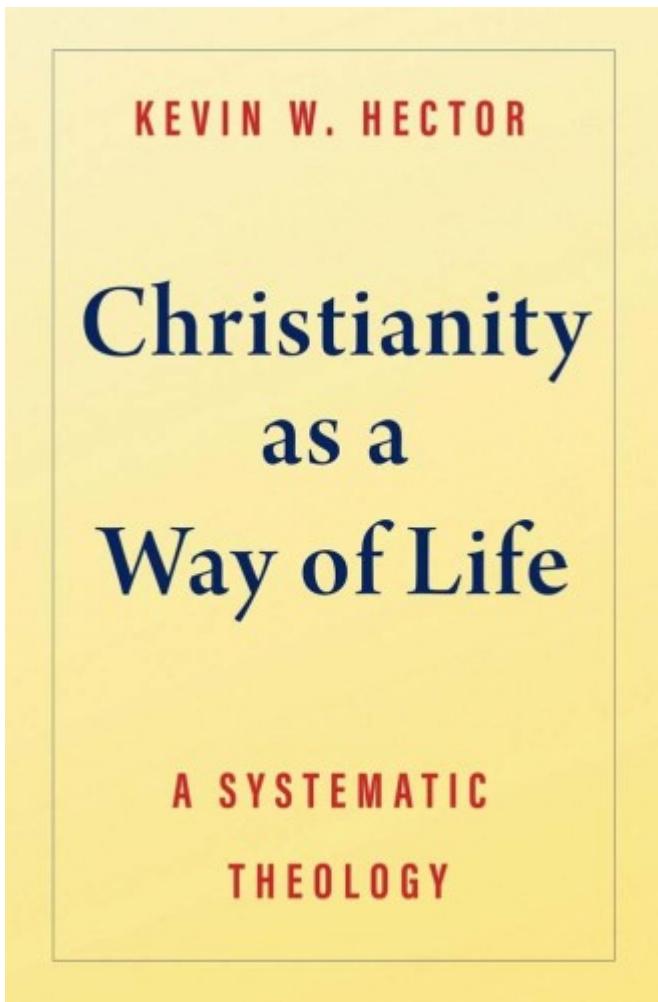


A boldly nonpropositional systematic theology

Kevin Hector presents theology as itself a practice of faith.

by [Amar D. Peterman](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

## In Review



### **Christianity as a Way of Life**

A Systematic Theology

By Kevin W. Hector

Yale University Press

When I was in Bible college, Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* was the one-stop shop for any theology course. If you needed to know about sin, there was a section for that; there were also sections on redemption, God, salvation, hell, and more. Systematized into distinct categories and argued through a self-affirming logic, the book reduced Christianity to a set of propositional truths that promised salvific knowledge of God to those who would affirm them. It appeared to hold the world of theology in its pages, doctrine by doctrine.

Kevin Hector boldly breaks out of this propositional mold with an accessible, single-volume systematic theology that aims "to offer a clear, understandable interpretation of Christianity" while highlighting "some of the wisdom that Christianity, so interpreted, has to offer about how to conduct one's life well" amid the realities of the world. Christianity conveys such wisdom, Hector believes, through a constellation of spiritual practices that transform the believer's way of being in and perceiving the world, ultimately orienting the believer toward "that which is taken to be ultimate—ultimately true, ultimately good, or ultimately important." This transformation changes not only our actions but our very self: our passions, loves, desires, thoughts, and perception.

*Christianity as a Way of Life* is structured around three sets of practices: those that orient us to God, those that transform our action in the world, and those that influence our way of loving and being with others. Theology belongs in both the believer's life and the academy, Hector suggests, because it offers two epistemic goods: wisdom and understanding.

Hector begins by exploring what Teresa of Ávila calls "the way of the world," which orients us away from God. After surveying different frameworks for sin—including Augustine's ordering of love and desire, Martin Luther's account of trust, and the critiques of absolutization and supremacy by liberationists such as James Cone and Rosemary Radford Ruether—Hector engages rigorously with questions of how we might be "bound to sin" and what a "broken" world entails.

He then moves readers into our deliverance from sin, arguing that "a God who promises to make all things right" may very well prime people to devote themselves to the Christian way of life. Here, Hector offers a robust engagement with the person

of Jesus and the central role Christ plays in the Christian tradition, including an outline of various atonement theories. We participate in this transformative way of life, Hector suggests, through ritual moments, including “the practice of baptism, the practice of confession and forgiveness, and the practice of friendship and self-narration.”

After offering this theological foundation, Hector details the spiritual practices that comprise the Christian life. Viewing our orientation to God through three broad categories—homemaking, imitation, and becoming one—Hector engages creatively with subjects of ecclesiology, sacramentology, and Christlikeness through practices of singing, eating, attunement, and collective becoming. How can we be in the world without being oriented by and to it, treating it as penultimate yet valuing it because it is filled with God’s good creation? To answer this question, Hector proposes a set of practices that include prayer, wonder, vocation, laughter, and lament with a focus on concepts such as joy, goodness, attention, and love.

Christian practices both orient us and transform our being with others. Hector offers a beautiful discussion of the nature and cultivation of love and its relationship to justice. Love, as he understands it, requires an investment in the well-being of others for their sake, a benevolent promotion or seeking of such well-being, and an appreciation for the subject of our love inasmuch as we find gladness in its (or their) existence.

Christian love, though, must go further than this. The practice of love found in the Christian way of life, Hector argues, must be included in one’s more fundamental love for God. That is, our love for others stems from our deepest love for a God who loves the world God has made. “It is no accident,” Hector reflects, “that the commandment to love one’s neighbor is second to the commandment to love God with all one’s heart, for the second commandment is supposed to follow from, and be included in, the first.” To love others the way God loves requires “that we *take sides* as God does, especially with the poor, the oppressed, the suffering, and the mistreated,” even while still loving all people.

To this end, Hector suggests several practices, including investing in the well-being of others and looking for the image of God in them (“which means not only to see good things in them but also to see these as glimpses of who they might be”). Regarding love’s relationship to justice, Hector depicts the practice of forgiveness as an entrusting of vengeance to God that frees us to pursue justice as an act of faith

and love, not hatred and malice.

The concluding chapter, titled “The End,” focuses on the telos of the way of life that Hector has outlined: eternal fulfillment. This eschatologically focused chapter does not offer a speculative account of premillennialism or rapture theories. Instead, Hector engages two recent arguments raised against the “desirability—if not the very idea—of eternal life” before returning to a question posed in the first chapter: Is there wisdom in this way of life? He proposes an innovative and detailed model of understanding eternal life that emphasizes the beatific vision of beholding God for all of eternity and participating in the ever-enriching, always renewing, abundant life of God. To the question of wisdom, Hector deems that, if he has been successful in the task at hand, we may conclude that there is indeed wisdom in the Christian life that is recognizable to both believers and nonbelievers, precisely because the ends of this way of life are good. By my evaluation, Hector succeeds in proving this to be true.

Given the diversity of Christians across space and time, I was curious how Hector would define Christianity as a singular and cohesive concept. He answers this question early in the book. For him, Christianity is marked by “several *significant* things to which a *significant* number of Christians are committed” across history. Hector names 12 of these commitments, which include beliefs about the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the ecclesial “life together” orientation toward God’s promise of new life, prayer as an entrusting of our concerns to God, and the ever-abounding eternal life we will share with God and others.

Hector’s catholic framing of Christianity allows him to draw from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant scholars. This constructive approach comes with its own set of questions. Hector, anticipating such questions, does the hard work of taking his interlocutors on their own terms, reading them in light of their broader corpus rather than self-selecting what works best for his argument. In this way, James Cone shows up in this text as James Cone—and the same can be said for Kathryn Tanner, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Mary Daly, and many others.

An accomplished theologian who has produced *Theology without Metaphysics* (2011) and *The Theological Project of Modernism* (2015), Hector could have written a systematic theology for the academy. Instead, *Christianity as a Way of Life*, while informed by intellectual rigor, offers a glimpse into Hector’s work as a teacher and a congregant. He uses ordinary language, offers memorable images and illustrations,

and ties rich theological ideas to the things of life we encounter every day. In these pages, deep knowledge meets with tangible practice.

Yet this book is not a quick or easy read. Its logic is wonderfully linear and its argument is cumulative, so it is best read cover to cover. I am convinced that the more time a reader devotes to this text, the more the Christian way of life it reveals will take tangible shape.

*Christianity as a Way of Life* both embraces and challenges the concept of “systematic theology,” reimagining the discipline altogether and bringing it back to its most basic form: reflection on our orienting devotion to God as the highest good and the complex practices of such an orientation in our daily life. Hector shows us that theology, at its core, is a Christian practice.