

introduced by a bulleted set of three 'Key Ideas' designed to orient the reader to the chapter's purpose. The first chapter in each section usually provides relevant historical background, while the next two focus on specific theological disputes or contributions emphasised by the person or movement. So, for instance, the first chapter in the Augustine section borrows heavily from *Confessions* in order to reconstruct the contours of Augustine's life, the next outlines his major contributions to the doctrines of original sin, the relational Trinity and the two cities, and the third focuses on the Pelagian controversy. The book concludes with a list of recommended authors for readers who wish to dive deeper into the world of early North African Christianity – a valuable resource for Eastman's targeted audience of undergraduate and seminary students.

The only real quibble I had with the work is its rather abrupt ending. Eastman concludes with Augustine, which is certainly a classic way to close the book on North African Christianity. However, the book itself contains tantalising hints of a longer story: we are told, for instance, that the schism between Donatists and Caecilianists faded into the background 'when all Christians in Africa faced a more serious and common threat' (p. 130). That threat, of course, was the Vandal invasion of 430, and it would have been fascinating to see what 'turning points' Eastman might have noticed in the abrupt reversal of Nicene Christianity's fortunes in North Africa as represented by Quodvultdeus, Victor of Vita or Fulgentius. Themes emphasised throughout the book, such as constancy under persecution and relations with secular authorities, could have been profitably extended into the Vandal era and even the 'Three Chapters' controversy that erupted once North Africa was absorbed into the Byzantine world. Perhaps the story, in other words, has ended too early.

Nevertheless, I want to emphasise what a welcome addition this book is to the rather narrow list of introductory texts that focus on North African Christianity. Eastman's balanced treatment of all sides and nuanced articulation of the issues involved is much appreciated, and it is my hope that *Early North African Christianity* becomes a standard textbook in college and seminary libraries.

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## Paul J. DeHart, *Unspeakable Cults: An Essay in Christology*

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It is tempting to view christological reflection in the twentieth century through Martin Kähler's distinction of the 'historical Jesus' and the 'historic, biblical Christ'. On one side, we have doughty historical-critical specialists, some number of whom aspire to ascertain who Jesus 'really' was and what Jesus 'really' did; on the other, we have pious theologians who view the explication of Christ's person and work as ingredients of the age-old project of faith seeking understanding. But we should resist this either/or,

just as we should resist the crude binaries of secular/sacred, religious studies/theology and fact/value. Would it not be a *sacrificium intellectus* for theologians simply to bury their heads in the sand and ignore historical research? Might there not be a way 'to affirm both classic incarnational thinking and modern historical consciousness' (p. 95)? Furthermore, might the multiple Jesuses of history, an array of cultural and scholarly products that stretch from the first to the twenty-first century, contribute to the ongoing task of hearing and speaking back to the Word made flesh?

Paul DeHart's brilliantly creative monograph advances an affirmative answer. It is an integrative text, in the best sense of the word: it strives to honour the breadth and depth of historical work on its own terms, while suggesting how such work can be situated in a rich theological framework. And it is an outstanding contribution to constructive theology. Although I'm deeply averse to academic gush, I will make an exception in this instance. Find time to read *Unspeakable Cults*. It is a demanding and profound book that deserves close study.

The basic moves of DeHart's argument are as follows. Part 1 rehearses and explores the problem at hand: 'the apparent incompatibility between modern historical thinking and the religious affirmation of Jesus' divinity' (p. 13). Ernst Troeltsch and David Friedrich Strauss illustrate the point. Unable to reconcile historical consciousness and orthodoxy, Troeltsch proposed a functional christology: he reduced Jesus to a 'rallying point' for past and present Christian communities. Strauss, for his part, doubted that any historical individual could bear the full weight of divinity. More recently, works by Morton Smith and J. Z. Smith might seem to compound our perplexity. If earlier generations registered surprise at the mismatch between their reconstructions of Jesus' life and ecclesial dogma, these scholars render Jesus still more alien to contemporary believers, while also offering compelling accounts of how a mere human being – perhaps a magician, perhaps an 'itinerant Jewish exorcist' (p. 236), perhaps someone more pedestrian – could come to be acclaimed as the Word incarnate.

Parts 2 and 3 of *Unspeakable Cults* convert what Troeltsch and Strauss took to be a problem into an opportunity. Rather than reframing christology or sidestepping the issue of historical consciousness (Karl Barth, according to DeHart, was a sidestepper), DeHart argues that naturalistic accounts of Jesus' life and naturalistic accounts of how Jesus came to be viewed as divine can be set within a noncontrastive account of the God-world relationship. A 'noninvasive ontology of mission' (p. 147), which Friedrich Schleiermacher gestured towards and which Thomas Aquinas helps to refine, is the key. Rather than overwhelming Jesus' humanity – or, for that matter, holding Jesus at a distance from the Hellenistic and Semitic contexts that defined him – the hypostatic union is mediated through the materials available to a marginalised Jew in the first century. The Word does not just become flesh; the Word became cultural discourse, and the Word worked through some combination of local 'scripts': Jewish, esoteric, thaumaturgical, animistic, Graeco-Roman, whatever. And that process continues, in a different way, in the church. A strong pneumatology – and DeHart again enlists Aquinas to refine and recast Schleiermacher's insights – allows the mission of the Son to intersect with the mission of the Spirit, that divine person who animates diverse presentations of Jesus' person and work. As such, there needn't be a standoff between historical consciousness and orthodox christology. Orthodox christology can be figured in ways that nest historical consciousness and historical research, in all its complexity and ambiguity, *within* an acclamation of Jesus as the Word incarnate.

What does this mean for reflection today? It means that Christian communities ought to honour the pneumatic energies that course through them, accepting that

Jesus' person, as a veritable 'monster of Life' (p. 220), will *grow* through 'processual and "horizontal" composition' (p. 222). It means that varied receptions and depictions of Christ, while inevitably marked by failure (for there is no direct access to the incarnate Word), reflect the uptake of a basic Christian obligation (for the Spirit compels and animates the process in question, weaving diverse Jesuses into the expanding fabric of Christ's risen body). The 'trial of the witnesses', to borrow a phrase, requires that we keep on the trail of Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, as Jesus goes ahead of us. Multiplicitous acts of human semiosis, perhaps inspired by historical-critical work, are constantly being elicited and, as a result, 'the cultic presence of the original wonder-worker' is constantly being 'received and processed through the imaginative labor of cultic recognition' (p. 182).

As this summary indicates, *Unspeakable Cults* is wonderfully ambitious. What initially appears to be an engagement with a familiar problem (Christian faith and historical consciousness) quickly morphs into something quite remarkable: a sympathetic reading of the two Smiths, presented as a test-case for contemporary historical research, as a resource for theological reflection; an arranged marriage between Schleiermacher and Aquinas, with the former's prescient grasp of modern mores paired with the latter's rich account of divine action; a bold endorsement of the value of historical scholarship, of various kinds, for Christian theology; and an arresting account of the need for a pluralised christological imagination.

To be sure, questions loom. I was disappointed that DeHart did not take up what seemed like a golden opportunity to reckon with some important 'imaginative improvisations of prophecy' that 'pivot ... between the biblical remembrance of his past and the partial apprehension of his future fullness' (p. 233): works by liberationist thinkers that have drawn attention to Christ's solidarity with the marginalised and minoritised, disclosing a deep compatibility between Christian faith and movements for peace and justice. While DeHart is surely right to worry about a tendency to 'nudge the "historical" Jesus into some religiously or ethically satisfying shape' – say, 'the crypto-feminist' or 'the guerrilla destabilizer of the social order' (p. 226) – why not pay tribute, at least in passing, to those who work against the grain of ecclesial and academic convention? Are they not on the right track, at least when it comes to keeping the liveliness, capaciousness and the rich 'monstrosity' of Christ in view? I was also unpersuaded, at points, by the treatment of Aquinas and Schleiermacher. In interpretative terms, I suspect that Schleiermacher's christology might be a bit less hampered by 'psychologism' than DeHart supposes, and I take Schleiermacher's ecclesiology to reach beyond a meditation on 'the social dynamics of human groupings in which an irreducible collective "persona" emerges with its own quasi-psychological identity and activity' (p. 151). More broadly, I worry that both Aquinas' and Schleiermacher's reliance on the idiom of causality risks short-changing reflection on the missions of the Word and the Spirit. Might not a different conceptuality – or, at least, additional conceptualities – invigorate the 'cult of the unspeakable'? Isn't imagination and improvisation needed with respect to our dogmatic lexicon, perhaps especially when it comes to thinking about the missions of the second and third persons of the Trinity?

Such questions, however, do not detract from my admiration for this book. *Unspeakable Cults* is a superlative contribution to scholarship. It is distinguished by erudition and insight and discloses a theological imagination of the first order. My hope is that it is carefully read, vigorously debated and enjoyed by many.