

An Assortment of Meditations

Samuel M. Brown. *Where the Soul Hungers: One Doctor's Journey from Atheism to Faith*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2021. 157 pp. Paperback: \$12.99. ISBN: 978-1-9503-0404-2.

Reviewed by Robert Bennett

Samuel M. Brown's *Where the Soul Hungers* is something of a grab bag of sundry reflections on the gospel. As Brown himself explains, the book is intended to be part "pure devotions" and part "philosophical essays" mixed with scattered attempts to "repent" or "celebrate life and the senses" (10–11). Frequently, he simply offers remarkably fresh interpretations of what might otherwise be considered all too familiar scriptures. Ultimately, this menagerie of meditations extends in multiple inventive and creative directions. As such, there is no central thread that ties the collection together, but this allows Brown ample latitude to explore a surprisingly wide range of territory.

The text starts off with a philosophical tone as Brown attempts to reconfigure intellectual questions in more spiritually productive theoretical frameworks and advocates restoring religious sensibilities to a highly secularized modern world. But it quickly turns in a more personal direction, relating moving anecdotes about Brown's struggles to be a better person, whether this is by becoming a more equal partner in his marriage or by baking "cookies of the priesthood" (79) for fellow church members, which enables him to discover a new "way to bring the mystery, power, and ordinariness of the sacrament into the patterns of ministry" (76). Other engaging stories describe his experiences of being mistaken for a homeless man (twice) and his protracted struggle to learn to appreciate opera. He even offers brief glimpses into how his wife's battle with cancer helped him develop a more "sacramental life,

one more sacred and more ordinary than I had previously known” (72). The emphasis is always on how these personal experiences have helped Brown and, by extension, can also help the reader “expand possibilities for living religiously” (11).

At its best, Brown’s meditations reveal surprising new insights into the gospel from unexpected angles and perspectives. Counterintuitively, he advocates for living an *inauthentic* life that rejects modern “expressive individualism” (51) for a more communal life aligned to “something greater and better than” our own personal selves (55). In another clever twist, he subtly reframes a story about the blessings he incorrectly misremembered receiving for not doing homework on Sunday as perhaps really being more about his “arrogance that expects God to deliver blessings on command” (64). He even extends this incorrectly remembered incident to help explain why Joseph Smith told his own First Vision story in different ways on different occasions because of the “twists and turns in the telling of our sacred stories” (66). When it comes to interpreting scriptures, Brown suggests that we might more profitably read the story of David and Goliath by casting ourselves in the role of Goliath rather than David. Provocatively reading this story “upside down” (99), he writes, “When I start to think I’ve encountered a Goliath in my life, I pause now and ask whether I am in fact the Goliath” (98). This reversal of the narrative, Brown argues, can help promote greater humility and civility in our dealings with others.

The one problematic aspect of Brown’s treatise, however, is that it attempts to pass itself off as something of a faith crisis, or at least a faith struggle, with its subtitle describing itself as “one doctor’s journey from atheism to faith.” Strictly speaking, this is not what Brown’s text really is. Brown may self-describe as a “lapsed atheist” (5), but by this he apparently means that his father had to “cajole” him into being baptized because of his “conviction” that he was a “strenuous atheist” at the tender young age of eight and that he considered himself something of a “French existentialist” in high school even if he “didn’t understand much of the

actual philosophy” (15). This doesn’t really represent the deeply invested, enduring commitment to atheism that the subtitle seems to suggest, especially when Brown admits that his “adolescent system of belief and practice collapsed” with “nothing of any importance” from his former life “remain[ing] as it had been” by the time he turned eighteen (16). Brown may have had a very interesting life as a teenage existentialist, but that is not the story that he presents in this book. Very few details about this former life as an atheist are given—aside from perhaps his nonconformist appearance and a brief questioning of his sexual identity—and even the particulars of his teenage conversion story are not recounted in this volume, though he explains that he has already presented them elsewhere. Certainly, this brief adolescent conversion story is in no way the complex story of a mature, well-educated doctor seriously grappling with issues of faith and doubt. Instead, Brown describes himself perhaps more accurately as “steadfastly religious” (9) with a soul “hungry for the presence of God” (5). Long before he becomes a doctor, he describes his missionary self as a “scrupulous perfectionist” (21), while at college he remains “fastidious about not doing any schoolwork on Sundays” (63). Ultimately, what is recounted in this book are the impressive spiritual musings of a deeply committed believer, a believer who has much to say about his interesting and hard-won personal insights into the gospel, but very little about any serious, let alone protracted, faith crisis. Methinks the teenage atheist doth protest too much.

This, in turn, raises a deeper question not only about this specific volume itself but also about the Maxwell Institute’s larger Living Faith series to which this book belongs. Several volumes in this series are powerful personal reflections on living a life deeply committed to the gospel, including Adam S. Miller’s *Letters to a Young Mormon* and George B. Handley’s *If Truth Were a Child*. While both of these works are informed by each author’s life as a scholar, neither one presents itself as the faith crisis of someone immersed in profound doubt. Both authors stand comfortably in their own Mormon skin. Even Patrick Q.

Mason's *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* is more about how to respond to other people's faith crises than about Mason's own personal religious struggles. The question should be asked, then, why Brown didn't also take such a readily available approach and simply lay out his meditations on the gospel instead of tacking on his somewhat superficial flirtation with atheism as a bait-and-switch frame narrative. One wonders if Brown's volume is simply trying too hard to attach itself to the rising cultural cachet of faith crisis narratives in Mormon culture at large. If this is as compelling a confrontation with doubt as the Living Faith series can come up with, however, the series might be better served by staying in its own lane.

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Smoot in New Light

Michael Harold Paulos and Konden Smith Hansen, eds.
The Reed Smoot Hearings: The Investigation of a Mormon Senator and the Transformation of an American Religion.
Logan: Utah State University Press, 2021. 302 pp.
Paper: \$46.00. ISBN: 978-1-64642-311-8.

Reviewed by Kathleen Flake

The eight essays in this collection describe and interpret the US Senate's investigation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during the Progressive Era. Nominally an investigative hearing on the election of Utah senator Reed Smoot, who was also a member of the