

Response to Robert David Hughes' *Beloved Dust*
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I have to say from the start that *Beloved Dust* is a remarkable book, a real gem. Not only does Robert David Hughes succeed at his project of constructing a spiritual theology back into the heart of Christian dogmatics, that is, a “Trinitarian dogmatics” (45) as a dimension of pneumatology between Christ and his Church, but he does so with an eloquence that is doctrinally probative and spiritually illuminating. It is ecclesial at heart in which the Church in the missions of the Son and the Spirit—I prefer the “Joint Mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit as in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 689)—is empowered by and directed to the full scope of the Trinitarian economy in the world and the cosmos. He is conversant with recent trends in Trinitarian theology, Christology and pneumatology as well as with the stuff of Behavioral Science in its psychodynamic and sociocultural queries while maintaining the integrity of spiritual theology both as a constructive effort and (this is very important) as a student of the great tradition of mystical theology and spiritual praxis. He has learned from the communion of saints and their articulation of what life in the Spirit is all about. This book is not only good theology but a rich spiritual conversation as well.

Having said that, it is my task to raise issues evoked (or provoked) by the book that might deepen our understanding of the subject. It may be helpful to locate myself theologically and spiritually, if for no other reason than to avoid any misreading of the text, and in our conversation to prevent speaking past one another. First off, I’m an incorrigible pietist. Pietism is mentioned only once in

detail in the book and does not come off well. Grouped with credulity and fideism as examples of “works-righteousness”— a distinctly Protestant way of putting things—it is defined as follows:

pietism, which identifies faith with certain intense emotional experiences and can be cut off from any sense of the necessity of concrete faithful response.
(138)

Fair enough! This is the perennial temptation for pietists of all sorts, even perhaps for those who like Friedrich Schleiermacher have moved on in their appreciation of the full scope of human experience and its relevance for faith and theology. Remember, his self-description of having “become a Moravian again, only of a higher order.” Actually it’s worth hearing the broader context of this quote written as a letter to his father recalling his early days with the Moravians:

There is no other place which could call forth such lively reminiscences of the entire onward movement of my mind, from its first awakening to a higher life, up to the point which I have at present attained. Here it was for the first time that I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world....Here it was that the mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of skepticism. Then it was only germinating, now it has attained its full development, and I may say, that after all I have passed through, *I have become a Herrnhuter again, only of a higher order.*”

And this after an early alienation from the Moravians! When his pastor father queried him at the time writing:

Who has deluded thee, that thou no longer obeyest the truth, thou, before whose eyes Christ was pictured...”

Friedrich responded:

You say that the glorification of God is the end of our being, and I say the glorification of the creature; is not this in the end the same thing? Is not the Creator more and more glorified the happier and the more perfect his creatures are?

I rehearse this—and I appreciate your patience—because Schleiermacher introduced feeling and experience into theological construction under the rubric of the religious affections. The higher order advanced was one that transcended the strict interiority of the pietist and situated the “feeling of absolute dependence” (as Schleiermacher came to call it) within the totality of the God-world relation while still maintaining a strong Christocentricity in his dogmatics, or as Richard R. Niebuhr phrased it a Christomorphic faith. The latter nomenclature is not insignificant because—if I am reading Schleiermacher correctly—the move from his youthful pietism to a “higher order” had everything to do with the experiential regime extending from the specific interior religious affections of the pietist to the religious dimension of human affectivity in all of life. Schleiermacher’s genius was to anchor this in the evangel of Jesus the Redeemer who is both the exemplar (*Vorbild*) and power (*Urbildlichkeit*—his unique ideality) of the specifically Christian God-consciousness; something, by the way that has not been always recognized by his detractors. Thus his redemptive activity is a person-forming work, by which we are transformed by the power or potency of God-consciousness present in Jesus (the “veritable existence of God in him”— § 94 of *The Christian Faith*) and emanating from him.

I digress, but not really. Hughes has critiqued the separation of spiritual theology from dogmatics to the detriment of both. In the case of the former as the

real subject of the book, spiritual theology assumed the form of tractates in mystical and ascetical theology focusing on the religious experiences and praxis of the spiritually elite, usually those in religious orders, far removed from the everyday experience of most Christians. It's the pietist temptation in a different genre, not the sentimental pietism of North American revivalism, but the call to sanctity and Christian perfection of those who have responded to Jesus' invitation "to put out into the deep" (*Lk* 5:4). Parenthetically, it was with this invitation that Pope John Paul II began his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) at the turn of the millennium (a letter which at the time caused this pietist to discover the gift of tears, especially as the pontiff exhorted us to contemplate the face of Christ, crucified and risen, nos. 24-28).

Hughes' point is that "the deep" (if I can keep with the gospel metaphor) is more intensive and extensive regarding our humanity—remember Schleiermacher's "Is not the Creator more and more glorified the happier and the more perfect his creatures are?"—than is the case with the neo-scholastic manualist treatises that characterized the foregone ascetical and mystical theologies. He deploys a reconceived three-stage spiritual journey—purgation, illumination and union now identified as conversion, transfiguration and glorification. Most importantly, they are concurrent and not sequential, and perichoretic or coinherent and not separate stages or "tides of the Spirit" as he puts it, keeping with his more dynamic representation of pneumatology. By integrating this old but new paradigm into a framework that embraces psychodynamic and sociocultural theory, human and religious development, and layers of conversion, he has expanded the scope of how

God touches our lives without forfeiting the wisdom of the tradition, including even (and this is a good test) the “dark nights” of Carmelite immersion into the depths of God. All this is situated within a thorough and intentionally robust Trinitarian theology, which for me is the clincher.

If we can track the tendency of this endeavor out of the narrow strictures of what I will call pietist enclosure and interiority, it follows the lead of Teilhard de Chardin to whom Hughes devotes a chapter and is succinctly summarized under the rubrics from the *The Divine Milieu* as “the sanctification of human endeavor” and “the humanization of Christian endeavor” (pp. 64-70). I applaud this move, and the fruit borne in the subsequent chapter on Simone Weil and her “four forms of implicit love” is no less than stunning. However, before reverting back to the acclamations of my opening remarks let me highlight some points of possible divergence.

I return to the pietistic metaphor. Truth be told, I am also a bit of a post-pietist. Perhaps there is some of this in Hughes as well, whom I take it once raised his hands in charismatic praise at the Yale University Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship back in the day (374), and even now still speaks of falling in love with Jesus. This truly warms my heart. (I should note that historically speaking, we are meeting here at Duquesne University, the place where the Catholic Charismatic Renewal got its start in 1967!) As we all discover in the spiritual life, it is in the disposition of the self *coram Deo* that we begin to discover the deeper workings of the Spirit, embracing consistent liturgical practices, the social dimension of the gospel, and the secular character of the universal call to holiness (at least for the lay faithful). All of which Hughes affirms, including some of the best insights into the

spirituality of marriage and family life that I have ever read. One might add that the particularity of vocations and gifts is also a factor. Here we might draw from the well of Salesian spirituality wherein Christian devotion must be practiced appropriate to the state of life one inhabits. But my concerns are also theological of which there are three: the theology of grace, theological anthropology, and liturgical and sacramental life. I will then conclude with a brief comment about infused contemplation and imparted charismata.

Hughes makes a methodological choice to subsume the theology of grace under pneumatology. He argues “there is a real difference between experiencing grace and experiencing grace as *grace*” (74). More conceptually, he is critical of a certain type of traditional approach to grace. I quote:

The tradition of Christian theology has done not-so-helpful things with this notion of the giftedness of grace. One is to treat it as something like silly putty, as if it were a quasi-substance coming between God and us and poured into us like water (the Catholic version); another is to treat it as a mere judicial decree with little or no real impact on our concrete lives (the Protestant version). (74)

Again, I fear that I end up on the wrong side of the tracks. He is not the first to characterize the types and distinctions of grace common to Catholic theology in such terms. In fact, he is grateful to Karl Rahner for undoing this neo-scholastic approach to God’s working in our lives. And Rahner was not the only major Catholic theologian to have done so. As for myself, perhaps there is nothing worse for David Hughes than a pietist drifting into neo-scholasticism—one who identifies affective experiences with grace now understood as some sort of thing that the Holy Spirit infuses or bestows. Well, I have no investment in defending the “thingness” of grace

and I will return to the issue of substance (and accident) when I come to theological anthropology momentarily. For now I want to speak in favor of the distinctions regarding types of grace.

In fact, Hughes does not entirely abandon such talk. As with the three stages of spiritual growth Hughes reconceives these distinctions in light of his theological anthropology and pneumatology. Just witness his (dare I say) scholastic charts!

Grace is just another name for God at work, for the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. (74)

Therefore, habitual grace “refers to the constant presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives” and actual graces are the “concrete particular ways in which that presence is embodied and made available and effective for us” (74). I don’t mean to quibble since I agree that the Holy Spirit works in multiple ways. However, (and I am not sure Hughes is doing this) do we simply identify grace and the Holy Spirit? Perhaps not—he states that God’s gracious loving of us is uncreated grace and its impact on us is created grace.

I tend to think that the scholastic distinctions are helpful even in the spiritual life. One may be assured of the constancy of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling by virtue of baptism and confirmation and distinguish it from one’s habitual orientation to communion with God, viz., the theological virtues of faith, hope and love that Hughes spends much time with and that are an effect of this habitual grace. Sure, the source of this orientation is the Holy Spirit in person as Gift/Love (to allude to John Paul II’s encyclical on the Holy Spirit *Dominum et Vivificantem*) and the work of that same Spirit is experienced in the bestowal of graces and gifts. But those graces and gifts are not the Holy Spirit per se. This distinction between the Holy Spirit and that

which the Spirit bestows makes even more sense in reference to actual grace. For example, St. Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* considers it rather crucial for the discernment of spirits (therefore spiritual directors must have experiential knowledge of this) that one distinguish between a spiritual consolation (an actual grace) and the period following the consolation in which one might still feel its effects (you see, it was Ignatian spirituality that rescued this pietist from its dangers!). I find this to be spiritually insightful and it is predicated on the distinction between the Holy Spirit and the graces bestowed, both habitual and actual.

This brings me to Hughes' theological anthropology emblazoned in the book's title: we are beloved dust. By this he means not only that we are material beings, but that we are also essentially relational; that is, we are animated dust, spirited dust, estranged dust, and redeemed dust. Without arguing the point, I simply think that categories of substance and relationality are not necessarily opposed. The work of W. Norris Clarke, S.J. in my judgment has demonstrated this. Additionally, grace is not a substance but an accident that inheres in our human substance. But let me move on and explore, however briefly, the issue of nature and grace.

In his sections on "dust" that deals with human self-transcendence Hughes is insistent that both the capacity and actuality of our self-transcendence is an entirely relational matter vis-à-vis the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as sovereign life-giver. He also enlists Karl Rahner and his theory of the supernatural existential in support of this. Whether one wants to sign on to Rahner or not (Hughes has), in my

judgment it is still a debatable point. Specifically, I refer to the modality of how we are graced relative to human nature or being. I do think that even Rahner distinguishes between the obediencial potency as our capacity for transcendence and the supernatural existential as the offer of divine self-communication. Hughes, on the other hand, characterizes the situation as follows:

Human self-transcendence, then, is a property of human character or human being precisely as a characteristic of God mediated to humans by the Holy Spirit. This is what it means even for human beings to have a human spirit. (61)

I like the notion of property and have no problems with its origin in the *imago Dei* by virtue of the work of the Spirit in creation. However, I want also to maintain that the outpoured Spirit of Pentecost, having been active in and receptive to the events of Incarnation and Paschal Mystery, is something more than *Creator Spiritus*—“for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (Jn 7: 39). This corresponds to the nature/grace distinction common in Catholic theology and still (I admit) controverted. My point—and Hughes bears this out throughout the book—is that when we are speaking of spiritual theology as an ecclesial discipline our referent is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. How this relates to the Spirit in creation, culture and other religions is still an open question, but one where the distinction between the Spirit of creation and the Spirit of Pentecost may, in fact, prove to be a fruitful one. Nature and grace *redivivus*? We shall see.

Finally, in addressing the new sacramental theology Hughes states: “these rites are now much more celebrations of the grace, the operation of the indwelling Spirit, already at work in the recipient” (332). Perhaps this is a minor point since it

is not a major theme of the book. But I prefer to say that liturgy and the sacraments not only celebrate the Spirit already present, but communicate the Spirit as well. “The Lord be with you” not “the Lord is with you.” There is dynamism in liturgical praxis as there is in the spiritual life.

I conclude with an observation and a suggestion. One of Hughes’ mentors in the tradition of spiritual theology is Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., not his “Thomism of the Strict Observance” but his ascetical and mystical theology. He follows Garrigou-Lagrange in two ways. First, there ought to be a unity between theology and spirituality even if he does not adopt the specifically Thomasian stipulation that *sacra doctrina* is speculative and practical at the same time, at least in its Thomistic form. Aidan Nichols, O.P. makes this point in his new book on Garrigou-Lagrange entitled *Reason with Piety* (110). Secondly, Hughes agrees with Garrigou-Lagrange on the unity of the ascetical and mystical. In a little remembered debate that Hughes takes note of, he affirms with his mentor that infused contemplation is meant not just for the few but for all, the ordinary Christian as well. Hence, my suggestion, and this from Karl Rahner.

In an essay entitled “Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace” (*Theological Investigations, Volume XVI*) Rahner attempted to give an account of religious enthusiasm sparked as it was by the charismatic renewal. Negotiating his way from the older Jesuit theological school in which grace was not the experiential subject of human consciousness to his own transcendental theology, he characterized such enthusiastic phenomena as “mysticism in ordinary dress” (43) and “mysticism of the masses” (47). In doing so he sought a more positive

evaluation of religious enthusiasm than was usually the case, projecting even the possibility that it could lead to a “clearer and existentially more radical interiorisation of the transcendent experience of grace” (51). This, I believe, is also true of Hughes’ work. To the extent that this embraces specific experiences of grace, religious affections as it were, as well as the religious dimension of all of life, we may take comfort in the full experiential register of God’s working in us. Considering Rahner and Hughes on these matters, this would not only satisfy my pietist inclinations but we also may agree—I hope— with the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that “Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace *escapes our experience* and cannot be known except by faith” (no. 2005).