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Review of Lucy Bregman, Beyond Silence and Denial: Death and Dying Reconsidered (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) for Review Symposium, Horizons.

In today's pluralistic, secular context, most people can no longer easily identify distinctive Christian perspectives on death. Moreover, commonly recognized Christian views, such as those that equate death and evil or elevate the afterlife over this life, have serious limitations. In her research over the past several years, Temple University Professor of Religion Lucy Bregman has worked hard to correct these twin problems of secular oversight and uncritical Christian thinking. In 1992, in Death in the Midst of Life she challenges naturalistic, individualistic images in the death and dying literature and places the powerful motifs of Christianity and depth psychology into a mutually enriching dialogue. More recently, in First Person Mortal (1995, co-authored with Sara Thiermann) she turns from theoretical to autobiographical accounts of illness and dying in diaries, essays, and a few novels to uncover a uniquely American vision of mortality and afterlife.

Throughout this work, Bregman is strongly motivated by the suspicion, if not conviction, that the Christian tradition and community has distinctive contributions not fully grasped by the scientific and psychological world view. This does not mean that she is not equally invested in particular psychologies. In fact, in contrast to some perspectives in the death and dying movement, depth psychology remains a "potential partner" partly because it is religiously useful (1992, p. 14). Freud, Jung, Hillman, Lifton, and others make traditional religious thought on death accessible to the modern person.

Bregman's most recent book, Beyond Silence and Denial, extends this agenda. In the ever-growing literature on death since the 1970s, counselors and sufferers have unmasked the problems of denial and silence. What has happened as a result, Bregman asks, to North American Christian understandings? How does this new psychological language on death as a natural event, and therefore to be accepted and grieved primarily as "loss," reconfigure how Christians regard death?

Christianity has, as the rest of the book illustrates, "more to say on the subject" than captured either by the death and dying movement or by cheap renditions of Christian views. The Christian tradition has, in fact, "said an enormous amount" (2) and death as natural or as loss do not figure prominently in this. Christians need to take stock and discuss carefully "what seem to be points of conflict between the new voices on death and dying . . . and Christianity's previous messages on the subject" (4). Since the new language on death is still in process, it would be good if Christianity proved a less "disappointing" (9) resource than heretofore.

After an historical survey of prominent motifs from early Christianity through the Middle Ages and Reformation to today (Chapter 1), the remainder of the book focuses on prominent images of the last thirty years. Bregman devotes three chapters to two prominent images in the death and dying literature: death as natural (Chapter 2 and 3) and death as loss (Chapter 4). Sometimes without knowing it, advocacy for the dying in the death awareness movement tapped into all sorts of deeper, mythic hopes about the benevolent harmony of Mother Nature, the renunciation of an unsupported war, and the appeal of the "feminine" sphere. Least we dismiss the movement's petition for acceptance of death as sheer nostalgia for a by-gone time of "tame death," Bregman

reminds us that the enemy behind the nostalgia still largely reigns. Few people can avoid dying in highly medicalized contexts where technology and professionals isolate the sick and rob them of moral control. Theologians and clergy agree with therapists about this unrelenting problem.

What then are the theological motifs that Bregman believes deserve greater examination? Two motifs are missing. Death as punishment (Chapter 5) and hope in an afterlife (Chapter 6) have almost completely dropped off the map of faith. However, the complex moral and spiritual needs met by both beliefs have not vanished. Without any better way to explain death's moral meaning, people file malpractice suits, blame illness on lifestyle, and see personal attitude as responsible for recovery. Similarly, visions of the sacrality of the cycles of nature and near-death experiences capture the postmodern imagination about death as a transition rather than end.

In both cases, Bregman does not rush in with new theological imagery. Bregman is a landscaper at heart. She plants, waters, and tends new seedlings and expects the seasonal passing away of withered garden refuse. Despite her advice on grief, she herself does not mourn the “eclipse” of traditional Christian views of death precisely because this allows new Christian motifs to grow as people today refashion the landscape of contemporary faith. As she illustrates in her meditations on the passion story that conclude each chapter, new cultural understandings allow Christians to find in the passion and resurrection of Christ new insights that were not visible before.

This leaves me with several questions. Bregman seems content with a “truce or division of labor, or even helpful complementarity” between psychological and Christian views on death and loss (119). Is this method of academic harmony adequate? Is

Bregman sometimes too optimistic about cultural contributions and, at the same time, about Christianity's ongoing vitality in a highly pluralistic context? The example with which she begins the book of the seminary student who cannot identify any distinctively Christian contributions on death is more representative than she realizes. In talking about such ultimate matters, one hungers for more than description, for something like normative construction. What would an adequate image of dying and death look like? How should Christians regard death given the longer tradition? Are there places where Christianity declares cultural images distorted? Ultimately, what should seminarians tell their parishioners, if not just death is natural and involves complicated encounters with loss?

Assessing the new psychological literature is an essential task and one of Bregman's most important contributions. She reserves as an addendum to each chapter the evocation of fresh theological meanings. By doing so, direct confrontation between Christian and secular ideas is avoided or at least bracketed. Could the meditations that end each chapter, that sometimes seem like afterthoughts despite their creative theological engagement, become another book, one more instructive for believers themselves? If anything resembling a Christian perspective is to survive postmodernity, perhaps this is precisely what is needed.