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# Evil, sexuality, and disease in Grünewald's Body of Christ

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Mozart himself referred to as “the mystical sanctuary of our religion” that so frequently occurs in Mozart’s religious music. Küng concludes with a chapter analyzing the entirety of Mozart’s great *Coronation Mass*.

This is a fine and wonderful little book that will be read with appreciation by theologians, musicians, untrained lovers of music, and Christian laity alike. It is certainly the best examination of Mozart’s musical religiosity to date.

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## **Evil, Sexuality and Disease in Grünewald’s Body of Christ**

Eugene Monick  
Dallas: Spring Publications, 1993  
xv + 189 pp. \$18.50 U.S.

Eugene Monick’s book is a thought-provoking study of the links between sexuality, sickness and religion. His major focus is the violently graphic crucifixion scene of the Isenheim altarpiece, completed by Matthias Grünewald around 1515. The work was commissioned by members of the Order of St. Anthony, for the chapel of a monastery which had become a hospice for victims of plague, leprosy, syphilis and the “burning sickness”, a form of gangrenous ergotism.

The painting features a grotesquely twisted Christ, whose body is riddled with wounds and festering sores. Monick arrives at the rather startling conclusion that this Christ—like many of the original viewers of the painting—suffers from the effects of syphilis. This image is one which is far removed from that of orthodox Christianity, where the perfect person takes upon himself the sin and suffering of the outside world; Grünewald’s Christ embodies corruption literally as well as figuratively. Of particular note is the suggestion that his disease is one linked to sexual activity, traditionally considered evil in orthodox Christian thought.

The notion of Jesus as a sexual being is not new. It appears as early as the second century in gnostic literature and in modern times has been explored by a diverse body of writers, from theologians William Phipps and Rosemary Ruether to art historian Leo Sternberg. However, Monick suggests an even more controversial hypothesis—that Grünewald’s Jesus had a sexually-transmitted disease. This Christ has special relevance in the age of AIDS.

As a Jungian analyst, Monick believes there is an interlacing network of good and evil at the core of the human psyche. As an Episcopalian priest,

this idea presents him with a moral dilemma when considering Jesus: if Christ is fully human, a Symbol of the essential Self, then he must also represent within himself both light and shadow. While this notion is a difficult one, its acceptance, as Monick notes, "can give an enormous sense of relief to bewildered and frightened persons... [Grünewald's] image of God shares with me a common nature; the evil I know as a reality in my own life is intrinsic to reality itself" (p. 25).

In his final chapter, Monick leaves behind the stark horror of the Crucifixion and considers briefly one of the images on the inside panel of the Isenheim altar. Grünewald's Resurrection reveals an entirely different Christ image—a resplendent figure, surrounded by an aureole of fire, who bursts forth from the darkness of the grave. One must see the crucifixion through the resurrection and vice versa: in both life and death, good and evil are intertwined.

Monick's book is less scholarly analysis than meditation upon an artistic image which had a profound emotional effect on the author. While the Jungian language may present difficulties for the uninitiated, and the speculations regarding Christ's sexuality—especially the suggestion of his bisexuality—may be disturbing to some, this book provides many useful insights. It would be of particular interest to those who must deal, either personally or in the context of a counselling relationship, with burdens of guilt associated with sexually-transmitted illnesses. The study is also worth reading if only to remind us of the power of visual imagery, not only in shaping our faith but also as a vehicle for spiritual understanding and psychological healing.

Monick is the author of two other pioneering works of "sexually conscious theology": *Phallos: Sacred Image of the Masculine* (1987) and *Castration and Male Rage: The Phallic Wound* (1991).

Diane E. Peters

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## **Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis**

Mark Kline Taylor

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books

xii + 292 pp.

Mark Kline Taylor opens this volume by reflecting upon his earliest boyhood memories of a Zapotec villager named Esperanza in Mexico. He lived there with his family for one year, while his father was doing anthropological research. Esperanza is also the name of a barrio in Guatemala City which influenced Taylor by their "life in Christ" (p. x). He then moves into