

***BELoved DUST: TIDES OF THE SPIRIT IN CHRISTIAN LIFE* by ROBERT DAVIS HUGHES III**

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Robert Hughes's book, *Beloved Dust*, represents the most significant contribution in the area of pneumatology in the past five years. Thus concluded several scholars who recommended it for the des Places Libermann Award in Pneumatology, offered by Duquesne University in 2010. Indeed, if this book has the impact it deserves, pneumatology will include spiritual theology just as Christology includes soteriology, and the disciplines of systematic theology (traditionally known as dogmatics), moral theology, and spirituality will be intrinsically linked.

H. teaches at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, and his research focuses on spiritual theology. He is an Episcopal priest, missionary, and a tireless advocate for those who suffer from abuse and addiction, being involved in several organizations dedicated to this latter cause (the twelve-step program is often mentioned in the book). His sensitivity, compassion, and honest appraisal of these contexts are inspiring.

H. writes from his experience as a spiritual director. Throughout the book, he recommends enlisting the help of such a charismatic, pneumatophoric figure in the process of discerning both the aspects of our personality that need to be re-incorporated into our converted self and the demons that need to be exorcised as our true self is being birthed. He masterfully balances these spiritual concerns with a solid scholarly method. He does not lose his authorial voice even when making a dizzying number of references to other authors. Erudite and original, H. remains very much rooted in the reality of spiritual growth with all its messiness—sometimes describing it in shockingly strong terms. ☺ I am not going to offer any examples in this sense. My mother would slap me from 6,000 miles away, in Romania.

The main purpose of the book is to develop spiritual theology within its proper place in dogmatics. According to H.'s definition, 'Spiritual theology is a disciplined theological reflection on the spiritual life or spirituality of Christians, and, envisioned this way, should have the Holy Spirit and her movements in those lives for its primary subject' (3). Just as Christology is composed of two inseparable but distinguishable parts (Christology proper and soteriology), so should pneumatology be composed of pneumatology proper and spiritual theology. Consequently, theological disciplines neatly separated by neo-scholasticism now become integrated into one another, like Russian dolls. Systematic theology encompasses pneumatology, which in turn contains spiritual theology, which includes moral theology.

H. proposes a reform even within spiritual theology as it has become divided into asceticism and mysticism. Instead of the traditional excessive turn toward interiority and ascribing mystical experiences solely to secluded elites with no social concerns, he advocates for an ecclesial, communal, and socially-oriented spiritual theology. H's theology has the characteristics of ressourcement, or a neo-patristic synthesis: a departure from neo-Thomist theology and a return to the sources; an engagement with contemporary thought and social issues; an ecclesial and liturgical centering of spiritual theology. While the need for this departure and the lines of the 'new' theology were identified almost a century ago, examples of such theology are still rare. This *IS* one of them.

H.'s theology is also profoundly trinitarian: his Triadology is a living theology about a Trinity 'for us,' and not an abstract neo-scholastic speculation, remote from our world. The ecclesiological dimension of spiritual theology is another welcome contribution, since today ecclesiology is more and more recognized as a chapter of pneumatology (though, at its best, ecclesiology is also a chapter of Christology and the theology of the Father). This shift leads to a

spirituality that is not an individualistic, but an ecclesial endeavor. Conversely, H. moves beyond ecclesiology's excessive focus on institution and charisms and enriches it with a spiritual dimension that has been forgotten.

Masterfully integrating all areas of theology, including Revelation, creation, anthropology, Trinity, sacraments, eschatology, moral theology, history, biblical studies, H. also manages to be eminently ecumenical.

No theologian in the Anglican tradition has quoted John Wesley to the extent to which H. does. A Wesley admirer myself, I find the integration of concepts such as perfection and social and personal holiness into spiritual theology refreshing. As an Orthodox, I salute H.'s appropriation of Eastern Triadology, anthropology, spirituality, and *theosis*. Catholics will be impressed with his assimilation of various spiritual traditions, with John of the Cross, Ignatius, and Benedict significantly shaping the structure of the book. Other Protestants (with the possible exception of Evangelicals) will be thrilled with H.'s integration of various principles characteristic of the Reformation. Far from irreverent eclecticism, this book offers a constructive spirituality, an area in which Christians are more likely to agree than when they address confessional differences. Via spirituality, H. also facilitates doctrinal union, lest we forget the main aim of the book: the integration of spiritual theology into systematics. Spiritually and doctrinally, H. is deeply ecumenical.

The reform (or resurrection) of spiritual theology requires not only a theological departure from 'manual' theology, but also embracing the language and data of contemporary human sciences, so that spirituality will be relevant in today's culture. Just as previous views of the person contributed to traditional theology, so modern discoveries have a role in the revival of spirituality. H.'s theology integrates various insights from contemporary philosophy, sociology,

developmental psychology, the connection between holiness and liberating justice, and our new appreciation for sexuality and family life.

The book is organized according to the pseudo-Dionysian threefold rhythm of spiritual life. H. rejects the idea that the progressive succession of these stages defines consecutive degrees of perfection, as well as the notion of instantaneous entire sanctification. He prefers to speak of the concurrent tides of conversion, transfiguration, and glory. Moreover, corresponding to John of the Cross's dark nights of the soul, there are two periods of slack, or interludes, which occur between these tides. These are periods when no progress seems to take place, although, in retrospect, they were times of grace-filled growth.

The first tide

The three theological virtues structure the tide of conversion as a response to prevenient grace. In faith we are *converted from* sin; when hope is born, we are being *converted to* the commonwealth or reign of God; we are *converted by* love, falling in love with our Lover and becoming beloved.

In the chapters on conversion and spiritual growth, H. draws from behavioral sciences, developmental psychology, sociology, the experiences of adult catechuminate, and various theologians. He encourages spiritual directors to use these developmental stages as tools for identifying and nurturing the underdeveloped dimensions of conversion. For example, they should help the directee discern between the perfectly natural phase of honest doubt and a detrimental hypercritical spirit, which is combined with vanity, cynicism, and resignation.

For me, personally, it was less comforting to find out that my spiritual life has the combined characteristics of infantilism, teenage rebellion that does not do well with rules, and midlife crisis (and there is no way for me to buy the spiritual equivalent of a red convertible sports car – I am left in despair).

If these challenges can be overcome with the help of a spiritual director, others also require the expertise of a therapist. These are the sacred illnesses of our time, such as obsessive-compulsive disorders, addiction, clinical depression, and traumatic stress reaction from abuse and oppression. They are forms of suffering for which we did not volunteer and which we cannot surmount alone. Similar to the twelve-step program, overcoming them first requires that we admit our powerlessness. Then conversion (understood more as liberation and healing than repentance) will occur by God's grace and 'the companionship of fellow sufferers' (86). Finally, the limitations caused by abuse, trauma, or mental illnesses do not restrict the Spirit, who brings sanctification, loving knowledge, and union with God. Thus H. looks beyond the psychological and theological aspects of conversion as espoused by various contemporary scholars. His account of conversion fills a great void in contemporary scholarship: the neglect of the role of grace in conversion.

Grace is nothing less than the Spirit, who is God's gift of love in person and not simply an energy or power. The Father loves the Son in the Spirit, God loves us in the Spirit, and we return God's love in the Spirit who dwells in us, beloved dust that we are. At this point we do not only experience grace, which is given to all as gift; we now experience grace precisely *as grace*. It is a transforming grace: the Spirit reshapes us personally, ecclesially, and socially.

As opposed to the Stoic view that passions are intrinsically evil and must be uprooted, H. is very Aristotelian in his approach to desires as morally neutral: if correctly redirected, they become virtues. H's description of moral growth is perfectly synergic, balancing human and divine actions. Lest we fall into a Pelagian overemphasis of the human role, there are no 'acquired' virtues (in classical parlance) but they are all ultimately infused. They too, are the effect of the Spirit's indwelling in us. And yet, these virtues are also ours, since we are created in the image of God and we collaborate with grace.

Far from giving priority to personal sanctification over the ecclesial indwelling of the Spirit, H. affirms that, as friends of Jesus empowered by the Spirit, we are engrafted into the Body of Christ through Baptism. The covenant community then shapes us as members of the priestly people of God. This is a community that serves the world for which Jesus died and which the Spirit indwells. In this way, the Church makes manifest the reign of God by transforming society.

The second tide

H. prefers to entitle the second tidal current ‘transfiguration’ in order to ground it Christologically and to stress that it is neither rational, nor natural, as the Western terminology of ‘illumination’ for this stage might imply. It rather refers to God’s glory, the Holy Spirit indwelling in all of creation, especially human dust. Easterners will recognize H. as an unapologetic Palamite. And yet, he remains grounded in Western thought, since he allows Simone Weil’s four forms of implicit love to shape the structure of the second tide into: 1. love of neighbor, vocation, and study; 2. love of the order and beauty of the world and work; 3. love of religious practices and prayer; and 4. love of friendship and life in community. H. connects each implicit love to an aspect of the Benedictine Rule—study, work, prayer and community—and engages them with Lonergan’s layers of conversion. Again, the book is organically ecumenical.

It is also communally oriented towards the Church and society, being grounded in trinitarian communion. Our spiritual growth is related to the contribution of our charisms to the edification of the Church and of society, all Christians having the vocation to mission and evangelism. This focus on apostolate transcends many traditional accounts that overemphasized individual interiority together with affective, intellectual and moral conversion, to the detriment of political and social concerns. Case in point, H. formulates the ‘postcolonial principle: a radical hospitality and inclusivity that welcomes the Spirit-filled but previously unsavable other precisely in his or

her radical otherness' (304). This means that the Spirit is already present in the other's culture, orienting all creation towards the Father through the Son. Consequently, mission is first service, healing, and liberation. The 'always-and-already-present Spirit' is at work in the other and will subsequently provide the opportunity for an explicit proclamation of Christ from within, rather than one that is artificially imported from outside. These considerations, of course, reflect the movements of the Spirit within the Trinity.

The third tide

Glory is attainable in this life through the moral, affective, and intellectual union of the person with God. In line with the East, H. refers to glory as *theosis*. While elsewhere in the book he describes *theosis* as pure gift, here he overemphasizes the human element. His initial position was more in line with the Orthodox understanding of *theosis* as the phase in which our input is drastically reduced to being aware of what God does in us; grace is more than ever in the forefront. But H. needs a more prominent human role because he ascribes a missionary dimension even to this stage, further departing from the neo-scholastic mysticism that reserved these higher stages to a few spiritual elites. But he also stresses the human dimension beyond the classics of spirituality. I tend to side with these traditional accounts, but I appreciate the missionary concern as well. The middle ground might be found in a cyclic, not linear, description of spiritual ascent (which H. advocated in the beginning), so we can come back to mission after having experienced the third tide. We would withdraw in order to return. This seems to have been the case of all the great spiritual fathers and mothers of the past, or of the Apostle Paul who, after having been caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) and declared, 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20), went to preach the gospel.

H. confesses that his description of the third tide of glory is also limited by his experience, or lack thereof. One wonders, however, if trust in a longstanding spiritual tradition on this subject would have changed the outlook of the book. In relation to *theosis*, the past goes beyond the limits of today's developmental sciences. The impossibility of relating the tide of glory to modern science should not be a deterrent from discussing this ultimate experience that is still very much alive today. Moreover, a stronger pneumatology would demand that we be able to replicate the transfiguration of Christ's humanity in the divine glory made visible to the physical eyes of the disciples. Thus, the Palamite insistence on the role of the body in *theosis* could have been better emphasized in a book on 'beloved dust.' But H. chooses instead to focus on ecclesial and missionary endeavors. While this is the book's greatest strength, in this case it unnecessarily limits the third tide to merely one chapter—by far the least developed section of the book.

Suggestions

H. offers a very strong spiritual theology as the practical aspect of pneumatology. His pneumatology, however, is left implicit in its specifics, and only its general lines are explicitly applied to spirituality. The little H. says about the Spirit is almost exclusively through her work in the economy; her role in immanent Trinity is insufficiently emphasized. A stronger pneumatology (construed both immanently and economically) would strengthen H.'s spiritual theology. His Christology is more complete in this regard. The imbalance between Christology and pneumatology is further augmented by an underdeveloped soteriology, which does not match H.'s strong spiritual theology. While the latter insufficiency is probably due to page limitations, even sympathetic readers will be left wanting a more explicitly developed pneumatology. One feels this need, for example, in H.'s discussion of matter.

The author designates our material bodies as dust. We are also given a ‘soul,’ or the life of the body, and when our life is one of self-transcendence, the soul goes by the name of ‘spirit’. He adopts an exclusively Aristotelian view according to which the soul does not survive the death of the body, although, along partial Platonic lines, the dust will be alive again at the end of time in glory. The contents of H.’s eschatology refer exclusively to the events after Jesus’s second coming, passing over in silence our condition between death and the Parousia. This stance raises at least two questions: Will the eschatological resurrected dust have the same spiritual identity as it has today? If so, one is forced to speak of a resurrection of the soul, since the soul is simply the life of the body, outside of which it does not exist. Moreover, is the dust ‘beloved’ between death and the Parousia, even if it is lifeless? These questions are not asked from an abstract essentialist perspective, but from the relational/existential prism that H. advocates, so that ‘dust’ is always in relation.

The larger context of these issues is the value of matter in itself, which H. carefully preserves against any Manichaean tendencies: no matter how much we progress spiritually, matter remains matter, but becomes infused (or, more precisely, is always infused) with the Spirit. H. is somewhat inconsistent and leaves one wondering if he believes that God actually created matter profane, despite his embracing of Teilhard de Chardin’s affirmation that nothing in creation is profane. In the body of the text he espouses an exclusively relational reading of Teilhard and abandons a substantial reading that, I believe, was Teilhard’s primary intent. While H.’s concern to emphasize the relationality of creation is worthwhile, he does not seem to integrate texts with substantial overtones, which he only mentions in the endnotes.

H. could also draw from Maximus the Confessor and Dumitru Staniloae (both quoted in the book), according to whom we desecrate matter when we unsuccessfully attempt to render it as a

purely material, profane reality meant for anthropocentric consumption. Both affirm that God continues to be present in matter, which makes our rejection of its spiritual value sinful. Dust is filled with God to begin with, and that presence is fulfilled in the incarnation and ultimately in the *eschaton*. H. would not deny the spiritual character of dust, but he would not emphatically affirm it in these pre-incarnational terms, either. One exception is his account of the Spirit's presence in all cultures and times, mentioned above.

H. has already expressed his intention to take this volume further, in the direction of the Spirit's presence in human history and cosmology. He hopes, in the end, to articulate the tides of the Spirit in trinitarian life and thus develop a pneumatology proper. The above remarks are simply suggestions for further developments in the directions already indicated by the author, as well as arguments for the necessity of a rich pneumatology for a strong spiritual theology, and the link between the two. We will get a glimpse of his future research in tonight's lecture.

Thank you.