633	634-635
636-637	638-639	640-641
642-643	644-645	646-647
648-649	650-651	652-653
654-655	656-657	658-659
660-661	662-663	664-665
666-667	668-669	670-671
672-673	674-675	676-677
678-679	680-681	682-683
684-685	686-687	688-689
690-691	692-693	694-695
696-697	698-699	700-701
702-703	704-705	706-707
708-709	710-711	712-713
714-715	716-717	718-719
720-721	722-723	724-725
726-727	728-729	730-731
732-733	734-735	736-737
738-739	740-741	742-743
744-745	746-747	748-749
750-751	752-753	754-755
756-757	758-759	760-761
762-763	764-765	766-767
768-769	770-771	772-773
774-775	776-777	778-779
780-781	782-783	784-785
786-787	788-789	790-791
792-793	794-795	796-797
798-799	800-801	802-803
804-805	806-807	808-809
810-811	812-813	814-815
816-817	818-819	820-821
822-823	824-825	826-827
828-829	830-831	832-833
834-835	836-837	838-839
840-841	842-843	844-845
846-847	848-849	850-851
852-853	854-855	856-857
858-859	860-861	862-863
864-865	866-867	868-869
870-871	872-873	874-875
876-877	878-879	880-881
882-883	884-885	886-887
888-889	890-891	892-893
894-895	896-897	898-899
900-901	902-903	904-905
906-907	908-909	910-911
912-913	914-915	916-917
918-919	920-921	922-923
924-925	926-927	928-929
930-931	932-933	934-935
936-937	938-939	940-941
942-943	944-945	946-947
948-949	950-951	952-953
954-955	956-957	958-959
960-961	962-963	964-965
966-967	968-969	970-971
972-973	974-975	976-977
978-979	980-981	982-983
984-985	986-987	988-989
990-991	992-993	994-995
996-997	998-999	1000-1001

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/635988/summary>

historical-critical studies end. Given what the experts say was the wisdom of Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas, what does their wisdom mean for us as human beings in our world? The reader is treated to an inquiry into being that covers truth, knowledge, love, desire, affective knowing, person, *imago Dei*, likeness, perfection, participation, God, providence, evil, shame, guilt, morality, art, and glory. In more than a few of the essays, the topics at hand are discussed in light of an opening statement about the current state of Western culture and prevailing opinions. Many of the essays are thus a kind of metaphysical commentary on the days of our life here below. These are sapiential essays that treat being, not only *sub specie aeternitatis*, but also as we live out our being clothed in circumstances.

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Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages. BY MICHELLE KARNES. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 268. \$ 50.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-226-42531-3.

Any visitor to the annual International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan or to the Medieval Academy of America annual conference will be aware that medieval studies is by no means one thing. Rare is the scholar who can (or wants to) converse with both the Scholastic philosophers on the one hand and the Langland scholars on the other. Michelle Karnes is one of those rare scholars, as this ambitious and well-crafted volume demonstrates. This study begins with Aristotle's theory of cognition, journeys through St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, and *Piers Plowman*, and ends with the Middle English translations of the pseudo-Bonaventurean *Meditationes de vita Christi*. Such an interdisciplinary scope is admirable and marks clear and hopeful promise for a growing dialogue in medieval studies between philosophers and theologians on the one hand and literary critics on the other.

Karnes, a literary critic herself, aims to demonstrate how medieval cognitive theory, specifically the Bonaventuran strong understanding of the role of the imagination, influenced and infused devotional practices such as meditations on the life of Christ. She argues that, under such influence, medieval writers conceived of the imaginative meditation as a path "from sensory knowledge of [Christ's] humanity to spiritual knowledge of his divinity" (20). Her case is built fundamentally around two central chapters on

the thought of Bonaventure. The first chapter thus serves as a kind of prequel, tracing the history of the imagination, primarily in the Aristotelian tradition, from the Philosopher himself, through Avicenna and Averroës, up through Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. For Karnes, the Aristotelian tradition develops a sophisticated account of the necessity of the imagination (*phantasia*) to bridge the gap between sensory knowledge of material things and immaterial intellectual understanding. Imagination prepares and assembles sensory input into a form from which the intellect can abstract intelligible species. Thomas Aquinas extends this tradition and expands imagination's power by arguing that imagination's phantasms conduce not only to the knowledge of an object's essence but also to knowledge of its particularity. With this claim, the stage is set for the second chapter's "Bonaventurian Synthesis."

Refreshingly, Karnes makes no effort to puff up a case for Bonaventure by contrasting him with Aquinas. Instead, she suggests that Bonaventure shares Aquinas's fundamental Aristotelian conceptions in much of his own theory. Bonaventure's account is distinct in the way he synthesizes Augustine's cognitive theory with this tradition. Karnes's own account of Augustine and Bonaventure follows the mainstream account of the Augustinian "illumination theory" developed so carefully by Stephen Marrone's two-volume history, *The Light of Thy Countenance* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), with no apparent knowledge of the critical revisionist account offered by Lydia Schumacher (*Divine Illumination* [Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011]), which was published at the same time as Karnes's book. The distinctive feature of Bonaventure's synthesis was to understand that the presence of Christ in all human knowing as its exemplary cause and regulating and motivating principle creates the foundations for a "cognitive mysticism," an ascent to the knowledge of God in and through human cognition. Christ, the "species" of the Father as generated exemplar, acts upon the human imagination as the intelligible species is abstracted from the phantasm. The presence of the light of Christ is present in every act of human knowing. Karnes then argues that this "cognitive mysticism" is not simply posited in Bonaventure's Scholastic writings on cognition, but put into play in his meditative spiritual writings, too.

Thus follows a chapter that considers Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* and *Lignum vitae* as exemplary cases of just the sort of "cognitive mysticism" theorized in other places. Karnes's reading of the *Itinerarium* shares real affinities with the cognitive realism of contemporary Bonaventure scholars such as Gregory LaNave, with a few important differences, which I will discuss below. Her reading of the *Lignum vitae* is crucial to her project as a whole, as it argues that Bonaventure enriches a young but vibrant tradition of meditations on Christ through a deeper synthetic Augustinian/Aristotelian account of the cognitive role of imagination. For Bonaventure, in the imagination, "Christ acts on the mind's image of himself in order to lead the cognizing meditant from his humanity to his divinity" (139). Karnes's

“cognitive mysticism” essentially boils down to this: “spiritual union begins with the mind’s proper use of its own images” (140).

In the next three chapters, Karnes traces the trajectory of the Bonaventurean synthesis in the pseudo-Bonaventurean *Meditationes vitae Christi*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and other later texts, into the Middle English translations of the fourteenth century. Karnes’s case in these chapters is not so much that the later authors inherit all the ins and outs of Bonaventure’s Scholastic cognition theory, but rather that they inherit a deep Bonaventurean confidence in the fundamental capacity of the imagination to lead the meditator from Christ’s humanity to his divinity. When early modern authors decry their medieval predecessors as fancifully subject to a vivid imagination, Karnes will agree that they were deeply concerned with the imagination. Yet the medieval imagination was not the antirational enthusiasm feared by the early moderns, but a rich inheritance of confidence in the integral place of imagination in cognition and reasoning itself.

Karnes is a fresh and stimulating reader of texts. Her reading of Bonaventure both suffers and gains from this fresh perspective. On the one hand, Karnes brings new life to Bonaventure’s illumination theory—no longer a last-ditch effort to preserve an Augustinian tradition in the face of an encroaching Aristotelianism, or, as Schumacher would have it, a Franciscan apologetic invention that distorts Augustine. Instead, Karnes discovers a deeply Aristotelian and Augustinian integral vision, both theoretically sophisticated and practically applicable, of natural human knowledge’s path to supernatural knowledge of God through meditation. On the other hand, Karnes’s fresh eyes for the text make no reference to the ways Bonaventure strives not only to connect but also to distinguish natural human knowing from knowledge of God as such. Karnes avoids exploring Bonaventure’s own term “contuition” as a name for the kind of knowing one has of God in any act of knowing. Similarly, she avoids the language of “spiritual senses,” a notion much studied in Bonaventure and a crucial means by which Bonaventure both establishes parallels between natural knowledge and knowledge of God and distinguishes between them; spiritual senses are *like* corporal senses, but they are not the same. Karnes seems to suggest a kind of seamless flow from the constructive work of meditation on the life of Christ to the unitive mystical knowledge of God. Bonaventure, I think, resists this too-easy flow.

This criticism should not discourage the potential reader. Indeed, as I say above, I applaud Michelle Karnes’s engagement with the Scholastic tradition, too often “where angels fear to tread.” Her summaries of the Aristotelian tradition are sound and compelling, and her awareness of Bonaventure’s deep Aristotelianism is a welcome reminder to us all of the shared patrimony of Bonaventure and Aquinas, two great doctors of the Church. I hope readers of this journal respond in kind and begin to explore the medieval literary legacy.

And on this journey into a foreign land, Karnes's later chapters can be a fascinating guide.

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The Assault on Priesthood: A Biblical and Theological Rejoinder. By LAWRENCE B. PORTER. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2012. Pp. 422. \$46.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-61097-292-5.

As rich as the teaching of the Second Vatican Council was, there are points of emphasis and de-emphasis that continue to raise concern. Often the most important concepts are the most problematic. Take, for example, "communion," which, on the eve of his resignation, Pope Benedict XVI called *the* central concept of the council. Yet, in the same address to the Roman clergy, distinguishing between the "real council" and the "council of the media," Benedict lamented that the latter propagated a "political hermeneutic" according to which the liturgy was seen primarily as a "community activity" rather than an "act of faith."

Something similar happened to the concept of the priesthood. The council deepened our understanding of the ministerial aspect of the priesthood, but, in doing so, lightened the emphasis on its sacrificial nature. Furthermore, though it broadened the magisterial teaching on bishops and the laity, it gave less attention to elaborating a theology of the priesthood.

In *The Assault on Priesthood*, Lawrence Porter laments these conciliar de-emphases, and he is not alone. Avery Dulles and Joseph Ratzinger raised similar complaints, and John Henry Newman had foreseen the day when a shift in the theology of the priesthood would result in confusion over its essence. Porter tries to repair the damage by exploring a range of biblical passages that deal with the priesthood. He focuses on ten examples of the Levitical priesthood and on the priestly ministries of Jesus and Paul. Porter's method is both original and practical, relying on scriptural insights to formulate concrete applications to everyday ministry. His goal is not to put together a comprehensive theology of the priesthood but to survey the main concerns that have occupied the Church since Vatican II.

Thomas Aquinas does not play a major role in Porter's project, but he does appear frequently. A few preliminary remarks about Aquinas's theology of the priesthood are therefore in order. In his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, Aquinas lays what many deem the cornerstone of his theology of the