

Ronald F. Thiemann. *The Humble Sublime: Secularity and the Politics of Belief*. London: I. B. Taurus, 2014. 255 pages. \$90.

The Humble Sublime is an extraordinary book. Its title refers to a writing practice, one celebrated by Auerbach in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Thiemann links the humble sublime to what he calls “sacramental realism,” a mode of representation in language that refuses ultimately to split *signum* and *res*. He then argues that its own view manages to hold on to the notion that God’s revelation is precisely in, with and under the ordinary--a uniquely Lutheran view of sacramental theology lies underneath. Its power, however, comes from joining it to the writing practice of the humble sublime, thus revealing how this particular way of thinking about reality and representation underlies Western literary practice. In Thiemann’s careful handling, Luther’s sacramental theology perdures as a kind of culturally engaged theo-poetic that, in the end, can through the witnesses of figures like Anna Akhmatova, Langston Hughes, George Orwell, and Albert Camus (the subjects of chapters 2-5 respectively) who themselves lived in dark times, inform even public theology and political life. In a striking way, Thiemann’s book passes through the author’s own “dark times.” While completing the book, Dr. Thiemann is struggling with pancreatic cancer, which ultimately took his life in 2012. While this aspect of autobiography is not often thematized in the book, it pokes through, at points, in revealing and poignant ways. And in this way, this extraordinary book succeeds by becoming mysteriously ordinary even in the face of death.

In many respects, the foil for this book is the philosopher Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007). Early on, Thiemann unpacks elements of Taylor’s important works and the way he portrays the rise of modernity. Taylor argues that modernity has shifted away from a kind of enchanted world of the medieval system of seven sacraments, which conceived of the human self as “porous” to external supernatural forces. Instead, modernity shifts toward a secular world marked by disenchantment and a human self “buffered” and operating in a more “immanent frame.” Of course, modern “disenchantment” hardly describes the vibrant religious context of what we often now call a “postsecular age.” Taylor’s work is much more nuanced than such a secularization sledgehammer. For Taylor, secularization is not about “subtracting” God or the sacred, but rather understanding reality in a way that does not necessarily *require* God. What strikes Taylor is that in the medieval world, reality is so oriented to the supernatural that it can be conceived in no other way. Late modernity, by contrast, is a context where it is *plausible* to understand reality in an immanent frame, even apart from God.

Thiemann worries that Taylor’s notion of disenchantment rules out the possibility of an ordinary sacramental theology that embraces the “in, with, and under” reality where revelation happens *sub contrario*. Thiemann rightly sees Luther in continuity with some key elements of the catholic understanding of sacraments. At the same time, Luther’s shift of focus to the external word of Christ’s promise/command in connection the sign participates in this same, classic Protestant, disenchanting change. Luther’s understanding of real presence is tied uniquely to the external word that makes it possible for him to revise the Eucharistic prayer in terms of Testament. I wondered at points whether Taylor actually was the proper foil for this part of Thiemann’s argument. The affirmation of the ordinary is a powerful driver of the Reformation legacy on the changing cultural scene. One might argue that this particular Reformation shift under the influence of disenchantment explains precisely how the beautiful ambiguities of “sacramental realism” hold such mysterious power in literature and philosophy long after the

sacramental universe of medieval Catholicism, like its emerging Protestant counterparts, undergoes disenchantment in modern and Enlightenment forms.

The mysterious yet ordinary Emmaus feast that is *The Humble Sublime* is particularly sumptuous in the chapters on Akhmatova, Hughes, Orwell, Camus, and in part, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. These chapters are rich and worth reading for homileticians and preachers alike. A careful read of Akhmatova and Langston Hughes in particular will yield great insight for preachers and teachers of preaching who share in a recurring theo-poetic task. The “humble sublime,” as it appears in their writing practice, and in wonderful works of visual art described throughout the book, can aid the field of homiletics and the practice of preaching to rediscover how sacramental realism might shape more deeply a language of preaching that struggles with naming divine presence in ways that can bear the weight of truth in dark times. I recommend this book highly.

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