

Book Review

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Samuel Kimbriel

Friendship as Sacred Knowing: Overcoming Isolation

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What is the nature of authentic inquiry of human beings on all levels—personal, social, civic, and religious? How, and why, is the lived experience of friendship so central to such inquiry? These questions are at the heart of Samuel Kimbriel's work in *Friendship as Sacred Knowing: Overcoming Isolation*.

Kimbriel's objective in *Friendship as Sacred Knowing* is a retrieval of "metaphysics of friendship". He shows that a "cosmic" understanding of friendship is needed. That is an understanding that does not sacrifice either personal intimacy or social and civic engagement, but rather actualizes human engagement on every level. This objective is achieved in two ways. The first is a critical examination of Charles Taylor's discussions of the pre-modern "porous" self and the "disengaged" self of modern and contemporary thought. The second is an elucidation of selected philosophical and theological (with a focus on Christian) contributions to the study of friendship in ancient and medieval thought. In the spirit of much critical thought in the area of friendship studies today, the author asks: "do we allow pre-modern texts to challenge our stance"?

Taylor's accounts of the two anthropologies are both affirmed and challenged in this book. Kimbriel agrees that the disengaged stance reflects "the attempt to withdraw from direct and vulnerable connection to the external cosmos by establishing a realm of secure internality" that is not in touch with reality. He further agrees that the porous – or cosmic – stance reflects the "desire to befriend the highest things (hence the etymology of the term 'philosophy')", and is characterized by inquiry practiced through "attunement" and "encounter" with self, others and

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the sacred, rather than through autonomous, invulnerable and isolated means. A critical evaluation of these categories leads the author to expand Taylor's insights on two important levels. First, Kimbriel holds that neither stance is exclusively found in pre-modern or post-modern thought. Aristotle, for example, while generally associated with the porous stance, is shown to reflect features of disengagement, while the porous self, generally associated with ancient and medieval thinkers, can be identified in contemporary commitments to subvert unethical (and therefore unaccountable to others) power structures. Secondly, he insists that the disengaged self cannot be devoid of the love of friendship since to be human is to be in some way responding to the basic human desire for cosmic friendship. However since the disengaged self suffers from a "metaphysical poverty", it does not have the capacity to actualize such friendship and is in need of healing.

The resources for an authentic retrieval of the porous self are found by Kimbriel in the writings of Christian thinkers, particular in the Johannine New Testament texts, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Among these, Aquinas provides the "most mature articulation of the porous self". Kimbriel clearly and carefully discusses the distinct features of this medieval thinker's contributions to cosmic friendship. These include an anthropology in which the intellect has both a passive capacity "to receive but without losing" and holds an essential relation to the will in this regard. Aquinas' metaphysics is marked by language of communication and participation. It is a metaphysics distinguished by a "positive view to finitude" and a God who is fully knowable as a communion of love, and who is "both source and participant" in every authentic experience of friendship. In Aquinas' account of cosmic friendship, understanding and love, or reason and desire, are not at odds with one another; "intimacy is not abandoned" by metaphysics. As such, it constitutes a necessary retrieval for understanding inquiry as being both essentially *formed by* friendship and not compromising rationality, but rather *informing* rationality.

Kimbriel recommends two steps for moving forward if we wish to cultivate the porous self informed by cosmic friendship. The first is "recognizing the way that friendship must be embedded within a broader economy of virtue", and the second is "seeing the way that this economy cannot be confined to the human political community alone, but must rather be a cosmic reality which penetrates the very base of existence itself". The most effective way of

facilitating these goals, he holds, are through the “logic of gift”, since “human existence remains in existence from gift and so is ever open (even in the dark corners of the disengaged self) to further gift”. This move is crucial to his project, and certainly not without philosophical and theological reinforcement.

What are the challenges and invitations posed in *Friendship as Sacred Knowing*? Kimbriel focuses on the Christian tradition as providing the resources for the “cosmic economy of love” that is so essential for both the survival and flourishing of human beings on personal, social, political and religious levels. He also holds “that charity is not the only alternative to the disengaged self” and that the “logic of gift” is most fundamental to any retrievals. It is equally urgent to identify other philosophical and religious thinkers reflecting on giftedness in ways that cultivate the porous stance. If Christian thought in light of Augustine and Aquinas affirms that “ordinary human friendship” is an authentic way of encountering the sacred, what are the implications of this acknowledgment and how is it being cultivated and honored? Kimbriel rightly holds that human embodiment and mutuality are profoundly affirmed in Aquinas’ thought. This declaration should be complemented by explicit attention to an early statement in the *Summa Theologiae* (1.20.2.ad3) that grounds friendship in the context of reason, mutuality and discourse. If such a grounding does indeed reflect an authentic, metaphysically informed, cosmic/porous anthropology for human flourishing, let us not waste a moment in disclosing, examining, and learning from, the transformative models of mutuality – past and present – that can get us there.

About the reviewer:

Jennifer Constantine Jackson holds a ThD in systematic theology from Regis College and the University of Toronto, an MTS from Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and an MA in English literature from Bridgewater State University. She is currently chairperson of the Religious Studies Department at Rosemont College and serves on the internal board of Rosemont’s Institute for Ethical Leadership and Social Responsibility. Publications include “*Sapienter amare poterimus: On Rhetoric and Friendship in the Letters of Heloise and Abelard*” in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse* (2011). Her research areas are: Aquinas studies, rhetorical theology, and theological anthropology.