A review of 'God and Mystery in Words' by David Brown

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This is the final volume in a theological trilogy – the first God & Enchantment of Place examined the need for faith to re-engage with a sense of place and context whilst the second God & Grace of Body explored the need for an embodied understanding of faith through art, dance, music and the Eucharist. The concluding book tackles the way in which poetry and drama can be channels for religious experience and was written in close conjunction with its immediate predecessor. God & Mystery in Words consists of two sections: Part I Experience through Metaphor; and Part II Experience through Drama – each with four chapters. At the outset Brown states his conviction ‘that revealed religion builds on natural religion rather than wholly subverts it’ (p 1) as he seeks to integrate his thinking about metaphor and drama with his ideas on worship. For Brown words and language can ‘function sacramentally’ (p 17) and in his opening chapter he draws out how such a sacramental understanding has roots in Greek philosophy and Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah). This introduction leads into his detailed consideration of divine disclosure in metaphor and poetry. He observes that the Greek term from which the word ‘poet’ is derived originally meant ‘maker’ or ‘creator’ which may, in part, account for the fact that ‘Christians have at times been as suspicious of metaphor as they have been of the visual image’ (p 53). Poetry and metaphor are resistant to closure which means they have a close relationship with both religion and iconoclasm.

Having concluded that we must engage with a poet’s metaphors on their terms rather than ours because ‘only that way can poetry provide the possibility of access to new understandings and experience’ (p 66) in the next chapter Brown turns his attention to the poetic expressions found in hymns and psalms. After
setting out some of the historical background he turns to the vexed issue of contemporary hymnody where he appears critical of many recent developments. To some extent this is because the present range of hymnody is ‘too narrow’ and characterised by a ‘continued reluctance to explore the whole range of human emotion and experience’ (p 108). Then in the final chapter for Part 1 he explores the relationship between verbal and visual images – in particular through preaching, illuminated manuscripts and the issue of idolatry. Brown clearly values sermons and illumination but makes the bold claim that ‘so much of contemporary Christianity sees itself as a religion of the word, and as such marginalises the visual’ (p 132). In my experience, ‘the visual’ has undergone something of a renaissance in contemporary Christianity through the use of banners in churches, together with more recent use of slides and images in worship.

Part II examines experience of God in relation to drama and takes a similar approach by exploring the historical links between performance and religion through the Classical, Medieval and Baroque periods down to our own time with Peter Brook’s four types of theatre – ‘deadly’, ‘holy’, ‘rough’ and ‘immediate’. For Brown, in the same way that metaphor and poetry are open forms of encounter, so are drama and liturgy: ‘A liturgical performance that has secure boundaries, but also opens up unexpected avenues as well ought … to be the aim’ (p 184). This leads into a discussion on liturgical singing including an interesting parallel between this aspect of church life and contemporary sporting culture. Brown points out that ‘deep participation in certain activities is possible without direct involvement: through imaginative identification. It is this kind of ability that has been lost in the modern church. Despite never touching the ball, the football crowd is fully engaged with the actions of their team. Yet congregations are seldom encouraged towards similar appropriate responses towards the choirs
they hear’ (p 216). The penultimate chapter examines how notions of performance, costume and staging are brought together in ritual and liturgy. He takes a stand against what he sees as Foucault’s contention that much social ritual is a powerful instrument of oppression, arguing that by ‘securing the right kind of attitude’ can ‘explain why drama is after all the best, more inclusive category against which discussion of Christian liturgy should be set’ (p 236 – my italics). He rounds off this section by making an appeal for a sense mystery as essential to a proper approach to liturgical drama and, indeed the life of Christ.

A brief closing chapter seeks to draw together an overview of not only this volume but the previous two as well. Brown concludes, ‘What I am above all concerned to ensure is that Christianity be seen as a religion to be practised and not just a doctrinal system that may or may not be internally coherent. That is why I was so adamant that among relevant criteria should always be included a degree of imaginative engagement’ (p 276). He is surely correct to insist upon the value of ‘imaginative engagement’ and over the course of these three volumes he has provided a fine example of how Christianity and imagination can be brought together in a creative and stimulating way.

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