
Pro Rege

Volume 37 | Number 4

Article 6

June 2009

God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary (Book Review)

Alida Sewell

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Alida (2009) "God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 37: No. 4, 23 - 24.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol37/iss4/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

to integrate into society. Later he states that loneliness is maladaptive because lonely persons are less able to focus their thoughts on mental tasks and are more obsessed with social cues. These drawbacks leave the lonely person unable to make the social connections that would reduce their loneliness. His evolutionary explanation claims that loneliness prompts people to make social connections in order to reduce the negative emotion of loneliness. But mere social connections do not do so. Instead, the research shows that people need *meaningful* connection to reduce loneliness. Cacioppo does not provide the reader with an evolutionary explanation of why meaningful relationships should provide more survival value, nor does he explain how loneliness changed from being adaptive to being maladaptive in our society.

Despite this confusion, one of the major benefits of this book is its broad scope. It brings many areas of psychological research to bear on the issue of social

connection and clearly shows the negative effects of living outside of community. Although its argument that loneliness is involved in the relationship between social connectedness and genetic survival is weak, the book is strong in showing the effects of meaningful connections on physical and mental well-being.

The book is very accessible, and the authors write clearly about research that is usually ensconced in technical jargon. This book would be an excellent starting point for those outside of psychology who are interested in social connection and isolation. If readers focus less on the evolutionary interpretations and more on the unique research, they can begin to see how important meaningful social connections are for spiritual flourishing and individual well-being. They can also take to heart the warning on extreme individualism. Living for the self is harmful to the self, and this is a conclusion with which Christians readers can especially agree.

David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, xii + 464 pp. ISBN 9780199231829. £ 30. Reviewed by Alida Sewell, Instructor of French at Northwestern College, Orange City, IA, and doctoral student of Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. This review was originally published in *Church History and Religious Culture*, Volume 88, Number 2, 2008, pp. 302-305, which has given permission for this re-publication.

This book is the second of three related volumes. The first was *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (2004) and another appeared in April 2008 as *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama*. Frequent references to the earlier and the later volumes (28 out of 1582 footnotes, plus references in the text) may tantalize the reader to seek out the other volumes in order to get the complete picture, although one suspects there is also some overlap. The subtitle of the present volume indicates the direction of Brown's argument, namely, that "all the world should be seen as sacramental, as imbued through and through with divine presence" (4). In this volume, Brown is particularly concerned with "how body might mediate experience of God" (3).

Brown divides his book into three parts: "Finding God in Bodies," "Ethereal and Material," and "The Eucharistic Body." He introduces the whole scope of the book and each section as well, preparing the reader for what is to come, not only in content but also in conclusions.

In the Introduction, Brown claims that "modern religion has become an optional extra, whereas through most of the history of religion it was seen as having a bearing on all aspects of life" (1). That may be the case in some streams of Christianity, but in neo-Kuyperian circles it is forcefully asserted that all of life is religion, that God is intimately concerned with all aspects of life, and that therefore all of life is to be lived unto God and under his rule. Brown, by contrast, employs a nature-grace duality of reasoning.

Brown appears to write from a high Anglican tradition (see footnote 116, p.162) but often sounds more Roman Catholic. He follows a Catholic trend of writing a "Theology of the Body." However, rather than give a theoretical account, Brown seeks to illustrate his views with examples from dance, art, and music to bring across his point about the body as graced. The human body as a creation of God is quickly linked to the body of Christ, in his incarnation, in the sacrament, in his resurrection and ascension (13). He returns to these themes in Part III. The divine presence in a graced body is what Brown seeks to reveal.

Brown seems to me to be derivative rather than original, as for example in his discussion of the "culture-relative dependence of specific notions of beauty of body" (29-30). Is there anyone who does not know this yet? Granted, not every reader will be familiar with all the examples he cites to prove his point, but this point, and others, has been made before, as can be seen by glancing at the footnotes. On the other hand, Brown makes general statements that seem to arise from his own experience but which could be challenged by others with a different personal reading or viewing histories. He states, "pornography is largely discussed in terms of freedom of expressions, scarcely at all with regard to the degree to which the forms of behaviour it popularizes appeal to an unhealthy male desire to dominate" (35).

In the Chapter on "The Dancer's Leap," Brown argues that dance may, under the right circumstances, by the

graced beauty of the dancers, hint at a world entered that is otherwise than our present flawed reality. To readers, that may be stating the obvious.

Brown discusses how dance is portrayed in the Bible, i.e., positively. This section I found to be quite illuminating, bringing meaning to the text not previously appreciated. He goes on to discuss dance in ancient Greek culture, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. He then returns to the rather sparse use of dance in the history of Christianity, concluding that dance as a metaphor should be replaced by its literal counterpart (89). Some of his deductions about dance providing the possibility of experiencing the divine seem rather forced and unconvincing, but he also discusses works that are more obviously religiously oriented.

My disagreements with Brown arise out of our different Christian convictions. For example, from his almost Catholic point of view, the dance *Messa Concertata* was “not of course an act of worship, in the sense that no altar was used and there was no priest to celebrate the mass” (109). From my standpoint, and with the support of Romans 12:1, what one does with one’s body, including dance, can be a “spiritual act of worship.” Some of his other interpretations and generalizations may prove to be controversial, too. Moreover, by frequently stating the obvious, the book can become somewhat tedious.

In the passage dealing with “gratitude to God in adversity” (128-29), Brown takes Mother Teresa as an example. He must have written that before her “dark night of the soul” became public knowledge with the publication of the book *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (September 2007). Her “winning smile,” it turns out, did not reveal “a tremendous serenity,” as Brown claims, but rather obscured her own frequent feelings of alienation from God and her longing for “the answering smile of God himself.” Yet Brown’s book also has much that is fascinating. His observations on hospitality in particular are insightful and heart-warming (130-35). Besides, the whole chapter on food and drink merits special consideration.

The second part of the book is devoted to music. Brown claims that music in all its variety opens up the possibility of experiencing God (even if only partially). Brown seems to work from a dualist worldview, that of the sacred and the secular, especially when arguing that the themes of certain music “widen the range of religious experience beyond the church door” (349). How many people ever limited religious experience to the church? However, in the very last chapter he claims to have rebelled against “views of religious experience that strongly oppose the sacred and the secular, revealed and natural religion” (422). So if he is not a dualist, he has been setting up straw men in order

to tear them down. Perhaps the trouble lies in his use of the word “sacrament.” If he had limited that to refer to baptism and the Eucharist, and had used “the sacred” to denote what potentially “might include all of life” (422), then all that we experience in our bodies, minds, and spirits can be sacred, set apart for holy use. All of life can be lived unto the Lord.

The chapters on music, especially the one on “Pop Music,” rather ignore the body for the most part and have more to say about the supposed ability of music to induce religious experience. Brown’s talk about music’s “power to provide significant openings for the outworkings of God’s purposes” (346) seems to be close to suggesting that without music God would be unable to work. The argument seems rather labored. Just because God or soul are mentioned does not necessarily make a song spiritual. And even a distinctly spiritual song cannot guarantee a spiritual response from the listener, or even the singer, as proven by some of the examples mentioned by Brown. Instrumental music can be received in various ways also.

Part III on the “Eucharistic Body” is the smallest section of the book. It discusses the history of how the church understood the meaning of the Eucharist and Christ’s body. Here again, Brown makes generalizations that do not resonate with all Christians.

The abundant references to art, literature, music, and other sources are wide-ranging in scope and time. Fortunately, it is possible to view and even hear many of the artistic works referred to in the book on the internet. Of course, that turns reading it into a whole course of cultural-musical education! But the fact that the book incites the reader to want to check out the sources is an indication of the fascination it arouses.

I noticed some errors of writing and editing, such as where Brown mistakenly refers to the “maiden who represents poverty” before going on to say that “Only poverty is depicted as male” (115). Plate 7 confirms that it should be a youth representing poverty. Brown refers to Ecclesiastes (398), whereas he means Ecclesiasticus, the deuterocanonical book. In the footnotes, the plates are referred to as being at the end of the book, whereas they are placed in the middle. The plates, with supplementary commentary, are in black and white, but Brown helpfully refers the reader to publications that provide them in color.

Despite my criticisms of the book, Brown has quite whetted my appetite for reading the other volumes in this threesome, especially as he promises to discuss the “whole issue of the use of body in worship” (91) in the third.