

young people. However, through his assiduous study of missionary records and specifically his careful reading and analysis of missionary periodicals, Morrison provides new insights into the myriad ways in which young people were informed and active agents of missionary support. The book's innovative global-historical approach reveals similarities and differences in how missionary literature, pedagogical projects, and religious ideas were experienced across a variety of settings. This approach opens productive avenues for future research and especially further study about how children's participation in the missionary enterprise was differentiated by race, class, gender, and geography. *Protestant Children, Missions and Education* makes important contributions to a variety of fields—including religious history, childhood history, colonial history, the history of education, and the history of emotions—and Morrison's work demonstrates the value of bringing these different areas of study into conversation with one another.

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**Dennis L. Durst, *The Perils of Human Exceptionalism: Elements of a Nineteenth-Century Theological Anthropology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022). 253pp. \$105.**

“Theology used to be a resource to which many turned for solace or [for] answers to the tragic side of life. If one can say that such an exceptional view of the human [understood as created in the *imago Dei* from the lenses of Christian theology] . . . was widely embraced at the birth of the nineteenth century, by the end of the century such an account was greatly reduced in its cultural authority, especially among the shapers of modern thought” (2)

Thus begins Dennis L. Durst erudite, cumbersome, diffusive romp through the nineteenth century. Part intellectual history, part theology, part cultural analysis, the book seeks to account for the ideas and people that knocked humankind off its lofty pedestal, rendering the human no longer as exceptional but just another animal, if a super-intelligent one, confronted with the general fragmentation of modern life and knowledge.

Opening with a plodding “theological journey” to survey Christian-theological approaches to anthropology in the premodern era, Durst turns afterwards to discuss William Paley and the rise of natural theology (chapter 2) in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, followed by an examination (chapter 3) of how the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher understood human nature from a theological standpoint that prioritized religious experience and conceptualized religion as a “feeling of absolute dependence on the Absolute” (9).

Chapter 4 explores Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) and how different Christian voices reacted to its unsettling “decentering” account of human origins. Chapter 5 sums up the contribution of various “anti-theologians”—Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, Edward Tylor, Henry Maudsley, and Friedrich Nietzsche—to the effacement

of human exceptionalism. Collectively, Durst claims, they “saw Christianity itself as an unfortunate detour in human history which demanded a modern course correction. They sought a cultured humanity freed from the shackles of a theological account” (9). The claim, however, does not really apply to Comte, who saw the “theological” stage of humanity as a necessary one, leading to a “philosophical” and then a “positivist” stage.

Among the most interesting parts of the book, chapter 6 treats the misbegotten “science” of phrenology, which sought to understand human capabilities according to the size and shape of one’s cranium. Although more hokum than science, Durst persuasively suggests that this discredited field of inquiry played an important role in reducing questions about the human “soul” or “mind” to questions about the physical “brain,” the basis of modern neuroscience. He shows too how Christians responded to this “science” and how it sometimes lent itself to simplistic generalizations about whole people and racial groups.

Chapters 7 and 8 examines how human nature was understood respectively from the standpoint of social Christianity (i.e., the “Social Gospel”) and the Transcendentalist movement. The former sought to deliver humanity from the dark underbelly of industrialization and urbanization. The latter promoted the beauty and grandeur of nature and the practice of introspection in relation to it. Even so, Durst contends, transcendentalists helped effect a shift away from understanding the natural world as created by a loving, Trinitarian God and toward “an impersonal divine order” (10).

In chapter 10, the author discusses “degeneration theory,” which arguably replaced notions of original sin with quasi-scientific ideas about human degradation, while chapter 11 makes forays into William James’ landmark book *Varieties of Human Experience* (1902), interpreting it as a learned dismissal of theological accounts of the human in favor of ones that prioritized experience—religious experience foremost.

As one might gather by now, the book is “all over the place.” Much can be learned by reading it, to be sure, but I kept asking myself whether all the parts really hang together? In a general way, I suppose they do, and Durst makes efforts throughout to try to keep questions of anthropology front and center. He is also keen to circle back to his general thesis: the decline of robustly Christian understandings of human nature in favor of scientific (or often scientistic) ones and the rise of general cultural fragmentation and pluralism when discussing human nature and so much else.

In a well-intentioned effort to show that, despite everything, “the image of God endures” (227), Durst presents the reader in the conclusion with a shaggy-dog tale that discusses, inter alia, recent interpretations of Genesis 1: 26–28, substantive and functional accounts of human nature, Karl Barth’s theology, human dignity in Victorian and more recent perspective, the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, ecumenism and the rise of the World Council of Churches, the Second Vatican Council, various organizations that seek to bridge theology and the natural sciences, and persistent perils to human flourishing as witnessed in the late twentieth-century atrocities that took place in Cambodia, the Balkans, and Rwanda.

Engaging with attention-worthy material throughout, the book, in the final analysis, zigs and zags and could have used a sharper focus and much better editing. One will need a large heart and the patience of Job to truly enjoy it.

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