devoted to Owen’s theology, George Hunsinger analyses the relationship between justification and the mystical union with Christ and concludes that for Owen union with Christ is foundational for justification. Owen’s spirituality also comes to the fore in the third section of this Research Companion, devoted to the practical part of Owen’s theology. It contains the above mentioned contribution about his view of the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology gives a good overview of Owen’s Reformed theology and states that Owen must be viewed as being in the mainstream of this international movement. However, one matter is not addressed in this study, for it implicitly also highlights the impossibility of analyzing Owen’s theology independently, because the integral relation with his spirituality is mentioned frequently. Therefore, a balanced view of Owen must include his spirituality, such as his doctrine of the Trinity. Owen not only provides us with a theological treatment of this doctrine, but he has also written about communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, thereby giving ample attention to spiritual experience, which he regularly articulates in mystical language. Owen’s emphasis on personal communion with God, as well as on the Christian life, has also made him known in the Netherlands, for several of Owen’s practical writings have been published in Dutch during the 18th century. In any case, this study affirms that Owen’s spirituality was firmly rooted in his Reformed theology.

Dr. Reinier W. de Koeijer
Minister Protestant Church Bilthoven (Netherlands)
rwdkoeyer@filternet.nl


The main title of this dissertation has been aptly chosen.¹ It offers precisely what is promised. The book is about “soul recreation”, and that

¹ A Dutch version of this review has been published in Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie, 36 (2012), 87-90.
is what the reader too experiences. One also gets the impression that the author enjoyed the same recreation during his research. The author is an erudite and pious scholar, who skillfully explores the field of Puritanism and passionately propagates its message. Tom Schwanda, professor at Wheaton College (Illinois), puts his historical knowledge to the service of the present-day church. This is at once evident from his twofold question of investigation. The first is whether Isaac Ambrose, the “moderate seventeenth-century Lancashire Puritan minister”, who is Schwanda’s main source, can be rightly regarded as a Puritan mystic, and the second is whether present-day Christians can profit from his practice of piety. Continually engaging with numerous other researchers, the author works out his twofold presentation of the question, where the first aspect obviously receives the most attention. Schwanda does a thorough work here.

Chapter I offers a fine introduction in which the author clarifies the term “mysticism” casu quo “mystical”. This is by no means superfluous: in the first place because the term is diffuse and charged, and in the second place because Ambrose himself, like his fellow-Puritans, did not use this designation. In the trail of Bernard McGinn, the renowned “specialist in mysticism”, who features prominently in this thesis, Schwanda distinguishes two kinds of mysticism: an ontological one, where the distinction between God and man is erased, and a relational one, where God’s presence is experienced through the mediation of Christ and of Word and Spirit. In the latter case, McGinn speaks of “mystical elements”. Applying this to Puritanism, Schwanda then circumscribes Puritan mysticism as a loving vision of God in Christ through his Word, in which one experiences “union” with him and practises hidden “communion” with him through the Holy Spirit. So it does not concern a mysticism in which the soul vanishes into God and leaves Word and faith behind, but an intimate experience of faith which is accompanied by the wonder of love. It is this contemplative-mystical element which presents itself in the writings of Ambrose, in particular in his Looking unto Jesus (1658).

For years – in the month of May – Ambrose had the habit of going into retreat, without his wife and children, and of withdrawing himself into a remote wooded area, in order to devote himself entirely to God in prayer and meditation. Ambrose is called “the most meditative Puritan of
Lancashire”. To Schwanda he figures as the foremost exponent of contemplative piety.

After some valuable notes about hermeneutic decisions, which the reading of classical texts requires, the author proceeds in the second chapter to the biblical and theological foundation of an aspect which plays a crucial part in this study, viz. the ‘spiritual marriage’. Besides texts like Psalm 45, Hosea 2, and Ephesians 5, it is especially the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon that is decisive here. The sermons on the Song of Solomon by Bernard of Clairvaux have been very appealing to Ambrose. Schwanda gives an instructive survey of the way in which the motif of the spiritual marriage in Puritanism was worded and he even weaves an intermezzo on the Puritan perception of marriage and sexuality.

To Ambrose, the unio with Christ is the foundation of spiritual life, the source from which the communion with God flows and flourishes. Because it is the Holy Spirit who realizes this bond, Ambrose urges his readers to be perceptive of the “movements” of the Spirit, as did, for instance, Richard Sibbes. This working of the Spirit is not to be received other than through faith. It is true that Ambrose means here an expressive and affective way of believing. And not only that – it also has a contemplative dimension. The latter probably constitutes one of the most prominent aspects of his piety. This contemplation (“beholding Christ”) is accompanied by a deep joy, which is just as characteristic of Ambrose’s piety. For Ambrose beholding Jesus is a matter of intimate and intense enjoyment. Where does the myth come from that Pietism should be gloomy? Ambrose mentions “pleasures of love”, “joyes of the union”. It reminds us of the profuse language which Thomas à Kempis sometimes uses (whom, however, Schwanda does not refer to).

The third chapter contains a “contemplative biography” of Ambrose. Here the author goes more deeply into Ambrose’s annual retreats. What happened there, what did Ambrose experience there? These things cannot be measured exactly. Schwanda therefore makes an important proviso: “A reader’s perception of Ambrose’s experience today may not have been the actual experience he had in the seventeenth century”! But this much is to be gathered from it: that it concerns experiences which to Ambrose were as valuable as they were incomparable. He describes them in a fully mystical vocabulary, which is unmistakably akin to that of Bernardus. So he speaks about the kisses of
Jesus’ mouth, about the sweetness of “comforts and communion”, about the touches of God’s Spirit: “The Spirit left in my soul a sweet scent and favour [sic] behind it”. Prevalent in all this is joy, especially during his meditations about life in heaven. Though Ambrose very well realized and also experienced that his solitary times enlarged the risk of diabolical temptations, he could not do without the solitude. The retreats tied him all the more strongly to his Master and Beloved and made him more fruitful in his service. They also gave him the stamina to stand his ground in the clerical struggle in which he got involved. He suffered persecution and imprisonment. In 1662, he was among the 2000 non-conformist Puritan ministers who were denied the pulpit due to the Act of Uniformity.

Chapter four describes Ambrose’s spiritual praxis and in particular his contemplative experiences. In the meditation (ruminatio!) the words of God are both thought and lived through. What Ambrose basically had in mind was “the enkindling of our love unto God”. The soliloquium forms an important component, in which the soul is conversing with itself in both admonishment and comfort. It often happens in the language of bridal mysticism, culminating in a longing for communion with God. From the point of view of spiritual history the roots of this praxis lie in the early church and in medieval monastic piety. Especially regarding contemplation, into which meditation may develop, Ambrose frequently appeals to Bernardus. This contemplation is not the result of human effort. It is a gift of grace. With Bernardus, Ambrose values it as a foretaste of heaven, a glimpse of the visio beatifica which will be imparted to the saints in heaven. By “heaven” it is not so much space that is meant, but the heavenly Bridegroom. Hunger for eternity is hunger for Christ. “What is heaven but to be with Christ?” The “imagination” plays an important role here. Ambrose evokes images and lures his readers via ‘sight and sound’ to form an impression of what is in store for the bride. “O, tie your souls in heavenly galleries, have your eyes continually set on Christ!” Ambrose refutes the reproach of the antinomians (who made themselves felt vigorously in Lancashire), namely that these meditative practices rest on legalism, by underlining their completely gratuitous character. Ambrose’s magnum opus, Looking unto Jesus, is a complete realization of this contemplative practice. It is ‘recreation’ which enlivens the heart. The love towards Jesus is fanned by it, the ability to cope with temptation is enlarged, the intimacy of the spiritual marriage deepened, the uniformity
with Christ strengthened and the eternal joy is experienced in it proleptically.

The author devotes a separate chapter to the latter aspect: “The Rhetoric of Ravishment, the Language of Delight and Enjoyment.” Here it is evident how strongly the Bernardine motifs of the *excessus mentis* and the *raptus* have affected Puritanism. In the “ravishment” – ecstasy, rapture – one steps out of the dark dungeon of oneself and one realizes oneself to be called to the bright light of faith and love, to look with the eye of faith as far as Christ’s glory. Is it active surrendering, or is it being passively overwhelmed? It will be both the one and the other. Schwanda first traces the biblical roots again and consequently puts Bernardus in the limelight. Ambrose gives every reason to. The Puritan quotes in this respect the widely known Bernardine adage: *rara hora, brevis mora*. Equally striking though is that Ambrose himself during his May retreat of 1641 was granted a foretaste of heaven, a “spiritual, heavenly, ravishing love trance”, the rapture of which engrossed him for two days! Ambrose did remain deeply conscious of its provisionality and fragmentariness. It was as yet only a drop in the ocean, a draught from an overflowing river. But it did fill him with such a thirst for eternity, that he had, like Rutherford, Christ before him in his dreams.

The final chapter answers the second question of investigation. Can this meditative, contemplative piety be fruitful for our time? Schwanda is convinced of it. But he does profoundly realize the aversions and objections that have been put forward, especially by Barth and his followers. His way of engaging in debate is as shrewd as it is honest. It is remarkable that the strength of his argument is certainly not diminished by consulting Herman Bavinck. Chronologically, it seems to be strange, but theologically it appeared – at least to me – convincing. In Bavinck’s Dogmatics and shorter writings, Schwanda finds support for his proposition that the life of faith languishes and withers when it is not accompanied by longing, love, joy, intimacy, in short: by experience. Bavinck knew that experience can never be the foundation of faith. The Scriptures are the only lasting basis. Ambrose knew and practised this no less. But the reverse is just as valid, namely that this faith of the Word consists of knowledge and trust, a twofoldness which moves man in head and heart, into his innermost being. For God reveals himself. One should spell this sentence out! God gives himself to be known in the biblical-experimental, deep sense of the word. It is a knowledge which builds and
cherishes communion. Ambrose experienced that like many of his pietistic colleagues did in the preaching of and pondering on God’s Word, in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in the solitude of the soliloquium, in communing and conversing with fellow believers.

The provisional climax for Ambrose was founded in contemplation, by way of precursor to the eschaton. Though Schwanda’s intention is pertinently not “to transplant or create a neo-Puritan culture in the twenty-first century”, he does plead with numerous arguments for a ‘retrieval’ of this piety. So ‘retrieval’ does not mean: repetition. It is revival. I agree with Schwanda wholeheartedly. If the church wants to honour its secret, it should neither lose itself in a moralistic drive for action, nor in intellectual hair-splitting, but rather lose itself to God, for the church and the Christian are of God because of the merciful wonder of the unio and the communio.

A great deal can be learnt from this book and at least as much is to be enjoyed. Soul recreation!

Prof. Dr. Arie de Reuver (translation by Pete George and Adri Moelijker)
Professor emeritus University of Utrecht
a.dereuver@kliksafe.nl

Recent theological debate has often focused on the relationship between union with Christ and justification, but what about union with Christ and sanctification? Be Renewed takes up this subject in a way that exemplifies well how to write systematic theology in conversation with the Bible and historical theology while aiming to address today’s church. It will be of great value to ministers and systematic theologians in particular. The author also teaches all Christians how to live the Christian life in union with Christ without reducing this theme to an empty and vague mantra such as “preach the gospel to yourself every day.”

This is one of the most interesting and exciting volumes of V&R’s Reformed Historical Theology series. It combines contextual historical investigation with biblical theology and systematic theological reflection (18). Van Vlastuin surveys figures from church history in relation to union.