

Book Reviews

Through the Dark Field: The Incarnation through an Aesthetics of Vulnerability. By Susie Paulik Babka. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017. 319 pages. \$34.95.
doi: 10.1017/hor.2018.7

Understanding kenosis to be at the heart of the doctrine of the Incarnation, Susie Paulik Babka follows the Incarnation down a deep, dark exploration of vulnerability and catastrophe, allowing expressions of wounded humanity in art, poetry, and culture to raise theological questions that will never be resolved but might open the theologian to the inevitable unknowability of the mystery revealed through the Incarnation. Seeking to reimagine the doctrine of the Incarnation, Babka weaves together insights from a wide variety of systematic, comparative, and philosophical theologians, including Blanchot, Levinas, Derrida, Dostoevsky, Tillich, Tracy, and Rahner. Babka allows art not only to ground her discussion and raise the critical questions that will deconstruct previously held certainties, but also to let uncertainty, vulnerability, and compassion lead to the void where “life emerges from emptiness” (xi). Babka insists that artists and theologians walk a common path as they seek to glimpse the depths of meaning in the material world; “the process of creating a work of art, and the process of envisioning the invisible, involves submission to the imagination, the muscle of the mind responsible for creating the images by which we shape the world” (3).

The book begins with an exploration of the aesthetics of vulnerability. Referencing Blanchot and Levinas, Babka expresses a dialectical theology in which the consciousness of grief refuses resolution and yet urges toward ethical action. She carries that dialectic into a discussion of traditional Christology, recognizing that for the earliest Christians kenosis was a central approach to Christology that slowly ceded toward more definitive Christological formulas. After discussing the significance of vulnerability in artistic expression and using artistic expression as a resource for theology, Babka’s discussion narrows to focus on a few exemplary artistic works, including Masaccio’s *Gnadenstuhl*, Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*, and Rothko’s

Seagram Murals. She allows questions and insights for understanding the vulnerability of the Incarnation to emerge through this exploration.

Through the Dark Field is an original and insightful work in constructive theology. Babka's language and style of writing lead the reader to spaces of unknowing, to voids where certainty falls away and only questions remain. Furthermore, she draws upon rich and varied aspects of human experience as a resource for theological inquiry. These multiple examples range from the ordinary to the catastrophic and confirm her theses that "God may be glimpsed but never grasped—a divine kenosis of self-emptying that is continually poured out for the fulfillment of the Other in the sphere of time and space" (xiii).

This book makes a valuable contribution to interdisciplinary Christian theological scholarship and will provide both theologians and artists with valuable insights for their work. As a theologian reading this monograph, I found it difficult at times to follow Babka's exploration of some artistic images because I could not visualize the artistic works. Babka points out the difficulty of trying to convey the impression of an artistic masterpiece through small black-and-white grayscale copies in books (228). While this is a valid point, I was unable to fully appreciate Babka's exploration of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, until I looked at images online. In addition, the valuable path Babka forged for the reader into places of unknowing was sometimes marred by a lack of clarity. Babka rapidly shifts from one theological reference to another, from one field of discipline to another, and discusses one artistic work with reference to many others. It is clear that she has expertise and perceptive analysis of the sources she explores, but at times she fails to adequately articulate the reasons for her rapid transitions and shifts, leaving the reader with appreciative impressions of these sources but unable to tie them to the larger argument of the book. Despite these limitations, the book articulates a profound vision that makes reading this monograph a valuable experience.

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Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King. By Matthew W. Bates. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017. xvi + 234 pages. \$24.99 (paper).
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What must people do to be saved? For half a millennium two main Christian views in the West have stood opposed: Protestant championship