

BOOK REVIEW

Bargár, Pavol. 2023. *Embodied Existence: Our Common Life in God*

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Reviewed by Nigel Rooms

Theological anthropology is foundational for a sound understanding of Christian mission in, from and with the local church. Who are those in whom God is at work both inside and outside of the Christian community? How does a theological understanding of the human person contribute to the crossing of boundaries in Christian mission which encompasses all of creation? It is no surprise that missiologists Bevans and Schroeder (2004) make anthropology one of their six ‘constants’ that have to be negotiated in contextual mission in every age and context. However, the theological relationship of the Judaeo-Christian tradition with the body is not a happy one as Adrian Thatcher has shown in his recent review of the field, with the aptly named book *Vile Bodies* (2023). We need a much more positive approach to body theology, especially in mission, which I believe is provided by the work under consideration here.

Pavol Bargár, the author of this book, is well-qualified to write on the subject since he works at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague as well as being a member of and significant contributor to the International Association of Mission Studies – especially from his base in Eastern Europe. The book arises from a wider ecumenically-based research project conducted by Bargár and other colleagues at Charles University (xvii). This ecumenical perspective is clear in how Bargár interacts with documents from the World Council of Churches and its Faith and Order Commission throughout the book. It is also true to say that Bargár is widely read and draws together an amazing number of sources and interlocutors in the work as a whole.

Many other theological anthropologies have been written, such as David Kelsey’s (2009) massive two-volume *magnum opus*. What is unique about this work is the

direct theological engagement with missiology and its dialogical approach to the subject from popular (mainly, but not wholly) western cultural artefacts (or *poiesis*) – especially cinema in the form of film. In fact, the book begins with a description of a film by the director Wim Wenders (1) and each chapter has a film or two to illustrate the argument – both positively and negatively. Largely this works: even though I was not that familiar with many of the particular films Bargár utilises, he gives a full description and carefully explains the connections to the subject matter. Perhaps therefore it is cinema itself which has influenced Bargár to write as he does about theological anthropology from six perspectives in each of the six chapters – story, body, imagination, transformation, relationality and feast. This approach, the author claims, “enables us to seek and pursue a common life for the whole creation in the force field of God’s radical and transformational reign – our common life in God” (129).

What I appreciated here was the bringing together of several themes, which while not original in themselves are helpfully explicated together in one place. Thus, narrative theology, particularly the storied human being, is a good place to start and embodiment has recently seen a resurgence of interest especially in practical theology. I have long thought that the gift of human imagination is much underused in the Christian Church and its mission and no serious commentary on humanity these days could ignore themes of transformation and relationality in community. I really enjoyed the final chapter on ‘feast’ as, while I know receiving and offering hospitality is key to the life of mission, I hadn’t quite seen it related to the breadth and depth of the celebratory feasts in Scripture.

Inevitably I have a few quibbles. Bargár wishes to reframe the kingdom of God to the ‘kin-dom of God’ (56) which I am not against, but in the exchange of one metaphor for another I would have expected a greater critique of the newer image, but it is rather taken for granted. Siblings might be more equal than the citizens of a kingdom, but that doesn’t stop deep fissures and rivalries emerging between them. Then I’d like to have seen a bit more on the relationship between the two hemispheres of our brains, spirituality, sexuality, prayer, *theosis* and transfiguration (rather than only transformation), particularly in the light of the work of Iain McGilchrist, Maggie Ross, Sarah Coakley and others. Finally, I’d also like to have read a concluding chapter which brought all the others together and maybe some examples from the field of how the proposals made can be embodied in practice, but perhaps these are available elsewhere in the wider research project.

Overall, I would thoroughly recommend this affordable book, it will make you think again about the human person and Christian mission, give many avenues for deeper

reflection and offer wider reading on the subject. It may even change your mind and how you inhabit your relational body in God's good creation.

About the Reviewer

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