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Hal St John Broadbent (review)

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Hal St John Broadbent

The Call of the Holy: Heidegger, Chauvet, Benedict XVI

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xvii + 216 pages. Paperback. \$39.95.

In certain circles, the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet has achieved a prominence that is unparalleled and frequently unquestioned. In this book, however, Hal St John Broadbent mounts an internal critique of Chauvet by exploring his selective appropriation of Martin Heidegger. In doing so, Broadbent does not offer a critique of postmodern sacramental theology but rather argues that “it is possible to be orthodox following the death of God without conceding anything to the secularizing force of current post-metaphysical thinking” and aims to investigate “where sacramental legitimacy resides once the grand narrative, with ‘its great hero’ the metaphysical God has lost its credibility” (2).

The book is divided into five chapters framed by an introduction and conclusion and a helpful preface which contextualizes the author’s argument. Chapter 1 begins by examining Chauvet’s critique of scholasticism’s allegedly mechanistic account of sacramental causality and his turn to Heidegger to overcome it. Broadbent interrogates Chauvet’s use of Heidegger and recontextualizes Chauvet’s quotations of Heidegger in order to argue that Chauvet neglects two central themes in Heidegger’s metaphysics: nothingness (*Nichts*) and anxiety (*Angst*). These, the author contends, can ground an orthodox postmodern sacramental theology that contrasts with Chauvet’s. Broadbent suggests, *pace* Chauvet, that the key to understanding Heidegger vis-à-vis sacramental theology is to see that the overcoming of metaphysics (*Seinsvergessenheit*) is “less an event of the human psyche to be examined, at the instigation of human initiative, and more a foundational existential happening that befalls us, in a dread-filling moment of awe” (35). While Chauvet eschews apophatic theology and invokes Heidegger in support of this claim, Broadbent shows that Heidegger in fact espouses a view which is closer to the apophatic tradition than to Chauvet’s positivistic tendencies.

Chapter 2 presents Chauvet’s argument that a return to the Augustinian tradition of linking Eucharistic presence with ecclesial presence as well as a recovery of the symbolic universe that such a view inhabits constitutes a necessary step toward over-

coming a Eucharistic theology bound to metaphysics. Chauvet believes that the language of transubstantiation must be replaced with a system of symbols in order to avoid the pitfalls of metaphysics yet still provide a framework for structuring and mediating the human experience of God.

The exposition then turns to Heidegger's concept of *das Nichts* and relates it to Rudolf Otto's idea of *das Heilige*. Broadbent proposes that Heidegger, following Otto, believes that it is in the experience of dread and angst that the holy is perceived most acutely. In sum, it is suggested that "if sacraments as symbols block access to the *sables mouvants* (quicksands) of the 'unutterable' and if...it is within these *sables mouvants* that God reveals himself, then Chauvet's sacramental theology actively prevents encounter with the living God" (111).

In Chapter 4, Broadbent examines how understanding God's presence in terms of *das Nichts* rather than through symbolic mediation affects the relationship between divine presence and ethics, which Chauvet understood to be the verification of Eucharistic presence. He does so through an examination of Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* in order to determine "the effect an immediate encounter with God in the abysmal depths of being has on man's behavior" (117). Drawing on Benedict's account of the Christian life as a response to the experience of the love of God, Broadbent proposes that Heidegger's claim that an experience of being overpowered (*das Unheimliche*) by another constitutes the necessary condition for breaking out of the technological world and reveals one's true identity and modifies one's subsequent horizon for being and acting. The concurrence between Heidegger and Benedict suggests for Broadbent that had Chauvet to given adequate attention to Heidegger's conception of *das Nichts*, it would not have been necessary for him to dismiss the notion of sacramental presence.

The book's final chapter and conclusion propose an account of Eucharistic presence based not on metaphysics or symbolism, but rather on the call of the holy. Broadbent argues that, for Heidegger, *das Nichts* is experienced most profoundly in death and consequently that "the mystery of being in its fullness opens up to me when I die to life metaphysically represented" (179). This conception of sacrifice—dying to life mediated through sensory and ontico-categorical means—grounds an experience of Christ's presence which requires "a *going under* or departure from the realm

of beings thought metaphysically” (200). This departure enables the human being to recognize “through an attunement to the stirring of my own self or in listening to the appeal of conscience, that I enter the realm of being wherein God flashes” (200). This epiphany takes place in silence and stillness; it is an encounter with God, the fullness of being but also *das Nichts*.

This text offers a valuable service to those who are wary of Chauvet’s account of sacramental presence. Much like Newman’s use of Locke in subverting the claims of Locke’s heirs concerning the reasonableness of belief, Broadbent engages Chauvet from within his own postmodern system. By beginning with the shared assumption that metaphysics is out-of-bounds for a convincing account of sacramental presence, the author returns to Chauvet’s own principal source in order to critique his departure from orthodoxy internally. Such an approach perhaps excuses the book’s relative neglect of recent Thomistic critiques of Chauvet, which aim to restore the centrality of metaphysics and causality for sacramental theology.

Despite the clarity of his basic thesis, Broadbent’s engagement with the texts of Chauvet and Heidegger is exceedingly thorough but is at times tedious for those who are not already well acquainted with their thought. Additionally, a more explicit account of what renders a theology of Eucharistic presence “orthodox” would have been helpful for identifying where the author understands Heidegger to succeed and Chauvet to fail. Finally, the volume’s prose is at times unwieldy and frequently stands in need of closer proofreading. These quibbles, however, should not detract from the accomplishment offered in this book.

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