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Adam's Navel: A Natural and Cultural History of the Human Form (Book Review)

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Adam's navel: A natural and cultural history of the human form, by Michael Sims. New York: Viking, 2003. 342 pp. Reviewed by Dr. Sherri B. Lantinga, Associate Professor of Psychology, Dordt College.

While camping with friends early one morning, we were warned by Bill to stay out of the way of his wife. She had temporarily become “Bodily Needs Woman” and was entirely focused on getting food, coffee, and a sponge bath; any interference with that agenda could be dangerous. I was delighted with their explicit recognition of the body’s influence on emotions and social interactions; healthy people rarely recognize the pivotal role played by their physical form and functions. Indeed, it took a bodily breakdown to prompt Michael Sims, author of *Adam's Navel*, to begin pondering how social interactions and cultural beliefs shape how we think about the body. Flat on his back for two weeks after surgery, journalist Sims became bored and began to scribble some thoughts about body parts. After being allowed out of bed, he researched what our different parts do, the cultural meanings ascribed to them, and even the origins of the names we give to our parts. His illness and recovery period resulted in a book that reveals a great deal about all of us.

As an author, Sims seems to be part biologist, part cultural anthropologist, and part tour guide. The resulting tone of the book is somewhere between poetry and science; it is both playful and informative without being disrespectful or crass. After an introductory overture on the porous membrane that separates our watery substance from the waters of the world, Sims surveys the external body from the top down. The head gets the most attention, including reflections on the fashion-prone protein dangling outside our skulls, the sensory technologies, and the face as a whole. The next section examines the arms, hands, and torso, including more about belly-buttons than you may have wanted to know. The last and shortest section includes a chapter on the genitalia (including various historical names for parts and their representations in art) and a chapter on the legs, particularly focusing on our bipedal posture. Throughout the book, Sims adeptly weaves together an impressive range of sources, ranging from scholarly sources such as Greek mythology, the Old Testament, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Thoreau, and Darwin to popular contemporary sources such as Gloria Steinem, Seinfeld, and James Bond. This broad range brings a sense of cultural breadth and authority to his work while making one appreciate one’s liberal arts education.

But why do we even need a book about our bodies? Why not just gaze at a just-bathed child or consult an anatomy text to know all that needs knowing? Sims’s book is important for at least two reasons. First, he renews in us a rightful sense of awe. Because the

human form is so familiar and because we have so internalized current cultural meanings for our body’s parts, we have lost our wonder about the human form and its functions. Sims’s own delight is evident in his everyday examples (e.g., the ranges of grips used by the hand between exiting one’s car and entering the front door) and allusions (e.g., “Around the end of the second month after conception... the embryo begins to look less like a Dr. Seuss character and more like a human being” 168). Beyond restoring wonder, Sims’s book also reminds us that bodies matter in a larger, socio-cultural sense. In an era of high technology where our bodies are largely tangential to our daily work, we tend to reduce our bodies to their mere biological functions. Sims shows us instead that culture both shapes and is shaped by how we think about and use our bodies: “All creatures experience the world through their bodies and use their bodies to respond” (130). Without bodies, we would have no psychology or anthropology or film, and literature would be dull reading without passionate embraces or thumbed noses or splitting headaches. Sims suggests that while it is true that we are more than bodies, it is also true that there is nothing more without these bodies, at least for human culture.

One cannot venture far in describing human beings without revealing one’s basic assumptions. That Sims supports evolutionary processes is clear in his comments about our primate cousins or “the fur that covered the bodies of our ancestors” (260). Despite these beliefs, Sims gives a surprising amount of space to Judeo-Christian views (indeed, the book is named for the Adam of Genesis and not for a fuzzy primate ancestor). His spelling of God and Creation with capital initial letters or his use of verbs like “designed” suggest at least a respect for Judeo-Christian beliefs, if not a personal commitment. Further, Sims’s comparisons of humans with other creatures are not always associated with an evolutionary agenda but remind us that humans could easily have been made otherwise. Thus, though Sims supports at least parts of an evolutionary agenda, he does not exclude other belief systems. He even briefly discusses his view of the compatibility between evolutionary science and religious views of human origins. His argument may not convince Christian readers, but the fact that Sims raises the issue helps readers keep an open mind to other ways of understanding and appreciating the human form. Christian readers can find much to agree with in *Navel* partly because Sims does not seem to be thoroughly convinced that humans are just another kind of animal. For example, Sims

notes important distinctions: “[We] run around peering eagerly about like every other creature—except that, so far as we know, we are the only animal dazzled by the splendor” (64), and “Outside of fantasy we are the only mammals that get about entirely on two legs, without even resorting to our knuckles” (276). Christians can easily ignore Sims’s references to evolutionary processes in order to glean many important insights about the wondrous creation of the human body.

As informative and readable as *Navel* is, it has some structural shortcomings. Some parts of the body are discussed in tiresome detail and other parts are given scant treatment. Sims admits that the book’s topics are based on his personal interests rather than a systematic survey of the entire body. Although the reader can appreciate his candor on this point, a somewhat more even treatment of the parts would have strengthened the book. A second weakness is that Sims’s many quotes are not referenced, so the interested reader has

no easy way to track down original sources on a particular point. Perhaps in compensation, the book does offer a detailed index and a selected (though lengthy) bibliography. Finally, like a Thanksgiving feast, the book is so generous with tasty quotes and facts that one leaves the table feeling quite full and happy but not remembering many of the specific flavors that were served; less breadth and more depth might have enhanced the meal and the book.

In the end, Sims guides us along a fascinating journey and points out many landmarks that we undoubtedly would have missed. An educated reader will certainly learn something new about herself and her culture that could not have been found in an anatomy text or history book. Most importantly, Sims’s insights about the human form appropriately deepen our sense of cultural history and call all of us to newly appreciate the wonder of this breathing clay.

Did John Calvin teach that “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God”? A review of David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*. (Lanham: Lexington, 2003). Xiv, 484 pages. Reviewed by Dr. Paul Otto, Associate Professor of History, George Fox University.

In *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*, author David W. Hall of the Kuiper Institute (www.capo.org/kuiper) sets out to explore the influence of John Calvin’s teachings on the founding of the United States. He argues that “John Calvin and his Genevan followers had a profound influence on the American founding” (vii). This claim, he says, is a necessary corrective after decades of obscurantism in which scholars have “read key events of the American founding period in terms of the subsequent interpretation of modernity rather than in terms of the antecedents of antiquity that led to the founders’ own perspectives” (x). While the author’s call for renewed attention to the potential role of Calvinism in the American founding is well to be heeded, and this volume highlights important evidence and raises interesting questions on this subject, it is nevertheless a significantly flawed effort at demonstrating the influence of biblical and Reformed thinking in on the creation of the United States.

The need for more fully considering the ideological origins of the American Revolution is certainly justified. The twentieth century has seen a vibrant debate on the coming of the revolution. At the turn of the century, historians began to challenge what has come to be known as the Whig view of American history. In this perspective, the American Revolution came about through God’s providential leading. American patriots

justifiably fought the tyranny of the British despot and ensured that democracy would flourish on American soil. The first challenge to this view came from the so-called Progressive historians of the era in American history of the same name. These posited, to paraphrase progressive historian Carl Becker, that the American Revolution was not so much a question of home rule, but a question of who should rule at home. In other words, Americans were not necessarily unified in thought, and their reasons for fighting the war or creating new governments had more to do with their own special interests, be they economic, social, or political, than with principles of liberty and justice. Such an interpretation held sway throughout the early and mid twentieth century. At the same time, something known as the imperial school emerged in which (mostly British or British-trained) historians centered their attention on England and suggested that a broader imperial view put the American Revolution in a whole new light. For example, some imperial-school historians argued that the American colonies’ revolt against the mother country was rather much like a child growing to adulthood and leaving home; it was just the natural course of things.

In the mid-twentieth century, both of these positions began to be questioned in two different but related ways. Americans, thick in the Cold War, felt the need to see their past with a greater sense of unity or consen-