

Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2025

PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



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Review: Thomas P. Harmon, *The Universal Way of Salvation in the Thought of Augustine* (T&T Clark Studies in Ressourcement Catholic Theology and Culture) (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024). 248 pp. Hardcover, \$103.50; Ebook, \$82.80.

After Augustine's conversion and shortly before his mother's death, the *Confessions* contains a touching scene where Augustine and Monica share in a conversation that leads them both to jointly experience an intellectual and spiritual ascent towards transcendence. To the casual contemporary reader this may suggest something sentimental about the relationship between mother and son, but for the late-antique Platonic intellectuals Augustine had formerly represented, this scene captures a philosophical and political revolution. Thomas P. Harmon seeks to convey this revolution in his fine book, *The Universal Way of Salvation in the Thought of Augustine*. Building on the political philosophy of Leo Strauss and Pierre Manent and the Catholic Augustinianism of Fr. Ernest Fortin and Fr. James Schall, Thomas Harmon reads Augustine as engaged with the problem of a universal way of salvation (the phrase directly appears in *City of God* 10.32) from his earliest philosophical investigations through his magisterial *City of God* and *Confessions*. Through this theme Harmon captures the political consequences of the impasse of Greco-Roman thinking before the advent of Christianity as well as solution of Augustine's two-cities theology and political philosophy that he bequeathed to the Middle Ages.

The issue of a universal way of salvation—a path of salvation available to all and not to be confused with the accomplished salvation of all—was a fundamental problem in the terms of Platonic philosophy's division between the few and the many. Augustine and his Roman contemporaries were steeped in this philosophy from their classical education and rhetorical training, and this approach fit well with their privileged positions in society. According to Platonism, all of humanity is divided between those few capable of philosophy and who can therefore rationally pursue transcendent participation with the *nous* or divine intelligence, and the many who are not so capable. Accordingly, philosophy is strictly the esoteric property of the few with souls capable of its pursuit of wisdom and who could through it achieve

happiness and true freedom separate from the body. Thus, Plato governs his ideal city with philosopher-kings while everyone else is governed through noble lies and management whose esotericism they cannot penetrate. For the remaining many, all that would be possible according to this fundamental hierarchy of humanity was a life focused not on virtue and wisdom, but on the use and maintenance of their bodies. But based on the Platonic terms of this division, what can be common between the few and the many or what hope can there be for shared lives and shared government? From the inheritance of this ancient philosophy, the Romans struggled as their political structure changed with their increasing power and position in the world.

Friends of the Ciceronian Society who appreciate the importance of place, tradition, and things divine will understand the difficulty that the Romans faced after their transition from a territorially defined city with a particular culture and divinities to an empire that contained vast and diverse multitudes. While they sought to overcome what Eric Voegelin would call the “mortgage of the polis,” the Roman Empire—in its position as an “ecumenical empire”—could not make use of local divinities for unifying its empire but needed a universal religion for all people to serve as its civil religion. In the social turmoil of the third century, the Neoplatonism of Porphyry of Tyre gained imperial promoters as a solution to the problem of the few and the many by offering the possibility of a universal way of salvation that could provide order and peace. Even a religion that appears on its face as non-political in its pursuit of transcendence has political importance if it appeases the multitude. It is, therefore, because of Porphyry’s contemporary prominence and his opposition to Christianity that Augustine deals in detail with Porphyry and the “Platonists” in the *City of God* and argues against their false way of universal salvation.

According to Porphyry’s universal way of salvation, one can move beyond being an ignorant member of the multitude through purifying theurgic rituals and other aspects of traditional cultic practice whereby their lower parts are cleansed. From this first step in the universal way of salvation, there is then an opening for a middle step of neophyte philosophers and the final culminating stage of the mature philosopher as one separates from the pollution of the body. Once the lower soul has been purified in the first stage, the way is open for training the rational soul in continence and virtue which moves the beginning philosopher away from the attachments of the body. Once truly freed from the body, the

PATH TO SALVATION: A REVIEW OF *THE UNIVERSAL WAY OF SALVATION IN THE THOUGHT OF AUGUSTINE*

mature philosopher achieves salvation through the contemplative virtues focused on the *nous*.

This theory captivated public intellectuals, but from his own experience Augustine was keenly aware of the failure and frustration of this approach. Harmon's outline of the historical context helps the general reader understand why Augustine's *Confessions* does not culminate at his first conversion to the vocation of philosophy as a young man, and why he struggled so greatly with his will in attempting to pursue salvation through his own means and his own power. It is only through God's grace that Augustine was finally converted, and after he has abandoned his intellectual arrogance through Christianity that he is able to truly experience a transcendent ascent that Neoplatonism had sought—but this experience happens alongside his uneducated mother. Without understanding the context of Porphyry's philosophy, the reader misses the revolutionary character of Christianity's truly universal way of salvation. While Neoplatonism had paid lip-service to universality, the general populace at the lowest levels were only ever appeased and deluded through civil religion, and the only worthy aspect of humans at the higher levels of Neoplatonism is the human soul. The Christian way of salvation is truly universal because through the incarnation God becomes man, uniting transcendence and matter, and therefore salvation does not depend on humanity navigating their own way to divine transcendence or renouncing the materiality of their bodies.

Harmon structures this monograph in three parts and the text moves steadily through each part of his analysis and argument with clear and discrete steps. The first part provides the historical and philosophical context of Augustine's Roman predecessors and their development of the particular flavor of Porphyrian Neoplatonism as well as Augustine's engagement with the issue of a universal way of salvation in his early writings. The second part directly addresses Augustine's critique of Porphyry's soteriological proposals in the *City of God*, particularly Book 10, which makes for complicated reading without this context. The first two sections then allow Harmon to connect the insights of this critique of Porphyry's faulty universal way of salvation with Augustine's own difficult journey to conversation contained in the *Confessions*. Harmon, therefore handles two of Augustine's major works through his analysis of soteriology, and the focus on Augustine's dispute with Porphyry

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provides a fresh means of unpacking Augustine's classic works. *The Universal Way of Salvation in the Thought of Augustine* is a fine book for those working in Augustinian studies or late antique political philosophy interested in the connection of Augustine's theology and politics.

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