

religious believer and its extension of the position to include the unbeliever's commitment to the good.

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UNSPEAKABLE CULTS: AN ESSAY IN CHRISTOLOGY by Paul J. DeHart, *Baylor University Press, Waco, 2021, pp. x + 261, £47.63, hbk*

Some recent Christologies appear strangely post-biblical, as if Lessing's 'great ugly ditch' had been transferred into the theology faculty, dividing systematicians and exegetes into utterly discrete silos of discourse. Any contemporary Chalcedon-consistent Christology must reconcile metaphysics and biblical narrative. Christ is both absolute (transcendent) and relative (immanent); Chalcedon's logic demands that the singular life of Jesus be accredited as the self-disclosure of infinitely transcendent reality, but nonetheless as a human life embedded within relative causal pathways. DeHart reconciles these impulses by recourse to semiosis, cutting through any post-biblical dissociation of historical facticity and the cultic reception of Christ's divinity. Although the prime targets are Christologies that constitute Christ as an interruption to the quotidian flow of creaturely causality, *Unspeakable Cults* is equally opposed to dogmatic reductions of facticity to irrelevance, and to any historicism that over-asserts the power of atomised facts to drive out metaphysics. Christologies are immunised against historical deconstruction only to the extent that they acknowledge their incapacity to exorcise themselves of history.

For DeHart, Christology flourishes within the space of 'lagging epiphany' (the ecclesial reception of Christ, derived from and determined by the incarnation itself). This reception does not re-pristinise the pre-determined fact of Christ but is the means by which that fact (*qua* Absolute Fact) reaches self-expression and actualisation. The incarnation is 'inevitably stretched out into a temporal interpretative process through communal cultural activity' (p. 12), but the nexus of semiosis invoked by this 'extended incarnation' intersects with the ontological mission of redemption. On DeHart's account, cultural semiosis is analogous to prime matter, formed by the animating dynamics of the Spirit 'without disturbing its purely immanent cultural dynamic' (p. 163). Christology consequently demands a pneumatology that avoids the extremes of Bultmann (entanglement within history) and Barth (disengaged hovering over history, poised to interrupt): the integrity of Chalcedonian Christology

hangs together with historical and cultural processes, guaranteed by strong pneumatology.

The starting point of DeHart's argument lies in an analysis of two modern attempts to negotiate a disconnection of the essence of Christianity from the historical person of Jesus, that of Ernst Troeltsch (Chapter 1) and D. F. Strauss (Chapter 2). For Troeltsch, authentic religiosity operates independently of 'old belief' in the divinization of the historical events of Christ's life: faith in divine redemption is decoupled from the historical existence and reality of Jesus (p. 28). For all the difficulties of Troeltsch's version of neo-Kantianism (regarded by the young Karl Barth as nothing but a Christological cul-de-sac), he helpfully identifies the importance of *cultus* as the means by which a neoprotestant Christology secures fidelity to historical faith. Strauss's dualism is intensified by decoupling not only the historical reality of Jesus from his appearance in cultic reception, also ultimate religious truth from historical facticity. For Strauss the 'mythological' interpretation of Christ cannot speak historically: the language of divinization is always catachresis, failing to deliver the meaning that it promises and falling short of historicity.

DeHart's semiotic strategy demands the 'semantic integration of Jesus and his cult' (p. 58): by holding Jesus and the worshipping community together in a single semiotically integrated process ('a genuine community of meaning', p. 57), the incarnational hypothesis gains plausibility as both history and metaphysics. Chapter 3 resources such a (re-)integration by interrogating the cultural scripts within which Jesus's identity was realised and accessible to his disciples. DeHart is liable to be misunderstood here as either staging an intervention into historical Jesus research or developing his thesis on the basis of particular historical-critical reconstructions. His point is somewhat more modest: to establish that there *are* historical pictures that render a semiotic reading of the enduring Christ-event plausible. Morton Smith's construal of Jesus as magician or itinerant wonder worker is juxtaposed with Jonathan Z. Smith's embedding of Jesus within two broad cultural impulses of 'anthropologization' and 'eschatologization'. As magician, Jesus is not primarily a vehicle of divine facts or propagator of a new *ethos*, but the locus of theandric agency. This distinctive agency locates the demarcation of the magician's identity in the demarcation itself (as an intrinsically transgressive or subversive figure). Jesus is, then, a complex and syncretic cultural figure whose intense liminality inscribes an unspecifiability indicative of authentic transcendence, demanding the interpretative superimposition of cultic and mythological frames. Likewise for J.Z. Smith, the gospel genre is a 'theatre' in which the semiotic constitution of Jesus's full deity is played out according to the intensified scripts of anthropologization and eschatologization. As a result, Jesus only fully comes into view in his cultic reception.

Chapters 4–6 establish the framework of DeHart's constructive proposal, seeking an 'orthodox Christology [...] maximally compatible with historical consciousness' (p. 95). Chapter 4 excavates the strong

pneumatology (via ‘causal stratification’) in which God ‘as speaker’ creatively manipulates the medium of history. Chapter 5 rehearses Strauss’s laceration of Schleiermacher’s Christological lacunae, noting that the affirmation of the ‘local presence’ of God in Christ need not supervene upon a disruption to the causal tapestry of reality. The apex is Chapter 6’s *religionsgeschichtliche* reading of Aquinas, who conjoins an account of authentic immanent causality with God’s (qualified) omnicausality: divine power can constitute things as such—including the events of history—not only as facts but, *ipso facto*, signs. The events of Jesus’s personal history are consequently ‘extensions of the eternal Son’s personal identity’ (p. 149). DeHart finds in Aquinas’s tripartite account of God’s presence to creation (*qua* creator, in the saints, in Christ) a curious proximity to the Spinozistic framework underpinning Scheleiermacher. The resulting picture is a Christ who is radically transcendent because more radically immanent: an inverted *extra calvinisticum* in which the life of Christ is possessed not only of a surplus of divinity but an irreducible excess of human meanings, received and exchanged in the ecclesial community.

DeHart’s reading pushes Aquinas in decidedly non-Thomassian directions, as becomes clear in the final two chapters, which address the consequences of Christology undertaken in ‘lagging epiphany’. Chapter 8 probes faith’s incapacity to accredit or discredit the supernatural causality of Christ’s miracles. The systematician (like the exegete) is liable to historical prejudice for reasons that are structurally integral to the mystery of the incarnation: precisely because Jesus’s transcendence is found in an excess of immanence, it does not present itself for empirical scrutiny. With Rousselot, DeHart affirms miracle as both entirely historical fact and as an aperture opening into a transcendent realm. This radically qualifies the utility of apologetic invocation of miracle (though perhaps not their functioning as motives of credibility, *within* the orbit of faith). Chapter 9 takes up the Hegelian theme of Christ’s ‘monstrosity’ (the unspeakable, conceptually repellent, composition of divinity and humanity). This, in DeHart’s analysis, is translated from the vertical scandal of metaphysical union to the horizontal scandal of two-fold descent, in which the incarnate body is ‘extended’ into the Church as the sign-body of Christ.

In many respects, DeHart’s proposal is a reiteration of classical Chalcedonianism in a quasi-hermeneutical idiom. Those seeking great innovation will be disappointed. Nonetheless, DeHart rightly emphasises the essay-character of his work: truncated, schematic, and in parts merely suggestive. His own proposal is sometimes crowded by a cacophony of engaged voices (not to mention others—like Congar, Peterson, and Williams—who exert a more remote structuring influence); it is likely that scholars of Eliade, Scheleiermacher, Troeltsch, Aquinas, and others will question aspects of his readings. There are systematic questions left underexplored: the burdens carried by ecclesiology risk veering towards Christomonism (notwithstanding the emphasis on the Spirit’s triangulating presence); the sacraments as a mode of divine presence are somewhat

neglected; and, given the semiotic focus, there is surprisingly little engagement with Schillebeeckx. But little more could be expected from an essay that is as generative and provocative as DeHart's affirmation of God's presence to the world not by leaking through Cohen's 'cracks in everything' but in and *as* the humanity of Christ.

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THE SPIRIT OF CATHOLICISM by Vivian Boland OP, *Bloomsbury Continuum*, London, 2021, pp. 272, £16.99, hbk

In this elegant and insightful work, Vivian Boland's *Spirit of Catholicism* constitutes a thoughtful dialogue with a deep thinker who has lived and breathed both the intellectual and affective atmosphere of the Catholic faith. Like a fine wine, the reader is invited to savour insights redolent of mind and heart, of body and soul, of temple and household, of sacred and secular, of God and humanity.

It should be said from the outset that addressing such a huge topic in just 250 pages risks superficiality, yet that is never the impression given. After whetting the appetite with a suitably theological introduction, the book proper is organised in four parts with the first being framed as an interrogative – 'A People of God?' This question allows Boland to go beyond the well-known modelling of the Church associated with Avery Dulles, by referencing more subtle and fecund imagery. With characteristic style, Boland arrests the reader's attention with a scintillating quotation from Geoffrey Preston OP offering not 5, but almost 100 images of Church (pp. 27-28). In so doing, he modestly profiles the genius of others while attesting to his own reading and literary leanings.

Having hinted that Catholicism is both 'social and embodied', Part II begins with an extended meditation on Adam and Christ as a portal for consideration of sacramentality. Using his cultural and theological inventory Boland begins:

Around one of the doors of the great cathedral at Chartres are sculptures of Adam and of Christ and they have the same face; they are identical twins. It was a tradition in some places that Jesus had the same physical features as Adam. It is another way of speaking about the first human being created in the image of God and of Jesus restoring that image in humanity (p. 41).

This sacramental 'both/and' approach then allows *Spirit of Catholicism* not only to consider sublime Eucharistic realities but also addresses the