

EUCCHARIST AS THE GIFT OF POLITICAL LANGUAGE

By

Jason M. Smith

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

August 10, 2018

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Bruce Morrill, S.J., Ph.D.

Paul DeHart, Ph.D.

Ellen Armour, Ph.D.

William Franke, Ph.D.

Kimberly Hope Belcher, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2018 by Jason Michael Smith  
All Rights Reserved

*For my parents*

*and for Rachel,*

*who taught me to speak,*

*in their own way.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have many people to thank for the innumerable gifts they have given me, gifts without which this project would have never been completed. First, to the members of my dissertation committee I extend my thanks for their aid during this process. To my advisor Bruce Morrill for his friendship and extensive comments on this manuscript I give my heartfelt thanks. Thanks must be given also to Paul DeHart and Ellen Armour who have been my teachers since the Masters level, and who have in their own way influenced this project at its roots. Finally, I thank my outside readers, William Franke and Kimberley Hope Belcher, for their influence on this work through their scholarship and correspondence.

My path to this degree has been lined by a vast number of kind people, the whole of which I have no space to thank here. I would like to specifically mention a few of those who have been central from my early days as a Hebrew Bible student to today. I would like to thank Richard Eliot Friedman at the University of Georgia for first setting me on this path through the study of Biblical Hebrew. I would like to thank members of the Theology Faculty at Vanderbilt University and Dr. Jimmy Byrd for allowing me to change my emphasis from Hebrew Bible to Theological Studies when I was admitted solely to the former program as a Masters student. I would like to thank my doctoral colleagues at Vanderbilt University for their friendship and conversation. I am particularly grateful to Andrew Krinks and Peter Capretto for their support and insight throughout the composition of this project. I am also especially grateful to the members of the Theological Studies colloquium who aided me in slowly refining the insights that drive the arguments to follow, particularly Lauren Smelser-White, Dorothy Dean, Chris Corbin, Amaryah Jones-Armstrong, Hillary Jerome Scarsella, and Zachary Settle.

I also owe a great debt to the members of the “Emerging Critical Resources for Liturgical Studies” seminar at the North American Academy of Liturgy for their comments on portions of this manuscript. Particularly, I thank Kristine Suna-Koro, who convened the seminar, Gerald Liu, who took the time to craft an extended response to the submitted portions, and the members in attendance that offered their expert recommendations on means to improving my argument—Sarah K. Johnson, Gabriel Pivarnik, Rebecca Spurrier, and Layla Karst.

Finally, I would like to thank those who have made my life beyond scholarship possible. First, I would like to thank the staff of Crieve Hall Church of Christ Preschool whose generous and gentle care of my daughter allowed me my daily work. Second, I would like to thank my mother-in-law Kathy Newsome who came to my rescue on more than one occasion when deadlines (and much of my sanity) were at stake. Third, I would like to thank my parents for their love and support throughout each degree. Their unfailing faith in my ability and sacrifice on my behalf are gifts I can never hope to repay. Finally, I am grateful beyond words to my wife, Rachel, for her unceasing support of my work at every possible level. She has helped me find my voice so many times and in so many ways. Without her, my life is unthinkable and the success of this project along with it.

On the day I was informed I passed my qualifying exams, my daughter, Amelia, was born. She will be two years old at the time of its completion. This project began with the most profound gift my wife and I have ever received, and it will end after teaching my daughter to speak. The words to follow appear utterly paltry in comparison to what she has taught me in this time. Thanks be to God.

Jason M. Smith

Palm Sunday, 2018

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Chapter	Page
I. Sacramentality and the Gift of Postmodernity .....	11
Introduction .....	11
The Unknowable God: Kant’s Critique of Metaphysics .....	13
The God of Being: Heidegger and the Problem of Onto-theo-logy .....	18
Marcel Mauss: The Beginning of a New Theory .....	25
Jacques Derrida: The Impossible Gift .....	29
Derrida on Language: This is the Writing of God for the People of God .....	36
The Other to Come: Derrida on Apophaticism and Politics .....	40
Conclusion: The Sacramental Horizon .....	44
II. Chauvet on Gift and Language: Overcoming Metaphysics as a Sacramental Project .....	48
Introduction .....	48
After Ontotheology: The Humanity of the Triune God .....	51
The Conversation We Are: Chauvet on Language, Symbol, and the Sacraments .....	57
Chauvet’s Philosophical Outlook: Heidegger and the Shadow of the Cross .....	63
Back to the Body: Language and the Symbolic Order .....	71
Chauvet on the Gift: Symbolic Exchange .....	84
III. Chauvet on the Eucharist: The Politics of the Presence of Absence .....	100
Introduction .....	100
The Ontological Scandal of the Eucharist .....	104
The Political Scandal of the Eucharist .....	135
IV. Milbank on Gift and Language: The Sacramental Against the Secular .....	148
Introduction .....	148
Milbank and Vico: The Roots of Milbank’s Doctrine of God .....	151
Ontological Violence: Milbank’s Meta-critical Rescue Mission .....	157
Heidegger made Strange: Theology beyond the Homology of Attitude .....	176
Milbank on Language .....	187
Milbank on Gift .....	193
Conclusion: A Trinitarian Ontology .....	202
V. Milbank on the Eucharist: Socialism Made Strange .....	204
Introduction .....	204
The Ontological Scandal of the Eucharist .....	206
The Political Scandal of the Eucharist .....	228

Conclusion .....	266
VI. Eucharist as the Gift of Political Language .....	269
Introduction .....	269
Eucharist as the Gift .....	275
Eucharist as the Gift of Language .....	284
Eucharist as the Gift of Political Language .....	294
Conclusion: An Apophatic, Sacramental, Political Theology?.....	306
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	308

## INTRODUCTION

### SACRAMENTALITY, GIFT, AND LANGUAGE

At the chaotic height of the 2016 election campaign several articles appeared in prominent publications, most notably *The New Yorker* and *The Point*, addressing what they called a collapse or a crisis of our shared language. Nathan Heller perhaps summed up the crisis best in a single phrase: “the language of common values has lost common meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Heller was addressing the student protests on college campuses that had arisen during the concomitant ascendance of then presidential candidate Donald Trump. The problem, however, extended far beyond various confrontations over “safe spaces” or “political correctness run amok.” As the Black Lives Matter movement had already shown, the problem was not necessarily that there was no longer a broad share of agreement on political issues, it was that there no longer seemed to be an accepted common vocabulary by which we might adjudicate political conflict. Either side seemed quite literally to be speaking a different language. *The Point* even went so far as to create an entire project devoted to translating the language of political values into common definitions so that either opposing side might better speak the other, an attempt, to put it in Heller’s terms, to make language of common value once again have common meaning amongst divergent political actors.

The results of such efforts within the sphere of public discourse are yet to be seen, but their very existence seems to portend the return of an all too human cataclysm: the Babel-like confusing of a language once shared by all. More importantly, the deeper truth that such watershed moments relate is that language and action are not entirely distinct from one another.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nathan Heller, “Trump, the University of Chicago, and the Collapse of Public Language,” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.



To speak in common terms is to be able to share in common action, and it is only by being initiated into such a shared vision of the world that one can claim to belong in any meaningful way to a community. In other words, if we are to create a more just communal life with and for one another, the first job to be done is to learn once again how to speak to one another.

Phrasing the problem in this way immediately brings to mind similar concerns within the ecclesial context. Obviously the Church was not immune to the shared consternation over the rapidly changing character of political discourse that the 2016 campaign brought about with such unique force. If anything, the problem was more pronounced among believers who worshipped in the same space but planned to mark different names on the ballot. Whatever the exact lines of conflict, the resulting malaise seemed to concern a similar ultimate difficulty—namely, that Christians no longer *meant* the same thing when they began to speak of their inherently Christian values. The language of common *Christian* value had lost common *Christian* meaning.

Despite the fact that the year 2016 felt like a moment unlike any other that had come before, the problems of a shared discourse were not new to the ecumenical or interdenominational conversation. Although he was writing about weapons of mass destruction, Rowan Williams outlines in the early 2000's the particular set of deep questions that arises when Christians find themselves in moral disagreement over issues that one takes as not only settled, but abhorrent to the Christian “grammar of obedience.”

I believe it is impossible for a Christian to tolerate, let alone bless or even defend, the manufacture and retention of weapons of mass destruction by any political authority. And having said that I believe it is impossible, I at once have to recognize that Christians do it; not thoughtless, shallow, uninstructed Christians, but precisely those who make themselves accountable to the central truths of our faith...I cannot at times believe that we are reading the same bible; I cannot understand what it is that could conceivably speak of the nature of the Body of Christ in any defense of such strategy. But these are the people I meet at the Lord's table; I know they hear the scriptures I hear, and I am aware that they offer their discernment as a gift to the Body.... So I am left in perplexity. I cannot grasp

how this reading of the Bible is possible; I want to go on arguing against it with all my powers, and I believe that Christian witness in the world is weakened by our failure to speak with one voice in this matter. Yet it seems I am forced to ask what there is in this position that I might recognize as a gift, as a showing of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Such I'm sure was also the feeling of a great many believers as they approached the Lord's table alongside those who supported a candidate or a political party that they found in fundamental conflict with the God whose body and blood they were now invited to share. One could easily imagine similar feelings from believers of the past over a variety of political and moral concerns. Yet, the matter that they share in common, the fundamental question that we must address in seeking to reconcile such divergent perspectives or keep them bound in the unity of Christ that supposedly runs deeper than the unity found in "the world," is one of *language*. I think language will show itself as the root of this problem if we try and name what it would mean to *fail* in such an effort. Williams once again casts this in terms of risk: "[T]here are times when the risky decision called for is to recognize that we are no longer speaking the same language at all, no longer seeking to mean the same things, to symbolize or communicate the same vision of who God is."<sup>3</sup> To fail in our efforts to act as one Christian community is bound together with whether or not we speak the same language—i.e. share the common terms of value that we would seek to "symbolize" through our actions in the world.

What could it mean to claim that such a problem can be combated, indeed can *only* be combated, sacramentally, and specifically through the primary sacrament of the Eucharist? In other words, how might the Eucharist provide the Church with a baseline of shared meaning? I am going to argue that to do so we must inquire into how it is that the Eucharist is both an

---

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," 13.

ontological<sup>4</sup> and political scandal. Perhaps the best way to say what it is I intend when I say the Eucharist is both an ontological and political scandal is to say first what I do *not* intend to say. I will do so by offering two “extremes.” The two extremes are seeming caricatures of High Church and Low Church perspectives but, despite their excessive nature, such pictures heuristically serve to elucidate the borders of an adequate theology of the Eucharist. The first extreme, of the decidedly High Church variety, would be an account of the Eucharist that veers dangerously close to attributing to the ritual some form of magic. The emphasis in this imagined extreme would be on reading the Eucharist as primarily an ontological scandal and only secondarily as a political one. To quote Williams again, the presence of Christ’s flesh and blood as a means of grace can ultimately feel like an “arbitrary” instantiation of “God’s unconditional power.”<sup>5</sup> That arbitrary power, however, is necessary for our salvation since receiving the Eucharistic elements imbues our mortal flesh with the very body and blood of Christ.<sup>6</sup> These spiritual substances

---

<sup>4</sup> This term perhaps merits further definition. I take “ontology” or “ontological” to mean, as Donald Mackinnon defined it, something like that sort of necessary discourse “where the concepts which we employ, and on which we must reflect, are those of the highest possible level of generality, such that we say we encounter them in discourse concerning any subject-matter whatsoever.” So in saying that the Eucharist is an ontological scandal I mean that it is a scandal precisely at this level of generality, i.e. that things behave *differently* within the rite and subsequently force us to rethink our conception of the general parameters of reality as a whole. This definition is obviously contestable, and the figures to be examined will, in some ways, counter it. One of the key insights yielded by my analysis of Chauvet and Milbank will be the ways in which their accounts of the ethical ramifications of the Eucharist are affected by the different ways in which they conceptualize the nature of ontology. Donald Mackinnon, “Prolegomena to Christology,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 33, no. 1 (1982): 149.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 97.

<sup>6</sup> This is a position not without parallel in the early Church Fathers. In particular, this notion that ingesting the Eucharistic elements secured an ontological transformation of our souls was notably the perspective of Cyril of Jerusalem in the *Mystagogical Lectures*: “In the figure of Bread is given to thee His Body, and in the figure of Wine His Blood; that thou by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ mightiest be made of the same body and the same blood with Him. For thus we come to bear Christ in us, His Body and His Blood being distributed to our members,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, vol. 7 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 151.

slowly work out a profound transformation of our character through their ingestion such that an ontological change in the elements begets a similar change in our very souls.

The second extreme, predominantly associated with the Low Church, reverses the first by focusing on the political scandal of the Eucharistic community but does so at the expense of any genuine ontological scandal in the phrase “This is the body of Christ.” Under this frame we might imagine that what is really transformative about partaking of the Eucharist is not the presence of Christ in the elements, however one might conceptualize that presence. The transformative presence is rather the presence of Christ in the gathered community. I am transformed not so much by taking the elements but rather by participating in and being adopted into a radically inclusive community. A sense of arbitrariness will haunt even this perspective, for the question soon becomes why it is that we need the rite of the Eucharist to experience this sort of communal belonging? Why, in other words, do we have to perform this action to receive this result? A purely political scandal, thus, seems to require still a recourse to an ontological one—the rite of the Eucharist must accomplish something ontological that makes its continual performance necessary.

Again, these two horns of a hypothetical dilemma do not have any advocates within the mainstream of Christian sacramental theology. Most sacramental theologians of High and Low Church seek a combination of the two—a theology of the sacraments that appreciates the legitimate challenge of the sacraments to a fully materialist ontology but one that also does not shy away from the political implications of Christian worship. As such, this essay situates itself as a participant in that discourse now called Sacramental theology, particularly as it relates to the concept of “sacramentality.” Indeed it is this concept of “sacramentality,” a view of reality as somehow the site of encounter with and transformation by God’s grace, that attempts to

negotiate the complex interplay between ontology and politics I've noted above. In an era called by many, either with elation or consternation, "postmodern" the concept of sacramentality has proved a particularly helpful tool in grounding a liberative praxis in an ontology that takes seriously the philosophical critiques that have so constituted our contemporary intellectual and cultural landscape.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay I am offering my own contribution to the notion of sacramentality, particularly as it relates to the primary sacrament of the Church, the Eucharist. Thus, I intend to argue for the notion of the Eucharist as *the gift of political language*. But why imagine the Eucharist in this way, first, as a gift and more specifically as the gift of *language*? In what follows I hope to show that the most effective responses to postmodern critiques of theology have attempted to give an account of Christian theology from the guiding principle of sacramentality—a return to both the presence of the living God within the external "sign" of the created order and of the mystery that this presence reveals. Attaching notions of gift and language to the Eucharist is the only way, I shall hope to show in what follows, to avoid the cosmological pitfalls into which such attempts inevitably seem to run. This way of conceiving of the Eucharist and, more importantly, of practicing the Eucharist as the Church prevents, I shall argue, the Eucharist from silently lapsing into an over-emphasis on either ontology or politics.

While it might be stereotypically Anglican, arguing for the Eucharist as the gift of political

---

<sup>7</sup> I use the term "postmodern" in this essay simply as a heuristic device to indicate the particular historical moment with which theology is currently faced and, in particular, I use it to indicate the period of time that our current theological period is often trying to move beyond or to circumvent. I am aware, however, of the criticisms of the use of this term including but certainly not limited to the criticisms proffered by one of this essay's principle interlocutors, Jacques Derrida, who in an exchange with David Tracy said: "I am not sure what this word means and I am not sure that it is useful to understand what is going on today," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernity*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 182.

language charts a middle way through the divide between two idolatrous manners of imagining the ritual that founds and grounds the Church as the Body of Christ.

The two characteristic attempts of defending Christian theology against the attacks of postmodernity I shall examine in this essay are the works of French sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet and Anglican philosophical theologian John Milbank. I have chosen these two thinkers because they offer uniquely protean responses to the problem within their own fields: Chauvet within sacramental theology and Milbank within philosophical theology. More importantly, however, their responses to postmodernity share one foundational commonality and one absolute divergence. What these two thinkers share in common is the notion that it is *modernity* and not postmodernity that is the real culprit of the problems that face Christian theology. Rather than adopting a pugilistic stance towards the radical critiques of metaphysics and theology we shall examine below, these two thinkers embrace them and consequently argue that it is inherently orthodox to do so. Christianity is not only capable of withstanding the postmodern turn but is actually at home in such a whirlwind. Where these two thinkers diverge however and in the strongest possible terms is in their evaluation of the usefulness of philosophy within the theological enterprise. Chauvet chooses largely to appropriate the resources of postmodern philosophy, particularly of Heidegger and Derrida, for his sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence. Milbank, on the other hand, chooses to cut a far more pugilistic path by casting aside such resources as inherently tainted by the ontological violence which grounds the groundless nihilism of philosophies of difference. What I shall hope to show in both of these thinkers, however, is that sacramentality plays a pivotal role in both this commonality and divergence. In other words, these thinkers cannot be properly read and

understood without grasping the centrality of sacramentality for their theological and ethical/political projects.

However, it will be impossible to appreciate the dialogue between these two perspectives without at least a basic primer on the postmodern context that motivates their responses. As such, Chapter One of this essay will seek to elucidate precisely this context by showing the inherent connection between the concept of sacramentality as it is used in theology proper and the radically postmodern project of overcoming metaphysics and ontotheology. The figures I shall spend the most time upon are Heidegger and Derrida with a brief foray into Kant's legacy within the critical tradition to which they are indebted. My hope in this chapter is to show how the project of overcoming metaphysics has an obvious parallel to the turn to sacramentality in that it is argued in both veins of thought that the return to the ordinary will save us from the inevitable category mistakes involved in abstracting our thinking from the finite order. More importantly for my purposes, however, will be to show the way in which the concepts of language and gift become inextricably linked together beginning with Heidegger and culminating in Derrida. In short, it is no surprise that this discourse grounded in language and gift presents a unique theological opportunity for the Church shaped by Word and Sacrament.

Chapters Two and Three will attempt to systematize the thought of Chauvet under the paradigm of the Eucharist as the gift of political language. This will mean, first, presenting the Chauvet's unique interpretation of the categories of language and gift as presented within his magnum opus *Symbol and Sacrament*. The aim of Chapter Two is thus to present Chauvet's unique interpretation of the relationship between theology and philosophy—in this case, an embrace of the Heideggerian project of overcoming metaphysics as expressing a “homology of attitude” with Christian theology. This relationship between theology and philosophy shapes

Chauvet's unique account of how categories of language and gift resist the critique of theology as ontotheology and redeem the devotional life of the Church from ills of modernity that now beset it. Chapter Three looks to the peak of that devotional life—the Eucharist—and the ways in which Chauvet conceives of the Eucharist as an ontological and political scandal.

Chapters Four and Five will examine the founder of Radical Orthodoxy, John Milbank, and his attempt to articulate a properly Christian ontology over against the rising tide of secularity. Chapter Four will have a parallel structure to my synthesis of Chauvet's work. I shall focus first on Milbank's particularly pugilistic conception of theology's relationship to philosophy, how this relationship affects his attempt to understand the way in which language is constitutive for thought, and, finally, how he attempts to purify the concept of gift exchange contra Derrida. Chapter Five will relate Milbank's critical project to his theology of the Eucharist. I shall show that while mentions of the Eucharist are quite sparse in Milbank's theological project, his emphasis on gift, language, and theurgy link his project directly to the doctrine of transubstantiation. The work of Catherine Pickstock, which demonstrates the potential of an explicitly Eucharistic theology that draws on Milbank's work, will be drawn upon to lend further credence to this claim. Finally, I shall show that the political scandal of the Eucharist, for Milbank, actually has two separate iterations. The first iteration, based in Milbank's earlier work, sees the political scandal of the Eucharist as a culture whose aesthetic shaping of the world shares a substantial affinity with the shape of the life of Christ. The second iteration, however, is to be found in Milbank's more recent work and is riddled with controversial political claims, particularly an argument that Christianity inherently advocates for a return of Christendom. I shall show that this recent push for a form of sovereign rule within the



Church is the result of an overemphasis within Milbank's theology on the Incarnation, an overemphasis that Chauvet can help correct.

In Chapter Six I am left with three fundamental conflicts to reconcile via our dialogue with Chauvet and Milbank. While it is no panacea for theology, I do believe that the key to resolving the three conflicts to be enumerated hereafter is the apophatic discipline that has been the watchword of Christian living since the Early Church. Thus, the first conflict to be addressed is just how it is that the Eucharist discloses a fundamental theology rooted in *sacramentality*. In my terms, this means elucidating the Eucharist as *The Gift*. Second, I must resolve how this proper understanding of sacramentality relates to the theories of language that were so influential upon Chauvet and Milbank. This means elucidating the Eucharist as the *Gift of Language*. Finally, I must resolve the conflict of a political scandal that never seems to arrive. After all, Christians have been partaking of the Eucharist for thousands of years and the Kingdom of God has not been established on earth. Reconciling this conflict means elucidating the nature of the Eucharist as the *Gift of Political Language*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SACRAMENTALITY AND THE GIFT OF POSTMODERNITY

#### *Introduction*

John Calvin famously introduced his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the claim that all of our wisdom that was to be counted true and sound consisted of two types: knowledge of God and knowledge of self.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary theology and philosophy can count neither areas of knowledge as secure in its decidedly “postmodern” context. It will be the goal of this chapter to trace why that is the case. In particular, it will be the goal of this chapter to show how language and “the gift” come to play a decisive role in this radical critique of the traditional foundations of metaphysics and theology. Describing the origins of the postmodern context for theology immediately raises the difficulty of beginning at all, something that a variety of postmodern discourses have problematized in any manner of ways. This essay makes no claim to expertise when it comes to the historical beginning point of such a tectonic shift in the human sciences. What I am after here is not a comprehensive history of ideas but rather an orientation to a particular current within a much larger tide. If postmodernity is the breaking of a wave onto shore then perhaps it is modernity and in particular the Enlightenment that began the undulation in the first place.

With that in mind, I shall begin with the Enlightenment philosopher of modernity *par excellence*, Immanuel Kant. Kant’s theoretical work sowed the seeds of metaphysical critique that Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida would later harvest to great yield. Kant’s legacy in this case is an intertwined pair of claims: first, that empirical knowledge of a metaphysical God

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 35.

is impossible, and second, that metaphysical knowledge's proper object is not an external, spiritual being but rather the structures of the thinking subject's rational faculties. While Kant actually coined the term "ontotheology," his use of the term in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is quite unlike the purpose to which Heidegger put the neologism.<sup>2</sup> Kant does not, therefore, engage fully in a critique of what I shall mean in this essay by the term "ontotheology," but his critique of metaphysical knowledge of God proves vital for Heidegger's continuation of this alteration, even destruction of metaphysics as it was traditionally constituted. Hence, after Kant I shall proceed to Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, attending specifically to the way that this metaphysical critique ushers in a new manner of thinking about the essence of language. Once we see language as the house of being the relationship between ontology and politics necessarily takes a sharp turn.

It is at this point that the great anthropologist Marcel Mauss will enter the discussion with his talk of "the gift"—what he thought was an anthropological observation with drastic political consequences. Mauss is important not just because he introduces talk of "the gift" into the philosophical lexicon but because his theory of the gift inaugurates a new manner of thinking about both ontology and politics. Mauss' gift to the discourse—to employ a pun used by a plethora of later commentators—is to show the manner in which gift-giving informs discourses beyond structural anthropology, to the point that the gift might become a transcendental principle from which all manners of human belonging have their origin. The gift leads to the question of the Gift, if you will.

Precisely this question—just what to make of the theory of gift-giving as more than just an ethnographic observation—begins our section on Jacques Derrida. I shall devote more time to

---

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) A632/B660, p. 584.

treating Derrida because it is his philosophical project that brings together all of the facets of postmodernity we have only to this point in the argument treated singularly under a larger umbrella—namely, the critique of metaphysics as ontotheology, the turn to language as constituting the shape of human knowledge, and the theory of the gift. I will join several commentators of Derrida’s in seeing deconstruction as a project that is, at root, a political option.<sup>3</sup> So to speak of Derrida’s philosophical work on metaphysics, language, and anthropology is at the same time, I will argue, to allow Derrida’s later political turn to shine through. To put that in Derridian terms, our analysis of Derrida on the gift and language will be haunted by *the democracy to come*. The great gift of Derrida to this project will be his insertion of messianism or, better, *apophaticism* into any adequate discourse on the gift and, hence, any adequate analysis of how language constitutes human beings as human. For the time being, we turn to the work of Immanuel Kant.

*The Unknowable God: Kant’s Critique of Metaphysics*

Prompted by a rude awakening from his famous “dogmatic slumber” at the hands of David Hume, Kant set about defending how one might make judgments involving metaphysical entities with any legitimacy, that is, how can we claim to have adequate knowledge of any object that we do not and in principle cannot encounter within our experience? The awakening that Hume had gifted Kant in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was to bring into focus the great problem facing metaphysics, a problem of just what it was we were *saying* when we claimed knowledge of objects beyond the limits of finite experience—things like the soul or

---

<sup>3</sup> See James K.A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, and Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1997); John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

God, obviously, but also of something as basic as a thing in itself.<sup>4</sup> Kant's defense was, ultimately, to bring out a key technical distinction that Hume had passed over—the possibility of a synthetic *a priori* judgment. In his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* Kant gave an account of two types of judgments: synthetic and analytic.<sup>5</sup> Analytic judgments do nothing more than identify something that was already inherent within a particular concept. They could be, like all judgments, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, prior to experience or based solely in experience. Synthetic judgments, on the other hand, bring out something new that the concept itself didn't necessarily entail. Hume had held that both synthetic and analytic judgments could be leveled against things *a posteriori*: we could analyze and discover new truths within our experience. But a synthetic *a priori* judgment, a judgment that added truth to a concept *prior to any experience of that object within the immanent horizon*, was impossible.<sup>6</sup> The implications of this claim led to Hume's radical critique of not only the traditional attributes of God but also causality itself as being necessary *a priori* (rather than an inference made *a posteriori*).

It was this denial of a certain type of judgment's possibility that Kant rose to dispute so vigorously in order to give metaphysics a second hearing. He did this, oddly enough, through mathematics and the natural sciences, two entities we do not typically think of as prior to our experience of the world. Kant's contention is that mathematical and scientific judgments are not, in fact, analytic—doing nothing more than naming what is already inherent within a concept—but that they are rather synthetic—bringing to light something *new* that is not inherent within the concept as it stands. Up to this point Hume might agree with Kant since, after all, one can

---

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Kant lays this charge at Hume's feet in Kant, *Prolegomena*, 4-6. Hume's position on the matter is found stated most powerfully in Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 3-43.

imagine how natural sciences might reach a synthetic judgment *a posteriori* through a variety of experiments. The path of science would begin with our idea of a concept, perform experiments, and then as a result of this experience come to a judgment we know to be true, a judgment that the original concept did not contain within itself. But where Kant diverged from Hume was in his contention that synthetic judgments could be prior to any sense data, i.e., that synthetic judgments could be *a priori*. Take, for example, two phrases from mathematics and the natural sciences respectively: “ $5+10 = 15$ ” and “Every event has a cause.” Both of these statements, Kant argues, are synthetic judgments in that they add to our knowledge something that the original concepts themselves did not say. There is nothing, as it were, in the concept of “15” that entails that “ $5+10 = 15$ ,” much less the algebraic and geometric equations in which we also might apply the concept of “15.” Even more importantly for Kant is the claim that this truth *does not need to be confirmed by experience*. Rather, the truth of “ $5+10 = 15$ ” presses itself upon us as necessary prior to an experience of, say, adding five apples to a basket already containing ten.

Hence, synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, opening a way to save the legitimacy of metaphysical knowledge. However, metaphysical knowledge will not be of immaterial objects to which our experience has no access—like God or the soul—but rather of the very structures of the human-reasoning capacity. Such knowledge is rightly called *metaphysical* because its object is removed from the physical world. In fact, Kant’s argument is that such structures are not the passive receptors for physical sense-data but instead actively give shape to that sense-data in the first place.

In this way Kant inaugurates his “Copernican turn” by insisting that the transcendental makeup of human subjectivity constitutes the world as a realm of knowable objects far before we experience the world at all:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given.<sup>7</sup>

For Kant, synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible not because they express fundamental truths about the world but rather because these judgments reveal fundamental truths *about the workings of human reason*. What makes synthetic *a priori* judgments possible is not a certain structure of the world that is “out there” for us to discover, rather, synthetic *a priori* judgments are made possible by the structure of our reason and the way it forms the data of our senses into a cognizable entity we call “experience.” Rather than observing the world from afar, our mind comes to the world and takes an active role in giving shape to the truth of our experience, like a TV shapes into a viewable picture the raw signal it receives.

This radical transformation of what we mean by “metaphysical knowledge” has profound implications for those objects which have been the traditional concern of what was called metaphysics before Kant’s revolution. He summarizes the problem masterfully in the first words of the Preface to the First Edition: “Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.”<sup>8</sup> What Kant’s Copernican turn does, in effect, is to destroy the traditional enterprise of metaphysics as it was known to him. Immaterial objects to which we have no experiential access like God, the human soul, and what he would come to call the “noumenal” realm behind the

---

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxvi, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, A7, p. 7.

“phenomenal” appearances of things, those things are no longer proper objects of metaphysical knowledge. These ideas still play a profound role in Kant’s philosophy as postulates of practical reason. As one commentator puts it, Kant never intended to dispel with “metaphysical *beliefs*” only to reform the proper object of metaphysical *knowledge*.<sup>9</sup> For our purposes, however, one must attend to the fact that what became the proper object of metaphysics was the transcendental makeup of human subjectivity. The structure of our rational capacities were now an open way to find a universal basis upon which to build a scientific discourse concerned with immaterial phenomena. While knowledge of God in the traditional sense was lost, knowledge of ourselves was found in a new and decisive manner.

In sum, Immanuel Kant’s critique of metaphysics sets the stage for postmodernity by achieving two remarkable philosophical feats. The first was Kant’s radical bracketing of the questions of God and the immortal soul such that there could no longer be a “rational” account of these objects, save one that held them to be the limits of reason’s capacity rather than an object available for reason’s analysis. The second might appear to be a mere procedural quibble, but it will prove decisive in laying the groundwork for the turn to postmodernity: Kant rescued the possibility of a future metaphysics by turning the structures of the rational capacity of the human subject into the proper object of metaphysical knowledge. While Kant later has a great deal of use for traditional metaphysical topics like God and the immortal soul (Kant affirms the existence of both), the foundation upon which to build adequate knowledge not only of a future metaphysics but of a whole range of philosophical sub-disciplines was the transcendental makeup of human subjectivity.

---

<sup>9</sup> W.H. Walsh, *Kant’s Criticism of Metaphysics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), 5.



*The God of Being: Heidegger and the Problem of Onto-theo-logy*

Kant's placing the subject at the center of his quest for adequate knowledge was also decisive for the rise of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline. In keeping with Kant's noumenal and phenomenal split, the father of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, "bracketed" the external world from his study of the experience of phenomena.<sup>10</sup> Though that may sound counter-intuitive on the surface (how does one give an account of phenomena without the external world?), the phenomena with which Husserl chose to deal were the conditions for the possibility of knowledge within the structure of human consciousness. In other words, Husserl's target phenomenon was the experience of consciousness itself, as opposed to Kant's more static investigation of pure reason. Still, Husserl's transcendental idealism, which still placed human subjectivity itself as the object of phenomenology, did not satisfy Husserl's young assistant, Martin Heidegger. It is to Heidegger that we now turn because Heidegger's response to Kant, and even to Western philosophy as a whole, was to claim that metaphysics did not need saving but was rather alive and well in *all* of philosophy. Indeed, the only way forward for philosophy was to recognize that it was trapped in metaphysics and then to begin the process of "overcoming" the metaphysics it always already had been.

Heidegger's break with Kant's thought came from being haunted by a simple question: what is Being? It was Heidegger's contention that philosophy had yet to think the truth of Being adequately, for in trying to explain Being philosophers always seemed to glide past the question and into other areas of research dependent upon a presumed agreement on this first principle. Philosophical endeavors might begin with the question of the truth of Being, but then, almost

---

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: Introduction to a General Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Macmillan, 1931), § 31.

unconsciously, would slip into talk of epistemology, natural science, or aesthetics. But still the question of what Being itself *is* remains unanswered and even unthought.<sup>11</sup>

The problem of this philosophical task is inherent in the objects of inquiry themselves: being and time. As Heidegger put it, “Being—a matter, but not a being. Time—a matter, but nothing temporal.”<sup>12</sup> The difficulty Heidegger found in even attempting to move away from Kant and post-Kantian perspectives was a foundational one: how can we think Being itself without thinking of it as a being? Similarly, how can we adequately think time given that all of our thinking thinks *within* temporality? These questions set the stage for the great problem that Heidegger saw within all metaphysical thinking, what he called “onto-theo-logic.”

Central to this project of “overcoming” metaphysics was Heidegger’s contention that all metaphysics (and, thus, most of philosophy) was constituted by “onto-theo-logic.” Heidegger’s explication of the term begins with a more foundational question for philosophy and, along with it, theology: what is the object of thought? Heidegger’s answer is that the object of thought is *difference*, particularly the difference between Being and Existence—thus, the *ontological difference*. He contrasts this devastatingly simple answer with Hegel’s system of thought wherein the object of thought is thought itself. Why such an esoteric beginning? The answer lies in another line from the great German Idealist: because the object of thought—thought thinking itself as Absolute Thought—is the beginning of all science. Heidegger’s contention is that this notion of the object of thought being that which determines the beginning of science is also that which essentially constitutes the science of thinking itself. So for Hegel to say that thought thinking itself is the beginning of science means that his particular dialectical process, worked

---

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 1-13.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 4.

out throughout the history of philosophy, is actually the primary concern of all science. What is even more intriguing and troubling, in fact, for Heidegger is that Hegel holds that the beginning of all science is *God*.

This Hegelian move redirects Heidegger's argument. For, at first, it appeared to Heidegger as if the conflict between Hegel and himself would center around mistaking or absolutizing the ontological difference between Being and Existence, which Heidegger elsewhere holds that Hegel does. But now Heidegger's question becomes more specific: how did *God* suddenly get into a conversation about thought? This moves Heidegger beyond a historical quibble with Hegel and squarely into a discussion of the character of metaphysics as a whole. Heidegger contends that Hegel is the apex of a trend latent in all metaphysics, namely that metaphysics has an onto-theological constitution. What does he mean by this phrase? As Heidegger tells it, Being—the object of metaphysics—comes to be equated almost immediately in the history of metaphysical thought with the “productive ground” of Being. In other words, Being comes to be equated with its Creator or Source. Metaphysics, therefore, is an onto-theologic. *Onto* because it concerns that which is most real, that which really *is*. *Theo* because that which really and ultimately *is* is the name of the productive ground for everything else, a god or God. To put it bluntly, for metaphysics Being becomes God and God becomes Being. The two elide into one another such that metaphysics is a theo-logic because it is an onto-logic and vice versa. A unique aspect of Heidegger's analysis is that even the staunchest critics of metaphysics, such as Marx and Nietzsche, find themselves preserving this onto-theo-logic in their adamant reversal of the metaphysical project. Hence, in seeking to empty philosophical discourse of the divine, to divest metaphysics of some of its damning ties to Christianity, their critiques cannot escape the problems of metaphysics because they have not truly gotten “outside” of the discourse

of ontotheology. The death of God only reinscribes the presence of a *theos*. Not only that, but ontotheology poses an extreme problem for theology as well. Heidegger captures this problem in his famous remark, that human beings “can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god.”<sup>13</sup> If we honor the separation of Being and beings we either end up making God into a being, which is idolatrous, or we equate God with Being itself, which is to rob Being of its truth. Ultimately the unthought framework of metaphysics has kept us, up until now in the history of Being, from worshipping and philosophizing aright.

But how can we avoid this problem if it imbues so much of the way we think not just about God but also about existence itself? How might it become possible for thought to avoid turning Being into a ground and thereby a god? Is it possible to think past metaphysics or must we seek an entirely new path altogether? For Heidegger, the absolute erasure of the problem itself is an impossibility. Since all thinking is rooted in a tradition and a history there is no purifying the philosophical enterprise of ontotheology in its entirety. In fact, we do not really *want* to do this. Instead, ontotheology has brought us into a unique situation in what Heidegger continues to call the “history” or “destiny” of Being—namely, ontotheology has brought us right up to the precipice of the truth of Being which manifests itself in the ontological difference between Being and beings. Yet, the supreme difficulty is that ontotheology also *conceals* this profound truth by its very operation. Ontotheology is the slippage of our thought back into thinking of Being as the Ultimate Ground and thus we begin to think of Being as the self-caused Cause rather than just as *Being*. This slippage, however, is an essential step on the way to the truth of Being. We can use ontotheology, in other words, to open up a new path of thinking, or

---

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 72.

what really amounts to a return for Heidegger to the original intent of thinking prior to Plato and Aristotle.

In this way, the onto-theo-logic of metaphysics will always be with us, since it was a moment in the history of Being that has afforded us the opportunity to begin thinking anew. This demonstrates Heidegger's radical commitment to the historicity of all thinking: metaphysics will always be a part of our thought, regardless of our attempts to push it aside, since it is a part of the tradition in which we have come to be. Hence, Heidegger suggests a different way of phrasing the goal. We should not seek to solve the problem of metaphysics, only to "overcome" metaphysics. Essential for our purposes, this project of overcoming depends upon a recovery of the true essence of *language*.

Why turn to language in order to overcome metaphysics? Perhaps it is best to begin by saying just how it is that ontotheology corrupts the true nature of language. As John Caputo has noted in his study on Heidegger and Aquinas, under the schema of metaphysics language's essence becomes entirely dualistic. Language does not constitute the meaning of anything but is rather the "external sign" of a meaning that has been "constituted interiorly, in the mind."<sup>14</sup> Language communicates or expresses meanings that have already been decided by the thinking subject's intellect. Heidegger's contention, however, is that language does constitute the meanings of things by being "the way in which things emerge into presence."<sup>15</sup> Hence, one can understand Heidegger's interest in a line of poetry from Stefan George, "Where word breaks off no thing may be."<sup>16</sup> Without language we are not just unable to express meanings that we hold

---

<sup>14</sup> John Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 159.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted by Heidegger in Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 60.

within ourselves, rather without language there can be no “meanings” at all. For how could such interiorized meanings even come to be without language? One has to imagine thinking of things without using language—imagine for example thinking about what to make for dinner with no interior monologue at all—which ultimately shows itself to be impossible. We do not have language, as Heidegger is fond of saying, but we are *claimed* by language itself.

In this sense, language begins to have a life of its own, so to speak. We do not require language as a tool to communicate but rather are always already immersed in language, like a fish in water. To quote Caputo again, “Speaking is not man’s [*sic*] representation of Being; rather, language is Being’s own way of coming to words in human speech.”<sup>17</sup> For Heidegger, it is not humans who use language to speak but rather language which speaks the truth of Being through that being which asks the question of its own being, *Dasein*. This is why on multiple occasions Heidegger calls language the “house of Being.” Language is quite literally the place or the abode in which we have access to Being.

But what is this truth of Being that language is able to manifest through human speech? Importantly, it is at this point that we see the beginnings of the connection between language and the Gift within postmodernity. This is also one of the many moments that the later Heidegger begins to sound slightly mystical in his approach to the question of Being. For what language brings to manifestation is not just the ontological difference between beings and Being but also the Dif-ference that *gives* this difference in the first place. Put simply, Heidegger claims that language’s intimacy with Being allows language to bring forth the way in which Being gives itself to beings such that beings have Being. This is obviously a rather sticky patch of philosophical bramble that we will eschew for the sake of time, but what is important to note

---

<sup>17</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, 159.

from this claim by Heidegger is that the “it gives [*es gibt*]” now begins to function as a transcendental category. Being *gives itself* to beings through language, and so for much of postmodern thought moving beyond Heidegger and joining him in his task of overcoming metaphysics the category of the Gift or of phenomenological “givenness” became absolutely central to their philosophical enterprise.

Even more importantly for my purposes, Heidegger reveals that this connection—that language manifests the givenness of Being or that Being gives itself in language—is only to be found by a “step-back” or a “descent” into that which is nearest to us. In other words, the gift of Being’s truth is to be found in taking a deeper look at the ordinary and everyday existence of human beings, not by theorizing such a concept in a manner abstracted from the world. As Heidegger puts it, “Thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest.”<sup>18</sup> The problems of metaphysics are overcome, then, not by engaging in a “pure” critique of the transcendental structures of the mind, but rather in returning to that which is so near to us that is ever-forgotten—the question of Being as it lets itself be seen in and through language. In short, Heidegger’s project of overcoming metaphysics turns on the recovery of the ordinary as the arrival of a gift (Being showing itself), which can only be appropriated and understood by embracing a new essence of language. This move, I shall argue later, has its parallel in theology’s turn to sacramentality as a response to the critiques of postmodernity. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to discuss the seminal work that put the gift on the theological and philosophical map, so to speak—Marcel Mauss’ anthropological study, *The Gift*.

---

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 254.

*Marcel Mauss: The Beginning of a New Theory*

If Heidegger had laid the foundation for postmodern thinking's reliance upon a new essence of language and of giving, Marcel Mauss' 1950 monograph *The Gift* brought giving full circle, making the gift a veritable obsession within postmodern philosophy. The flashpoint that Mauss created is one of the animating features of this essay since the gift brought back a vital energy to the debate on the relationship between ontology and ethics, particularly as both categories came to be seen as foundationless. It should be said that this relationship between ontology and ethics had been a concern of Heidegger's in his later work. Heidegger had succeeded for many in offering a revolution in just what was meant by ontology, hence the question rightly came to be asked whether there must be a consequent effect upon the way we live in the light of such an ontological revolution. This was a question posed to him in the "Letter on Humanism," but he used it as a means to clarify his already-given perspective rather than attempting a new argument. For him, the terms "ethics" and "ontology" are terms that only come into play *after* one has truly thought through the truth of *fundamental* ontology. The thinking that Heidegger is advocating, therefore, is "recollection of Being and nothing else." Meaning that his insight into ontology "has no result" and "has no effect."<sup>19</sup> All that Heidegger's work can offer is the freedom to let Being be. Marcel Mauss' work offered a dramatic new way of conceiving of the relationship between "ontology" and "ethics." Despite the fact that his work is, at its base, nothing more than anthropological study on the forms of gift-giving within North American and Melanesian tribes, it came to launch a way of thinking about gift-giving as a transcendental structure of reality, a sort of practical ontology that tempted one to accomplish what Heidegger had eschewed in his later analysis.

---

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 259.



Mauss' ethnographic study begins with a central problem, namely, that all gift-giving, though it appears free and gratuitous, is actually obligatory and self-interested. This insight provokes the two key questions that form the basis of his investigation: "*What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?*"<sup>20</sup> Obviously, Mauss undertakes this analysis of societies of a "backward" type not just out of curiosity but in order to show how the principles that organized their political and social institutions are the bedrock of the tradition from which our contemporary institutions are made. They have, in other words, had a "bearing" on our contemporary systems of "law and economy" that is essential for understanding adequately the present moment.

Recounting the extent and shortcomings of Mauss' observations is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I should like to point out two decisive conclusions Mauss reached based on those observations of the potlatch ritual.<sup>21</sup> The first is Mauss' answer to the central riddle of his investigation: Why does a gift *obligate* a return-gift? Mauss claims that it is not merely a social convention or cultural norm that motivates such reciprocation but, rather, it is a *force within the thing given* that motivates the receiver to give a gift in return. This force within the thing is nothing less than the *personhood or subjectivity or soul of the giver*. The thing given is not just a

---

<sup>20</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 3. Italics original.

<sup>21</sup> Helpful resources (by no means a comprehensive list) on the critical reception of Mauss' work are: *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (London: Routledge, 1997); *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*, ed. Wendy James and N.J. Allen (New York: Bergahn, 1998); and Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

passive object abstracted from the reality of the community; rather, it “possesses a soul, is of the soul” of the one who gives.

In this system of ideas one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul. To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal, not only because it would be against law and morality, but also because that thing ...exerts a magical or religious hold over you.<sup>22</sup>

Things and persons, thus, are never entirely separate under this form of thought, rather, they are intermingled together such that to give a gift is to give a part of your self that demands of the recipient the reciprocation in kind. For our purposes it is essential to note that this leads from the language of value to the language of *symbol*. The exchange cease to be based on value and becomes purely “symbolic” once we have understood that what is being given and what obligates the gift in return is not the worth of the object itself. Gift-exchange that has passed into the symbolic realm judges the merits of exchange beyond the logic of value.

The second conclusion has thus been named: If gift-giving functions on the basis of an active intermingling of subject and object, then gift-giving and the principles that govern it extend far beyond the economic sphere of “value.” If someone gives of their very selves when they exchange an object with another person, and if that object, endowed with the force of the giver’s very soul, elicits a return-gift, then what we are talking about when we talk about gifts is much more than economic principles. To transpose such an exchange into the mode of “value” and “price” is fundamentally to misunderstand what is happening during the potlatch. More importantly, however, for Mauss, such a misunderstanding occludes the vital truth that the principles of gift-giving undergird social and political practices far beyond the potlatch. The gift, therefore, is not simply a ritual curiosity but what he calls a “*total* social fact,” meaning that gift-

---

<sup>22</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, 12.

giving can account for the functioning of the society as a whole since it is “at the same time juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological.”<sup>23</sup> Gift-giving is, thus, not just an effect of society but rather the structural feature that determines most, if not all, of its economic and political makeup.

One can easily see, then, how the concept of gift-giving as a positive fact for sociological analysis might have come to be thought of as a transcendental structure of reality itself. The philosopher of religion, in particular, could engage in such a transcendentalizing of gift-giving by seeing all of the finite order as the gift of a Divine Creator. Yet, the more ready application of Mauss’ observations, which he himself saw, were the political ramifications inherent in calling for a return to a gift economy over and against the current, market economy. Mauss’ treatment of these “moral conclusions,” as he calls them, is infamous.<sup>24</sup> As Mary Douglas notes in her foreword to the English translation, “Taking the theory straight from its context in full-blown gift economies to a modern political issue was really jumping the gun.”<sup>25</sup> Mauss’ attempt was to show that the theory of the gift could be a foundation for “social democracy,” that redistributions of wealth through social programs might come to enact the same cycle of gift-exchange that Mauss had seen in his anthropological research. But, as Douglas avers, his attempts at making this jump never really succeeded. What did succeed, however, were such later projects, like Mary Douglas’ own in fact, taking Mauss’ insights about the gift and applying them to practices in contemporary contexts presumed not to have anything to do with giving. It was Mauss’ theory and its use in this manner that caused Jacques Derrida to devote an entire series of lectures to thinking about the Gift. What Derrida concluded comprises the starkest critique of the logic of

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xv.

gift-giving yet produced, and one with which any theology that attempts to use God's gift of Eucharist as a site for theological reflection must grapple.

*Jacques Derrida: The Impossible Gift*

In the monograph *Given Time*, Derrida identifies an aporia at the very heart of the gift. Derrida addresses his critique specifically to Mauss by beginning his inquiry with one Mauss' key conclusions, namely, that the gift should transcend the logic of value.

If there is gift, the *given* of the gift (*that which* one gives, *that which* is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving [one]. It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted as a gift, by the process of exchange....[T]he gift must remain *aneconomic*.<sup>26</sup>

For the gift to remain a "pure" gift or even a gift at all it must steer clear of the circle of the economic, wherein a thing is given to another person in exchange for something of value such that the thing arrives back to the giver in another form. The gift cannot become caught up in this logic of contract, value, and exchange, but it cannot remain utterly removed from it either. For how could one still recognize the gift as an *interruption* of such logic—as something *aneconomic*—if the gift did not maintain some sort of relationship to this circularity? As Derrida notes, "Not that [the gift] remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness."<sup>27</sup> It is in this sense that the gift cannot remain free of the economy. The gift is involved in economy even in defining itself as fundamentally opposed to it.

---

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.

Thus, the difficulty in giving, for Derrida, is that the gift cannot *appear*. What Derrida means by this is that as soon as I recognize an object offered to me as a “gift” I immediately become indebted to the person who gave me the object in the first place. As soon as the gift becomes visible to me it loses its status as gift because it places me in *debt*. I am under *contract*, as it were, to pay back this debt in good time. Just by showing itself as a finite phenomenon the gift seems inevitably to slip out of the “pure” realm of charity and into the logic of economy. This slippage produced by the appearance and recognition of the gift as gift produces quite the bind for would-be givers or recipients.

For there to be a gift, it is necessary that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into contract, and that he never contracted a debt. [ ... ] It is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not recognize the gift as gift. If he recognizes it as gift, if the gift appears to him as such, if the present is present to him as present, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent. [ . . . ] If the other perceives or receives it, if he or she keeps it as a gift, the gift is annulled. But the one who gives it must not see it or know it either, otherwise he begins at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given.<sup>28</sup>

Here then is the deep aporia at the heart of the gift and, it should be noted, such an aporia presents itself not in contradistinction to Mauss’ conclusions but as their radical outcomes. The gift *does* obligate reciprocation, but in so doing it annuls its very nature. The gift really does have a *force* within the given object that compels this reciprocation, but it is this very force that annihilates the gift and produces the very economic valuation that Mauss so heavily critiqued. Moreover, we are no better off removing a tangible object from the equation, no better off giving *symbolic* or *immaterial* things like authority, love, or gratitude in an exchange. For these symbolic realities also compel *exchange* rather than *excess*, and even if we remove the recipient

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 13-14

entirely, we still find ourselves “exchanging” or “investing” the given object in order to get back praise for ourselves. No matter what alterations we make in the phenomenal realm, the naming of an object as “gift” only succeeds in ensuring that it will be nothing of the sort. In light of this, Derrida makes an essential claim: “*The gift is the impossible.*”<sup>29</sup>

Now I want to say first, and with the greatest emphasis, that Derrida is not claiming that the gift *is* impossible. Given the profound impact Derrida’s critique might have on traditional dogma, particularly in sacramental theology where the object of our analysis is often construed precisely as the *gift* of God, it is no surprise that response to Derrida’s work has been vigorous.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, interpreting Derrida’s argument poses a sort of impasse for sacramental theologians. On the one hand, Derrida can be read as a vital resource for thinking naming the difficulties of gift-exchange in relation to the sacramental economy. On the other hand, Derrida can easily be cast as a foil wherein the “impossibility” of the gift must be denied and the possibility of sacramental grace must be rescued.<sup>31</sup> The danger, in other words, is reading the reflections of Derrida on impossibility as a devastating critique of sacramental theology from the outset. What Derrida actually offers is not a preemptive strike on the resources of sacramental theology but rather an opening to begin afresh. As Derrida himself writes, “Not impossible but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought as the impossible” and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>30</sup> See in particular Kevin Seasoltz, *God’s Gift Giving: In Christ and Through the Spirit* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011); Benjamin Durham, *Christ’s Gift, Our Response: Martin Luther and Louis-Marie Chauvet on the Connection between Sacraments and Ethics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015)

<sup>31</sup> From the sources cited in the previous footnote, Seasoltz, in particular, seems to fall into this trap. Durham and Belcher provide much more productive engagements of Derrida on the gift in terms of sacramental grace (Belcher) and sacramental ethics (Durham).

then, even more importantly, “It is proposed that we *begin* by this.”<sup>32</sup> We begin by the impossible. The impossible is the starting-point of our reflections on the gift and its impossible possibility. Hence, Derrida does not dismiss the gift, rather he theorizes its impossibility as a sort of cognitive limit that undergirds our very attempts to think anything at all.

The gift, then, is not a self-contradictory impossibility but much more (and perhaps more only in the sense that is profoundly “less”). The gift is the very figure of the impossible itself—the presence of an absence, if you will, meaning something that by its very nature “could never admit of subjective experience.”<sup>33</sup> And yet, as obtuse as this might seem, such an absence is the point of departure for thinking about the gift. In other words, the gift is more than just a conceptual fool’s errand or an easily dismissed contradiction. The gift, in its very contradiction, is a vital beginning point for a project that will not prove or defend the gift’s existence, to be sure, but said project will depend upon the concept of the gift *as its precondition*. In this sense it is false to say that Derrida rules gift-giving to be impossible and thus dismisses it as such. The gift is an example of precisely the sort of groundless ground that Derrida takes it his theoretical and political duty to think.

Still, there could be good reason to cast Derrida as a foil for sacramental theology. After all, if Derrida is correct, then the moment a priest presiding over Holy Eucharist proclaims, “These are the gifts of God for the people of God!” the priest has annulled the giftedness of the elements. The gifts of God, once they appear, are anything but. Indeed, the prayer said after Eucharist in the Anglican Communion only seems to confirm Derrida’s suspicion of the pure gift by imploring God, “send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as

---

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Gerald Moore, *Politics of the Gift: Exchanges in Poststructuralism* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2011) 8.

faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.”<sup>34</sup> Even the gift of God, it would seem, is not immune to the poison of exchange, in that the gift of God succeeds in indebting us to pay the return-gift of love and service. As good as those things are, the difficulty is still to find a way that God might give anything, since it is not only the Eucharist but the Son of God, our Savior Jesus Christ, that is said to have been *given*. If the gift ends in aporia then it is difficult to see how theology itself will not end there as well.

One could, as have many, make the same point about the God of ontotheology. How could such a God be present in the elements of the Eucharist? How could such a God *give* anything without becoming another being among beings and, therefore, not God? The gift and the project of overcoming metaphysics are more closely related than they might seem. But how does thinking the gift as the impossible aid the project of overcoming metaphysics? Derrida all but links the aporia of the Gift to the project of overcoming metaphysics when he writes, “The structure of this impossible *gift* is also that of Being—that gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing—and of time which, even in what is called its “vulgar” determination, . . . is always defined in the paradox or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is only scarcely and dimly.”<sup>35</sup> Thinking the truth of Being and beginning by the impossibility of the gift seem to be one and the same—a step-back that will take us outside of the logic of metaphysics and into a different kind of discourse. The gift, then, functions analogously to Kant’s transcendental ideas of God or the immortal soul discussed above: They serve as a limit between the relations of the noumenal and phenomenal world. We can never experience them, but they irrevocably shape our knowledge all the same. It is in this

---

<sup>34</sup> Episcopal Church, *The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 366.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 27.



way that, for Derrida, the impossible is more than just a dismissal of the gift. What Derrida is claiming is that while the gift cannot become present, its very impossibility is the groundless ground of our thinking.

As we saw with Heidegger's turn to the centrality of language for thought, Derrida's turn to the gift is also a trenchant critique of the "subject." For the problem of recognition and of appearance are not the fault of the economy but of the economic reasoning that enters into thought through a metaphysical view of subjectivity. As Gerald Moore writes, a true gift "would have to take place in the absence of the subject, in the absence of any supposedly self-identical giver or receiver who might recognize obligation or benefit in the giving or receipt of a gift."<sup>36</sup> Submitting to the impossibility of the gift renders possible an overcoming of the metaphysics latent in the subjectivity by which the gift is defined. The gift decenters the logic of subjectivity by disrupting the problematic logic at the root of gift-giving, wherein a donor *causes* an effect in the recipient by means of an object. Mauss' theory of the gift held that the given object was endowed with a sort of force that was really nothing more than the subjectivity or soul of the donee, but under Derrida's critique one must ask if it is not rather the other way around. Is it not the subject (without capitalization) who is irrevocably formed by the object to be given, by the economy of signification within which the object presents itself to us, and by the language within which the subject is always already immersed? In short, the theory of the gift seems to presuppose an account of the subject commensurate with traditional metaphysics, and if our critique of the theory of the gift undermines that latent subjectivity then it also participates in the project of overcoming metaphysics.

---

<sup>36</sup> Moore, *Politics of the Gift*, 8.

I have been recounting Derrida's account of the gift as the impossible, but it now remains to show how this theory of the impossibility of the gift is intrinsically linked to Derrida's work on language and Derrida's supposedly later "turn" to politics. There is little of Derrida's work that is not influenced by or a direct implication of his work on language, but it will be of particular importance to show the way in which the aporia of the gift relates to Derrida's later political work. For Derrida is the first thinker we have encountered who completes the trajectory I have been outlining thus far, i.e., Derrida "travels", so to speak, from a critique of metaphysics and the god of ontotheology to a deep engagement with language and gift only to arrive at a renewed engagement with politics. Chauvet and Milbank, I shall argue below, follow this precise trajectory in their attempts to craft a renewed Christian theology for postmodernity. They, however, complete this pilgrimage, if you will, in and through theologies of sacramentality whose particular nexus is the Eucharist. This is their decisive breaking point from Derrida. Yet, a key convergence point that they share with Derrida, and one to which my constructive proposal will return in the concluding chapter of this work, will be all three's relationship with *apophasis*. With that in mind, there is a third point to establish vis-à-vis Derrida—namely, the influence of negative or apophatic theology on Derrida's thought. For what we shall see below is that the tie that binds Derrida's work on language and the gift together with his work on politics is the fundamentally apophatic disposition at the heart of deconstruction. What we shall see in my treatment of Chauvet and Milbank below is that their binding together of gift and language often entails a seeming opposition to apophasis as unhelpful or downright ontotheological.

*Derrida on Language: This is the Writing of God for the People of God*

Like Heidegger, Derrida finds that once one begins to interrogate what it is to speak or, in Derrida's particular case, to *write*, one is caught up in a larger form of questioning. In other words, there is something about humanity's having language or, better, being claimed by language that raises *ontological* rather than merely semantic questions. As Derrida put it, asking "what it is 'to write'?...can disturb the very question 'what is?'"<sup>37</sup> Hence, from the beginning of Derrida's illustrious career until his death, the problems of language continued to direct (and perhaps *haunt*) his work.

Derrida's notion of writing, which will prove critical to my interpretation of Chauvet and Milbank, has proven both original and generative. By "writing," Derrida quite literally means any secondary mode of signification that uses an embodied medium to communicate ideas, but the concept does not rest in that simple definition. In fact, it is precisely by interrogating the "secondariness" of writing to thought that Derrida arrives at some of his deepest and deconstructive critiques of traditional philosophy. Since Plato, Derrida argues, language and writing have been denigrated by philosophy as belonging to, in Plato's case again, the tempestuous and untrustworthy realm of finitude. Truth, however, was to be found in the realm of "ideas" or "Forms," securely located in a realm beyond the finite disorder. For Plato, this place of truth was the realm of Being and the decidedly un-solid ground of finitude was the realm of Becoming. Writing belonged to the latter, while the truth, set forth in speech, belonged to the former.

Derrida, however, found Plato's account lacking and not confined solely to the thought of Plato. Not only did later philosophers carry forward this denigration of writing, it was also

---

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations," in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 37.

lurking, according to Derrida, within and behind the characteristic discourse of contemporary sciences—particularly the “structuralism” that characterized most of the anthropological studies in Derrida’s context. The critical insight animating Derrida’s position is as follows: The denigration of writing in favor of the pure, unmediated access to truth, supposedly given in speech and ideas, is a falsehood. In other words, there is no objectivity or truth that is free of temporal, mediated embodiment—in fact, objectivity itself depends upon this becoming-embodied for its very existence. As Derrida notes in his famous *Introduction to Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*, “The possibility or necessity of being incarnated in a graphic sign is no longer simply extrinsic and factual in comparison with ideal Objectivity: it is the *sine qua non* condition of Objectivity’s internal completion.”<sup>38</sup> The secret of ideas, it turns out, was that they needed writing and language—material, temporal, located forms of embodiment—to become real for human beings at all.<sup>39</sup>

Derrida holds that the necessary mediation of writing for the expression of ideas applies to language as well. This might seem rather obvious. After all, we need to speak with physical tongues, make use of air, and have what is said fall upon listening ears in order to be understood at all. Speech, in other words, is not, as was assumed by such thinkers as Plato, Husserl, and Levi-Strauss, the venue for an immediate and secure self-presence free from embodied mediation. Rather, speech is just as subject to what Derrida calls “supplementarity” as physical

---

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 89.

<sup>39</sup> This is why Derrida used Husserl’s own argument in the *Logical Investigations* against him in *Speech and Phenomena*. The argument I’m referring to is Husserl’s contention that there are free idealities and bound idealities, with the former being the most pure and the latter being the necessary evil of finite expression. Derrida holds that Husserl’s own argument cannot adequately maintain the distinction. The two idealities are necessarily entangled with one another, meaning that there are no purely free idealities. All idealities in so far as they are only able to be thought within a body, by a body, in a particular time and place, are, as such, bound idealities.

writing is. For our speech is not a one-to-one translation of thoughts in our mind, but is rather a signifier of the signifier—i.e. a translation of thought that is already itself immersed in a particular language. To give an example, one might ponder a coffee mug for a moment—its color, size, odor, its position in space, etc. Our experience of these aspects of the mug might, after a time, reach a sense of certitude. Yet, when one attempts to think of this coffee mug *without language* Derrida’s problem arises with a particular urgency. There appears something like an abyss between our most basic experience of the mug and the means of expressing any of that experience. Our words about the mug, after the fact, are not the pure expression of the truth of our thoughts but are, rather, a *secondary* sign, a translation of the original. In a famous passage from *Of Grammatology* Derrida shows this when he writes, “The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they enter the game. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language.”<sup>40</sup> All human attempts at expressing meaning through speech then are beset by this original mediation or what Derrida calls “*arche-writing*.” This explains how Derrida can claim that writing precedes speech, for it is this mediation at the origin of thought itself, this *arche-writing* that haunts all of our attempts at knowledge, that is the condition for the possibility of any speech at all. After all, what would there be to say without the mediation of embodiment? Derrida can thereby claim, “Language is not merely a sort of writing, but a species *of* writing.”<sup>41</sup> Language, therefore, is made possible by writing, not the other way around.

---

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 52.

Talk of writing thus yields a key implication for Derrida: The original mediation at the heart of all language shows that identity is not self-grounding but is rather constituted by alterity. Language is only made possible by the mediation of “writing,” consciousness is only made possible by the “others” of space and time (the not-here and not-now), and my subjectivity is only made possible by the alterity inherent in a deeply constitutive *interrelationality*. This is not to launch this essay headlong into Derrida’s analysis of semiotics any further than we have already have, but rather to show that Derrida’s emphasis on alterity and difference is vital for a proper understanding of why gift and language both carry with them such profound *ethical* and *political* ramifications. The arrogant assurance that language is of a greater value to truth than writing—Derrida’s primary concern in *Of Grammatology*—will make of ethics a particularly dangerous idol. As Derrida writes, “There is no ethics without the presence *of the other* but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, difference, writing.”<sup>42</sup> Alterity, difference, and absence are necessary prerequisites to begin to talk about our being-together. More importantly, to proceed without such an understanding of our interrelatedness would be to fail at the very outset. For what sort of ethics would we be attempting if we began from a description of the human condition that vastly mischaracterized it? One can understand, then, why Derrida so strongly resisted even the appearance of a pure, aneconomic gift in our experience of the world. Such a gift would be more than just an aberration, it would be something akin to an eschatological inbreaking—the very presence of mystery. In other words, it would require Other Words (capitalization very much intentional), words not available to us in this realm of experience. It would be the impossible, which cannot, by definition, *be*.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 140.

Here we run up against the integral connection between Derrida's thought on politics and apophaticism, namely, that there is something inherent in deconstruction as a project or mode of philosophizing that dictates certain ways of belonging together (politics) on account of the alterity and difference that makes possible all speech to begin with (apophaticism).<sup>43</sup> To be clear, Derrida does not equate deconstruction and negative theology at any point in his work. Hence, Derrida's politics are not, one might try to argue, the equivalent of an apophatic political theology. While such a political theology might be a much needed work (indeed, this dissertation is an attempt at such theology), it is not an accurate description of what Derrida is doing as it relates to the aporia of the gift or to the *arche-writing* that makes language possible. Hence, we must take stock of Derrida's attempt to "save" the apophatic, for it is only through this lens that his politics of hospitality for the other comes into focus.

*The Other to Come: Derrida on Apophaticism and Politics*

"However highly it is esteemed, *différance* is not God."<sup>44</sup> Derrida has often been accused of and/or celebrated as a purveyor of negative theology.<sup>45</sup> The project of deconstruction as attending to radical difference and the attempt to speak about that which escapes words has an obvious analogy to those ancient Christian discourses that sought to speak of the God who is beyond human language. But Derrida's work of deconstruction—his passion for uncovering that

---

<sup>43</sup> I should note here that "deconstruction" is quite the contested term, even contested to a certain extent by Derrida himself. I have called deconstruction a "project" or a "mode of philosophizing" to make explicit the fact that deconstruction is neither a purely destructive endeavor nor an anti-philosophical manner of thinking. It is rather, as Smith as helpfully put it elsewhere, "a deeply affirmative mode of critique" aimed at "reconstructing and reconstituting institutions and practices to be more just" such that Smith goes so far as to call it a *vocation*. For that helpful summary see Smith, *Derrida: Live Theory*, 9-15.

<sup>44</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> See for example *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: SUNY Press, 1992).

which prevents all human meaning from full closure, i.e. *différance*—is not to be equated with negative theology. *Différance*, *arche-writing*, *khora*, none of these are names for God, even for the God whom Marion famously described as *without being*.<sup>46</sup> Showing why this equation fails is essential for two reasons: first, to show how it is that gift and language are inextricably caught up in apophatic discourses and, secondly, to show how this general penchant towards apophaticism in Derrida’s work grounds deconstruction as a political orientation.

In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, John Caputo elucidates why equating *différance* with the God of negative theology fails to do justice to either. *Différance* refers to that which is “neither a word nor a concept” but is itself the condition for the possibility of all words and concepts.<sup>47</sup> *Différance* is, if you will, that mediation to which the term *arche-writing* refers. In other words, *différance* is the unnameable that makes the infinite play of names possible, the white page that makes the marks of writing legible, the alterity that gives way to identity. Hence, Caputo will call *différance* a “*quasi-transcendental*,” something that does not *quite* exist but allows for the creation of all of our language about existence.

At this point the mistaken tendency to refer to this thing that is not quite a thing, this referent that cannot be named, as the God of negative theology is understandable. Yet, despite their similar spirit, if you will, *différance* levels quite the critique against negative theology, while at the same time not declaring it subject to the “death of God.” The God of negative theology is often said to be *beyond* being or essence. Negative theology employs the discourse of

---

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon: and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 130.



*hyper*, wherein God is said to be beyond or above being, essence, speech, and name.<sup>48</sup>

*Différance*, however, reveals that this embrace of the *hyper* is simply another way of resisting the mediation at the heart of what Derrida calls *writing*. As Caputo puts it, when the negative theologian “sighs that she cannot name or say a thing about God,” this is not the whole story. This mystic knows in secret that she has an answer—that while God is beyond all predicates of human language there is still a “deep and powerful” experience that assures her that the object of her faith is present.<sup>49</sup> It is precisely this assuredness that deconstruction disrupts. Caputo elaborates:

As a hyperousiology, negative theology drops anchor, hits bottom, lodges itself securely in pure presence and the transcendental signified, every bit as much as any positive onto-theo-logy, and in a certain sense more so. Its difference from kataphatic or onto-theology, from “metaphysics,” lies in claiming to touch bottom not by means of representational thinking, of concepts and discursive reasoning, but by leaving all such representational paraphernalia and parerga in the vestibule and entering into a wordless, imageless, timeless inner sanctum of the temple, into a still point of unity in the very heart of God, a point where God’s ground and the soul’s ground are one.<sup>50</sup>

It is in this sense, then, that deconstruction may resist the God of negative theology. God, even shrouded in this darkness, would be a “transcendental condition,” that is, a “sufficient and enabling condition” that secures things within a horizon of intelligibility. On the other hand, *différance* is a “quasi-transcendental condition” which does precisely the opposite. It allows languages to settle but also slip loose from their assigned places.<sup>51</sup> In short, *différance* is the “possibility and *impossibility* of a language that addresses God, of positive, onto-theological

---

<sup>48</sup> The most significant instance of this is perhaps the work of Pseudo-Dionysius. See *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>49</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 10-11.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

languages...and the extraordinary languages of mystical theologians,”<sup>52</sup> that which both brings forth such events within language and forces them to reckon with the fact that they are not as self-assured or grounded as they might seem (even those that claim to be groundless!).

Derrida’s deconstruction is not merely a critique of religious language. It is also, as James K.A. Smith has argued, a “political option.” The first is to say that Derrida’s project of deconstruction was always already a political option. How so? In *Of Grammatology* when Derrida names the problem to which he shall address his arguments, he labels “*logocentrism*” as the perspective that would denigrate and shun writing as an unnecessary fall away from truth. Far from just revealing a theoretical misstep, however, Derrida pushes further: Logocentrism actually discloses “the most original and powerful *ethnocentrism*.”<sup>53</sup> The impulse that draws away from writing in favor of speech is not merely a neutral argument but is rather a political preference for one sort of ethnic identity over another. Logocentrism, therefore, is not merely a problem confined to thought. In deconstructing logocentrism Derrida is placing himself politically in opposition to an ethnocentrism implicit within the self-assuredness of logocentrism. Hence, at its very origin the project of deconstruction fashions itself as a political option.

More importantly, deconstruction’s emphatic insistence on the problem of translatability has deep political consequences. Translatability here is borrowed from Caputo’s argument that “the thesis of translatability does not say that everything can be translated but that translation cannot be stopped, that it is both necessary and impossible, necessary because impossible, and something we deeply love just because it is impossible.”<sup>54</sup> Here we return, to use a phrase common to Derrida, to the gift and its economy. What deconstruction reveals is that the

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 13, my italics.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 54

foundations of political systems are subject to the problem of translatability and that the “impossible,”—both the impossible as instanced in the name of God and the impossible as it appears in the gift—is precisely what reveals this contingency to us. While entities like the State or the Market can impose themselves upon us as if they were eternal and unchanging, the commitment to translatability reveals such political realities’ utter contingency. Deconstruction as a political option, therefore, looks with suspicion upon current political realities, and this suspicion is in itself a form of political action as critique.

What might be the relationship between this ontology, or better, this *grammatology* and our modes of human belonging together? What is the political response, in other words, to *beginning by the impossible*? It would be incorrect to say that Derrida does not know. It is more accurate to say that Derrida cannot say. This is because any political system that Derrida could fully articulate would be subject again to the problem of the gift’s aporia—anything able to manifest itself in the finite order is subject to the problem of translatability, of an *economy* of linguistic exchanges. The “democracy to come” is Derrida’s chosen phrase to refer to the political order that will always remain “to come” but must color our political actions now.<sup>55</sup> Fully explicating Derrida’s justification of this move, however, is beyond our focus. The key point is that the democracy to come is the political outcome of an ontological critique. Once the problem of economy and translation come to the forefront—the abyssal opening of *writing* and *différance*—our politics inevitably change. Alterity, in other words, remains the gadfly of

---

<sup>55</sup> Derrida’s initial evocations of this concept occur in Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) and in Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso Books, 1997). Derrida gives his fullest treatment of the “democracy to come,” however in Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

ontological and political self-assuredness, and the project of overcoming metaphysics can and must have a political correlate.

*Conclusion: The Sacramental Horizon*

This chapter's task has been to orient the reader to the project of overcoming metaphysics and its integral connection to the concepts of gift and language. To that end, the basic waypoints of this trajectory are as follows: Immanuel Kant dramatically problematizes metaphysical knowledge of God through his critical project, but Kant "saves" metaphysics, so to speak, by enshrining the human subject as a transcendental. God and the human soul will not be recovered until practical reason comes into the picture, but the particular damage that Kant's first critique does is to execute a philosophical gambit of sorts: Kant exchanges the controversy of God as an object of metaphysics for the supposedly secure foundation of a self-apparent subjectivity. The proper object of metaphysical knowledge, a knowledge beyond the *a posteriori* horizon, is nothing other than the structures that make up the reasoning capacities of the human being.

Martin Heidegger destructures this subjectivity through his audacious critique of all philosophy via the question of Being. The transcendental idealism of Kant and Husserl has things the wrong way round, as it were. It is not the external world that is questioned but the *subject* who asks the question of the meaning of one's own Being. What is peculiar to this being is precisely that it seems thrown into Being, claimed by Being through that which is truly unique to *Dasein*: speech. A human being does not *have* a language but is *possessed* by language, Heidegger argues, and this profoundly unsettles much of what had been taken for granted, with metaphysics having proven the prime example of this. Heidegger's critique of ontotheology inaugurates a new trajectory in the history of philosophy: overcoming metaphysics. Overcoming

metaphysics requires attending to language and, even more importantly, attending to the ways in which Being arrives to us *as given*.

Derrida brought this line of thought to its apex. The aporia of the gift and the unending translation revealed by *arche-writing* and *différance* show that the project of overcoming metaphysics crashes onto the shore of something like but not equivalent to negative theology. Not only that, but this orientation towards the Other is in itself a political option or, at the very least, a revolutionizing of our ability to think and speak about our being-together. This new manner of thinking ushers in what might be called the properly postmodern: The time in which the transcendental structures of subjectivity that Kant and others saw as a secure beginning point for knowledge have irrevocably collapsed. Derrida joins the project of overcoming metaphysics by insisting upon the necessary mediation at the root of all human meaning, and it is this insistence that reveals both an ontological commitment (however slim) and a political commitment. Derrida demonstrated how the problem of “the gift” and the postmodern emphasis on the constitutive nature of language join together into a philosophical disposition that is both an ontological and political commitment at the same time.

Yet, should the theologian be satisfied at this point? Is all gift-giving, as Derrida claims, always already subject to the logic of exchange, already fallen under the spell of economy? It seems that theology has always had at its disposal (or perhaps theology has always been at *its* disposal) a site of ritual action that claims both an insight into the constitutive nature of language (Heidegger’s claim) and a gift that escapes the aporia of economy while also appearing (Derrida’s “impossible”). I refer here to the Eucharist. Thus, it is no accident that in the wake of the postmodern project of overcoming metaphysics theologians have turned or perhaps returned to the Eucharist as the privileged site of theological reflection. I shall examine two theologies of

this type in what follows—the “sacramental reinterpretation of human being” proffered by Louis-Marie Chauvet and the radical orthodoxy of John Milbank. What is distinctive about these responses, however, and why they warrant such considerable reckoning, is that they respond to the project of overcoming metaphysics in such a way that enables them still to insist upon the integral connection between the ontological and political scandal of the Eucharist. In other words, Chauvet and Milbank are not spurred on by a conviction that Christian theology can recover the presence of genuine spiritual mystery in the finite order of things. They both hold this conviction, to be sure, but they hold another consequent tenet: The recovery of Christian orthodoxy’s sacramental view of reality, grounded in the Eucharist, is *at the same time* a recovery of a particularly Christian way of thinking about human belonging together. I turn first to Chauvet’s theology.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHAUVET ON GIFT AND LANGUAGE:

#### OVERCOMING METAPHYSICS AS A SACRAMENTAL PROJECT

##### *Introduction*

Most studies of Louis-Marie Chauvet rightly center upon his seminal work *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*. The controversial nature of much of Chauvet's work stems from his insistence upon joining his theology through what he calls a "homology of attitude" to the Heideggerian project of overcoming metaphysics I discussed in Chapter One.<sup>1</sup> To that end, theologians working to explicate the nature of Chauvet's work tend to narrate his argument beginning from one of three points. There are those who focus predominantly on the narrative that Chauvet himself follows in his work moving from Chauvet's initial critique of Scholastic theology as infected by ontotheological presuppositions to his placing sacramental theology into dialogue with the dramatic rethinking of the doctrine of the Trinity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Second, there are those whose primary goal is to explicate Chauvet's unique structure of Christian identity as the interrelation between Scripture, Sacrament, and Ethics, and so these scholars begin with Chauvet's account of that structure and only then move on to treat extraneous questions of ontology or Trinity.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Chauvet is often the target of a great deal of criticism for his unique account of Eucharistic change and so another group of

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, translated by Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 74-76.

<sup>2</sup> See Glenn Ambrose's definitive treatment of Chauvet's theology in Glenn Ambrose, *The Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet: Overcoming Onto-theology with the Sacramental Tradition* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See Timothy Brunk, *Liturgy and Life: The Unity of Sacrament and Ethics in the Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

scholars only engage Chauvet’s argument for Eucharistic change as both a “revealer” and “operator,” delving into Chauvet’s other philosophical or theological commitments only as they help explain this particular argument.<sup>4</sup>

It is not my intention to declare any of these foci inadequate in themselves. So far as I can tell, none of these approaches leads inevitably to a dramatic misreading of Chauvet. Moreover, the scholars who take up these argumentative positions share the common concern of providing for their readers, whether academic colleagues or lay Christians, the best description of the vital boon that Chauvet offers for their work in Church or academy. In my reading of Chauvet, however, I shall take a different path that I think will aid the reader in avoiding a few critical misunderstandings of the French theologian’s argument. I shall begin with the *latter part* of Chauvet’s magnum opus, particularly the way in which he sees Trinitarian Christology as consistent with, even giving shape to the manner in which the Eucharist functions within his aforementioned structure of Christian identity. Chauvet himself stated that his “foundational theology of sacramentality” had to be articulated along two axes: first, the axis of language and symbol and, second, the axis of the Logos of the Cross. To my knowledge, most explications of Chauvet begin from the first axis, as Chauvet himself does, articulating the way in which theories of language and the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger leads to the unique structure of Christian identity proffered by Chauvet. Only after this long path has been taken to its end do most engagements of Chauvet enter into the ways in which Chauvet applies such philosophical commitments to doctrinal matters.

I want to begin with Chauvet’s latter axis—the Logos of the Cross—because I believe it will lend greater understanding to some of Chauvet’s more obscure philosophical leitmotifs that

---

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph Mudd, *Eucharist as Meaning: Critical Metaphysics and Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014).



appear throughout *Symbol and Sacrament*. Concepts like the “presence of absence,” “ontotheology,” “and “the way” are, to be sure, mostly appropriated from Heideggerian philosophy. However, if we take Chauvet at his word that he is not seeking in *Symbol and Sacrament* merely to “baptize” Heidegger’s thought, perhaps the best place to start is not with an analysis of Heidegger’s influence but with Chauvet’s doctrinal commitment to the Triune God. Thus, the subsequent analysis of Chauvet’s theological system will begin from a place that already recognizes the limited nature of his appropriation of Heidegger and, more importantly, the profound influence that 20<sup>th</sup> century attempts at overcoming ontotheology have on his system. This will better show, I shall argue, how decisively all of Chauvet’s argument turns on the Pasch of Christ, understood as itself the proper starting point for any account of the life of God.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the sacraments in which we encounter this God, the ontology of the world in which we live, and the politics that must guide our belonging together in so far as we belong to God stand or fall with our account of the Pasch of Christ. It is, therefore, to such radical reimaginings of the doctrine of God in light of the Pasch of Christ, particularly the theology of Eberhard Jüngel, to which we now turn.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> As will be shown below, what Chauvet intends to highlight in utilizing this dichotomy as a heuristic is the tendency to source the effectiveness of sacramental grace solely to the hypostatic union. Chauvet proposes in the latter axis that the real source of sacramental grace’s effectiveness must be the whole of the Paschal Mystery, meaning sacramental grace is not just a result of the joining of a human hypostasis to the divine hypostasis but is rather the result Christ’s Life, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. Thus, for Chauvet, sacramental grace is dependent upon a more holistic view of Christ’s presence in the economy of salvation and less in the singular moment of the Incarnation. For an interpretation of this emphasis as it concerns the Eucharist see Bruce T. Morrill, *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: The Paschal Mystery in People, Word, and Sacrament* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on Chauvet’s relationship to Reformed theologies of the Cross is also addressed in a dissertation by Tom Trinidad. Therein he examines the fraught relationship between Chauvet and Barth, arguing that there is far more compatibility between the two than first might appear. See Tom M. Trinidad, *The Word of God in Ecclesial Rites and the Formation of Christian*

*After Ontotheology: The Humanity of the Triune God*

What shape must the doctrine of God take after ontotheology? Or, to put it another way, what must we say of that which is most foundational for our ontology if God is not pure Being, pure *ontos*? As noted above, Chauvet sought to orient his sacramental theology as a direct address to this problem, and he did so for two reasons: first, because traditional sacramental theology has been instrumental in preserving ontotheological presuppositions within the Church (more on this below) and second, because any theology that will be tenable within postmodernity must take Heidegger at his word that no parishioner can “fall to [their] knees in awe nor can [they] play music and dance” before the god of ontotheology.<sup>7</sup> The concern is therefore both theoretical and pastoral in keeping with Chauvet’s decided philosophical rigor and his ultimate commitment to the Church he serves as priest. Both sacramental theology and the doctrine of God must be fundamentally transformed after ontotheology through an in-depth analysis of theories of language and symbol and a complementary engagement with Trinitarian Christology. An account of Chauvet’s theology could begin with either concern, but I have chosen to begin with the latter on account of significant interpretive benefits that shall be delineated below. Hence, I turn now to Chauvet’s engagement with what he calls “Trinitarian Christology.”

Chauvet’s foray into Trinitarian Christology begins with a presupposition that there is indeed communication between God and humanity in the sacraments and it is this communication which we call “grace.” However, we can only understand the true nature of this communication via “the bursting forth of the simple notion of God, a bursting forth into a Trinity

---

*Identity: A Comparison of Karl Barth and Louis-Marie Chauvet* (South Bend: Notre Dame, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 72.

that can be adequately conceived only from the perspective of the *Logos* of the cross.”<sup>8</sup> For it is in the Cross that God most emphatically cannot be identified as the god of ontotheology since the Cross insists that our *a priori* presuppositions about the nature of divinity do not apply to the God whose very Being is said to be wholly contained in Christ crucified. So the beginning of any adequate sacramental theology, it would seem, must lie at the precise point where the myth of ontotheology most decidedly ends—namely, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

But how to begin all theology at the Cross? The foundational claim of Trinitarian Christology, a claim that Chauvet directly appropriates for his sacramental theology, is something like the following: the Crucifixion is not just a profound moment in salvation history but is a decisive ontological event in the being of the Triune God. This has been a matter of dispute in German theology for quite some time, being most popularly expressed in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* but going as far back as Hegel.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in this instance Chauvet is most influenced by the work of Eberhard Jüngel and his comparably difficult yet masterful tome *God as the Mystery of the World*. In that work, Jüngel echoes the central question to which Chauvet’s final chapter continually returns: If it really is the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a single history is the decisive revelation of the being of God, then *what kind of God must we mean?*<sup>10</sup> In essence, this is the same as Chauvet’s continual probing of just what sort of God can be said is *present* in the sacraments, in human rites born entirely of material elements and human history. What must we mean by the word “God” if we

---

<sup>8</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 492. Unless otherwise noted, all italics in subsequent quotations of Chauvet are original to the text.

<sup>9</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> See Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 3-43.

subsequently point to the Cross or a piece of broken bread as our primary reference? Beginning at the cross with no hidden presuppositions leads to a radical reimagining of our doctrine of God.

For Jüngel this transformation of the doctrine of God revolved around two key claims that proved markedly influential on Chauvet's work. The first is the odd-sounding claim that God's divinity is actual as God's humanity.<sup>11</sup> Chauvet uses this phrase several times during his two major works but perhaps this quote from his smaller work on the sacraments is the most paradigmatic: "[T]he claim that encounter of and communication with the living God are done through...[the] sacraments does not hold good unless, *the very being of God* can in some way be conceived of as "human" in its very divinity."<sup>12</sup> The second, and a consequent to the first, is the downright paradoxical claim that God's presence is as the "absent One."<sup>13</sup> Hence Chauvet can write, "Thus, the Eucharist seems to us the *paradigmatic figure of this presence-of-the-absence of God* outside of which the faith would no longer be faith."<sup>14</sup> Unpacking these Jüngelian claims all too briefly will clear the way for Chauvet's unique sacramental turn on Trinitarian Christology.

As to the first, Chauvet joins Jüngel's reinterpretation of Barth's Trinitarian theology in insisting that the particular history and life of Jesus is itself the narration of the very being of God. In other words, there is no God for Godself that is not also God for us. The story of God for us in the life of Jesus is the nature of God for Godself. This leads to the difficult claim that is also

---

<sup>11</sup> John Webster *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 63.

<sup>12</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 155.

<sup>13</sup> I should note that "present as the absent one" is the way in which Webster typically renders this motif as found in John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel*, 67. Guder's translation, however, runs as follows: "The presence and absence of God are no longer to be thought of as alternative in the word of God. Rather, God is *present as the one absent* in the word." Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 166. See also *Ibid.*, 182, 300, & 349.

<sup>14</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 405.

the title of Jüngel's major work on Trinitarian theology, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*—God's being is in becoming.<sup>15</sup> Now, at first blush this might sound as if Jüngel is committing a blatant theological *faux pas* by equating the Being of the Eternal God with the becoming of the finite realm. But Jüngel is insistent upon the validity of his language here precisely because it is *God's* becoming and not a creature's manner of becoming about which we are speaking. In other words, what is decisive about the being of God is the "manner in which God chooses to be [Godself]," such that God can be said to become in a manner that is appropriate for God and does not compromise the divine being.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, it must be made clear that Jüngel is not allowing philosophical presuppositions about the nature of the Divine being to determine what a compromise of the divine being would be. Instead, speaking of God's becoming, of the manner in which God chooses to be Godself, is necessary because of *Christological* rather than ontological concerns. If it is true, as the tradition of orthodox theology declares, that God's being is most fully demonstrated on the cross of Christ, then becoming must in some way be proper to God's Being. The radical correlate of this thesis, and the implication that Chauvet most forcefully embraces, is that God's divinity must be expressed in God's *humanity*. Hence, we can say that for Jüngel God's divinity is actual as God's humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>17</sup>

The second of Jüngel's claims that Chauvet takes up follows from this idea of God's divinity being actual as God's humanity. What Jüngel has effectively done in his embrace of the scandal of the Cross as constitutive of Christian thought is avoid the typical picture of God that seems to be required of us based on the claims of what we might pejoratively call "rationalist"

---

<sup>15</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

theology. Under those demands we would presume the typical attributes associated with that being we call “God”—i.e., omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc.—and then essentially adjudicate how the God who possesses these attributes could reasonably be identified with the Crucified One. This is not satisfactory to Jüngel, as we have already mentioned, so the new picture he proposes is one in which we do not begin with a presumed picture of God drawn from *a priori* philosophical propositions. Pasting such attributes onto God before looking to the Cross leads inexorably to ontotheology as Heidegger described it and to the current crisis in the “thinkability” of God according to Jüngel.<sup>18</sup>

So what was necessary for Jüngel was to stay faithful to making the Cross central in any doctrine of God. The problem, however, is how to go on speaking about God in the ways that have heretofore been typical of believers. The most important of these ordinary expressions for Jüngel was how to speak of God as being *present*. For how can it be that the Highest Being was truly present on the Cross? Not only that, but how is it that God was present in the one who *died* on the same Cross? For him, once it is accepted that God’s divinity is actual as God’s humanity then it must follow that God’s “presence” is rethought according to the withdrawal of God’s presence in the Cross, even to the point of the oblivion of death itself. This is the genesis of Jüngel’s notion that God is present as the “absent One.”<sup>19</sup> In the very death of God on the Cross, the utter withdrawal of God’s presence in Jesus’ cry of dereliction, this horrific absence itself discloses the presence of God as one standing in death in order to render it powerless. Such is the particular being and presence of the God whose very being is disclosed in Jesus. Hence, God is not present in the sense of “being somewhere,” rather presence and absence work in tandem with

---

<sup>18</sup> Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 105-111.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

one another such that God's presence can be identified with the event of the Cross. Therefore, God's presence must be thought of as being present as the Absent One.

As I have hoped to show, this notion of God avoided the typical bind that theology can fall into by allowing presuppositions about the nature of divinity rather than the Pasch of Christ to determine how it speaks of God. It is this particular story that tells the nature of the being of God and only does so as a concrete history, not as a set of abstract propositions based on predetermined ontological categories (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.). Now, Chauvet found these doctrinal insights appealing for two reasons unique to his sacramental theology: 1.) his emphasis on the constitutive rather than instrumental nature of language for human subjects and 2.) his embrace of the Heideggerian notion of truth as a "way" rather than as correspondence. The first was a profound influence on Chauvet because of a simple insight, namely, if it is the case that theology speaks of a God whose divinity is actual as God's humanity then must we not insist on the fact that the Church encounters this God not in the most heterotopic and transcendent places but in those places that are most decidedly *human*? The place of the most human wherein we encounter the most divine is for Chauvet nothing other than *language*. Jüngel set the stage for Chauvet in that his concern to articulate the speakability of God had little to do with saving religious language from the derision of its cultured despisers. Instead, throughout his work Jüngel's concern had been to articulate the way in which religious language succeeds in bringing "God to speech."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the speakability of God is about the possibility of the *advent* of God's presence in the very language that makes us human subjects in the first place.<sup>21</sup> As we will see, Chauvet takes this insight and applies it to the sacramental system to great effect.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 285.

Jüngel's linking the problem of the doctrine of God specifically to the possibilities of God's advent within human language is a vital cog in Chauvet's argumentative machine.

As to the second, if it is the case that God's being is in God's coming and that God's presence is as the absent One then the purpose of thinking can no longer be to produce a full and final representation of our object. Rather, the purpose of thinking God (or any object, for that matter) must be to be guided by the object itself into *encounter*. For Jüngel, as for Chauvet, it is precisely in language that this encounter or, more accurately, this "address" occurs. Yet, even more importantly, such a declaration reveals a profound wisdom in centering theology on the liturgical act of celebrating the Eucharist. By beginning with the event of the Eucharist we submit ourselves, as it were, to a particular narrative. We submit ourselves, in other words, to the "way" of the God which consequently sets us on the way. Theology begins with the liturgical act of Eucharist, according to Chauvet, because it is there that we receive the gift of God's address in the form of a concrete history (the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth) and are set on the way of returning it. These are the decisive theological commitments Chauvet takes from Jüngel. What remains now is to explicate Chauvet's unique appropriation of theories of language and symbol in order to see anew the advent of God in those places that are most human. We turn, then, to the second axis of Chauvet's sacramental theology: the axis of language and symbol.

### *The Conversation We Are: Chauvet on Language, Symbol, and the Sacraments*

At the time of *Symbol and Sacrament's* publishing, Chauvet declared that "we see today an increasing interest" in the topic of "sacramentality," evidenced by the growth of conferences, articles, and burgeoning interest from laypeople of all types on the subject.<sup>22</sup> This situation of

---

<sup>22</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 1.



growing interest has certainly not changed some thirty years later. If anything, interest in the topic of sacramentality has only grown, eliciting further conferences and articles, not to mention entire volumes devoted to the topic.<sup>23</sup> This deluge of scholarship has led, inevitably it would seem, to an evolution of the proper meaning behind the term “sacramentality” itself. Examining this dissemination fully is beyond the scope of this essay, but it must be made clear here precisely what Chauvet means by the term and why he finds it such an essential matter as to make it the topic of his magnum opus.

As is often the case, perhaps it is best to begin by stating what Chauvet is *not* saying with regards to sacramentality. In discussion on the topic there can be a tendency to treat sacramentality as if it referred to a mechanism or structure of the created order that imbued all of creation with the presence of God. While the instinct behind this position is a good one—the desire to restore the proper awe and wonder a disciple of Christ should possess towards all Creation—the theoretical result is often what Chauvet would call the “blur of a ‘general sacramentality.’”<sup>24</sup> In short, if everything becomes sacred then there seems little cause to say precisely how it is that these particular rites are *more* grace-filled than, say, taking a hike or tending a garden. Hence, when Chauvet speaks of sacramentality he *does not mean* to speak of some general principle which lies *behind* and *supersedes* the seven particular rites themselves. The diversity of the rites, in fact, is one of the primary values of the sacramental system.

---

<sup>23</sup> See for example: Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017); Hans Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God: Pansacramentalism and Doing Theology Interreligiously* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016); And, in particular, the three-volume series by David Brown on sacramentality in ordinary life: David Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience Through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 1.

Whatever sacramentality is, it must be *not* be something we can have access to without these seven particular rites or, as Chauvet importantly calls them, *symbols*.

What Chauvet means by sacramentality then is a hermeneutic principle which attempts to place the sacraments properly within the structure of Christian identity and then, from there, use them as a foundational means of reinterpreting human existence itself. This is why Chauvet says that the real intent behind the interest in sacramentality is not something like a panentheism or a blur of general sacramentality but rather “a *theology of the sacramental*... that is, a theology which opens up a *sacramental reinterpretation*, initially modest but ultimately global in its potential extension, of what it means *to lead a Christian life*. *A foundational theology of sacramentality* – that precisely is what we are proposing to elaborate here.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, what Chauvet is after is not the hidden presence of God in all of the created order, but rather an elaboration of the particular nature of the sacraments as constitutive of what it means to live as a disciple of Christ. From the outset, therefore, Chauvet’s elaboration of this foundational theology of sacramentality will refuse a distinction between the theoretical and the practical within an account of what it means to lead a Christian life.

Chauvet secures the union between the theoretical and the practical in the opening part of *Symbol and Sacrament* by setting forth his axis of language and symbol. I have already shown the deep influence of Trinitarian Christology on Chauvet’s doctrine of God, but the explanation that now follows is the philosophical position—a philosophical anthropology to be more precise—that seems to both support Chauvet’s theology and follow from it. For his part, Chauvet believes that once our picture of the human being changes, so our picture of the God whose divinity is made actual as God’s humanity must change as well. Although I have not done so,

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

one can see why Chauvet is entirely comfortable spending the entire first part speaking only of the human subject as constituted by language and as always already enmeshed in what he calls the “symbolic order.” If the being of God is understood only in light of the concrete life of Jesus of Nazareth then plumbing the depths of philosophical anthropology, of our best wisdom as to what it means to be a human being, will only benefit our theology of this God whose divinity is actual as God’s humanity. It is when we decide to take the opposite course—to speak of God based upon a picture of God decided beforehand by philosophical *a priori*’s—that our theology often goes awry. Hence, my next step in explicating Chauvet’s system is to confront directly his work on language and symbol as the foundation for any adequate sacramental theology. By investigating the sites wherein the human subject comes to be as human, we open a way to understand the divinity of the human God as communicated to us in the sacraments.

Chauvet’s time as a priest and professor had led to his being confronted by a deep problem within contemporary Catholic life. As Chauvet saw it, there was a deep problem in the way treatises on the sacraments and even priests or laypeople within the Church explain how the sacraments work. This decidedly pastoral concern might surprise new readers of Chauvet given the daunting philosophical rigor of the text under examination. Despite deep engagements with figures like Heidegger, Lacan, and a host of structural anthropologists, the driving force behind Chauvet’s theology is the pastoral question, already mentioned above, of what it means to “*lead a Christian life.*”<sup>26</sup> Wrapped up in that question for all Catholics was the long-held claim that the sacraments and grace were related to one another in an essential way. In particular, it was traditionally held by Thomas and a slew of other theologians that the sacraments *caused* grace in the believer who received them in faith. Precisely this sort of language, however, leads

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

inexorably, so Chauvet argues, back to the god of ontotheology and, therefore, to a crisis of faith. For the ontotheology that Chauvet believes has infected the way that the Church speaks of the sacraments has become untenable in the postmodern age. The stakes could not be higher, then, for Chauvet, the priest from the Parisian suburbs—the viability of faith itself is at risk.

In seeking to illustrate the danger of this snare for contemporary believers, Chauvet begins his section on language and symbol with a critique of Scholastic sacramental theology. The purpose here is not so much to hang the label “ontotheologian” around Thomas Aquinas’ neck, rather, I think the purpose of Chauvet’s critique of Thomas, for which Chauvet himself has received strong criticism, is to illustrate the deep divide between Chauvet and Thomas’ *philosophical outlook* which forms the base of any subsequent theological edifice.<sup>27</sup> What we encounter when we engage the sacramental theology of the Scholastics, Chauvet argues, is a “different epistemological terrain” altogether than the terrain from which Chauvet believes sacramental theology must work. Hence, in showing the limits of the Scholastic system, in submitting their system to “destruction,” as Heidegger would say, we open up a new way not just of speaking about the sacraments but of being transformed by them. Such is the purpose, as I see it, of Chauvet’s engagement with Aquinas.

The simple question Chauvet uses to reveal this profound epistemological divide is this: Why it is that Aquinas chose to think of the efficacy of the sacraments in terms of *cause*? Put a bit simpler, why is it that Aquinas came to think that the sacraments *cause* something in the first

---

<sup>27</sup> Most notable amongst these critiques are Mudd, *Eucharist As Meaning*, 33-37; Bernard Blankenhorn, “Instrumental Causality in the Sacraments: Thomas Aquinas and Louis-Marie Chauvet,” *Nova et Vetera*, 4, no.2 (2006): 255-94; Raymond Moloney, review of *Symbol and Sacrament* by Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Milltown Studies* 38 (Autumn 1996): 148; Dominic Holtz, “Sacraments,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 448-457; Lawrence Paul Hemming, “After Heidegger: Transubstantiation” in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Lambert Leijssen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 299-309.

place? Why this metaphor and not another? More importantly, why is it that Thomas's account of the sacraments begins with the explicit statement that he wishes to avoid speaking of the sacraments under the order of cause only to later slip back into such language? After all, Aquinas begins his account with Augustine's classic definition of sacrament as the "sign of a sacred thing," but then almost immediately begins speaking of sacraments not as signs but as causes.<sup>28</sup> "It cannot be denied: the sacraments of the New Covenant in some fashion cause grace,"<sup>29</sup> he emphatically states in question sixty two. It seems, so Chauvet argues, that despite Thomas' best attempts to speak of the sacraments, in keeping with Augustine's definition, only as "signs of a sacred thing" he simply has no other words to describe what happens when we receive the sacrament than that of "cause."

Thomas is imprisoned, as it were, in what Chauvet calls the "productionist scheme of representation."<sup>30</sup> Such a scheme reveals itself precisely in Thomas' constant use of *technical* or *economic* analogies in describing the way the sacraments communicate grace. The sacraments *cause* grace or perform a *work* or *make* something occur. This is of the utmost significance for Chauvet because it portends two subsequent claims. First, it is appropriate to speak in this way of the sacraments because the God whom we encounter in the sacraments, according to the productionist scheme, is the Highest Cause. Hence, despite a continual reminder that Aquinas is only speaking in analogies, Chauvet still feels that treating the sacraments as if God causes something by them leads back inexorably to the ontotheological presuppositions we saw so heavily critiqued in Chapter One, above. Second, Chauvet holds that Thomas' inability to speak of the modality by which the sacraments communicate grace as something other than cause

---

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 60, a. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 62, a. 1

<sup>30</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 21.

reveals an alignment with the metaphysical tradition's view of language as an instrument. This latter tenet is critical, for it is this moving beyond the view of language as a tool or an instrument that Heidegger thought held the path to overcoming the stranglehold metaphysics had on philosophy. For Chauvet's purpose, the path opened up by a new account of language and the human subject who comes into presence through it, is nothing short of the path to genuine encounter with the Triune God revealed in the Crucified Jesus. Thomas' sacramental theology, while innovative in its own right, must be pushed aside in favor of a sacramental theology that can resist falling prey to the trap of ontotheology.

So what must be laid out here is the "philosophical outlook" that undergirds Chauvet's project, particularly the way in which Trinitarian Christology and overcoming metaphysics come together to move us beyond the difficulties of Scholastic sacramental theology. It should be noted from the outset and with great attention that the relationship between theology and philosophy will be a key arena of disagreement between the two theologians I have chosen to make interlocutors. Hence, elucidating what Chauvet means when he says that this philosophical outlook and the Logos of the Cross come together through an "homology of attitude" must be made clear as well. Milbank will vigorously disagree with Chauvet on this account, but more on that in the pages to come.

### *Chauvet's Philosophical Outlook: Heidegger and the Shadow of the Cross*

Chauvet's elucidation of the philosophical outlook that undergirds his theological project begins with the Platonic dialogue *Philebus*. Therein, Socrates is attempting to show how wisdom is superior to pleasure since it participates more fully in the Form of the Good. What draws Chauvet to this dialogue is the distinction Socrates makes between the proper realm of pleasure

versus the proper realm of wisdom. Pleasure belongs to the realm of “*genesis*” or “perpetual becoming” whereas wisdom belongs to the realm of *ousia* or “existence,” a realm outside of process and the realm for the sake of which processes exist in the first place.<sup>31</sup> I spoke of this distinction at length in Chapter One. Chauvet, however, is troubled by a detail that I did not bring up above, that is, the particular set of analogies Socrates must use to prove the validity of this distinction and his favoring of wisdom. The one Chauvet particularly notes is Socrates’ choice of comparing the relationship of a lover and their beloved to the relationship between a ship-builder and their ship. The point to which Socrates is driving is that process and becoming exists for the sake of existence and Being. Both the lover and the ship-builder don’t love or build just for the sake of the process themselves but for the being of the beloved or the ship. Hence, things that belong to the realm of becoming are inferior to those that belong to the realm of being, one of which is wisdom. Yet, Chauvet is troubled by the implied equivalence between these two analogies, and he thinks that even the ability to equate the two reveals a profound problem that has troubled philosophy for generations. Here is the difficulty as Chauvet sees it: ship-building has a finished product—boats, obviously—“it builds them, that is all there is to it.”<sup>32</sup> Love, however, is of an entirely different order. This insight is obvious on its face, but Chauvet points out a particularly fecund contradiction. While ship-building culminates in the existence of a finished product, the lover-beloved relationship is never finished. In fact, just the opposite: “The boat is a finished product; but the beloved is precisely a product that is *not finished* — and is this ‘infinite’ in the sense of ‘indefinite,’ always in process; which is as much to say that the beloved is *not a ‘product’ at all. Because the beloved is a ‘subject,’ this person can never be simply*

---

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Dorothea Frede, 53c-55a in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 442-444.

<sup>32</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 24.

*reduced to an 'achievement,' but is always process, development – even a development without end.*”<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, the thought of something as exemplary as the love between a lover and one’s beloved belonging to the state of perpetual process was unthinkable for Plato, and this reveals the true “metaphysical bent” of our Western tradition, namely that “a permanent state of incompleteness defies any logic.”<sup>34</sup> The truest realization of the Form of the Good would amount to the extermination of any “interminable becoming.” This is why, according to Chauvet, the subordination of becoming to Being finds its foundation in the concept of *causality*. This is vital to remember since we have just finished discussing the difficulties Chauvet has with Thomas’ account of the sacraments as causing grace. For Plato the entire world is grounded on an original cause that brought it into being as a finished product (the ship-builder to ship relation is used here as well), and this cause is thus also the source of all cause-effect relations in this plane of becoming. This subordination, thus, betrays a “fundamental desire to eliminate as far as possible whatever pertains to a becoming without end, in favor of the Good described as achieved perfection.”<sup>35</sup> Plato is, therefore, the precursor to the ontotheologic we have been describing above. Yet, here Chauvet makes an essential objection. His objection is that the lover-beloved relation cannot be reduced to the sort of productionist scheme that Plato utilizes. Rather, the lover-beloved analogy reveals to us the existence and truth of another epistemological order entirely. Quoting one of his mentors, Guy Lafon, Chauvet declares that the lover-beloved example reveals that there are “happenings, such as love, and joy, and pleasure, which do not produce existence or come to an end in the sense of a distinct term. There are many other

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 25.



realities of this nature and these all attest in one way or another to the presence of a *symbolic order*.”<sup>36</sup>

To understand Chauvet’s use of the phrase “symbolic order” we must first make preliminary inroads into his particular account of the philosophical and theological import of language as constitutive of human subjects. I have above already explicated Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology and, in particular, the paltry view of language it engenders.<sup>37</sup> Under an ontotheological perspective language ceases to be seen as that which gives Being to or constitutes the subjectivity of human persons. Rather, language comes to be seen as an instrument to be used by human beings in their pursuit of truth. As Chauvet puts it, “They use language as a necessary *tool for the translation* of their mental representations to themselves (thought) or to others (voice)...But...although an instrument of translation, language is simultaneously – alas! – an *instrument of betrayal*.”<sup>38</sup> When conceived as purely an instrument for human use language constantly betrays its supposed masters because, as we saw with Derrida, in Chapter One above, it can never give an exhaustive account of that which presents itself to us. When taken as a tool for the translation of meaning, language finds its task ever unfulfilled. For Chauvet this gives rise to the impossible ideal to “dispense with language” since, despite the beauty it engenders, language remains an “obstacle for human self-realization.”<sup>39</sup> Language seems not only to fail in its purported instrumental use but actually to *occlude* the very means to truth which it was believed to have offered in the first place.

---

<sup>36</sup> Guy Lafon, *Esquisses Pour un Christianisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1979), 88. Quoted in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter One, 8-14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Chauvet turns, yet again, to Jüngel in his analysis, and asserts that the difficulty with this view of language, apart from the difficulties already described, is that it presupposes the ontological priority of thought over language.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the picture of the human person that emerges from such a representation of the world is one in which the human being must engage in some form of thinking prior to speaking. Whatever words we speak, arguments we form, or even art we create, the picture of the word grounded in an instrumental view of language takes it that all such emanations of human beings stem from some form of cognitive activity that took place prior to their creation. However, the wisdom that Chauvet draws from Heidegger and Jüngel is that this is simply not the place language occupies. The reverse is in fact true. Language has ontological priority over thought since, as Chauvet puts it quoting Jüngel, “every thought is ‘always already language.’”<sup>41</sup> This point might best be illustrated by thinking back to my example of the coffee mug in Chapter One. If one were to think deeply about a coffee mug set on a table before them our thoughts seem to give to speech a plethora of things to say about the mug. Yet, if we try to think of the mug *without* language we come face to face with the point Chauvet is trying to make. All of our thinking is itself always already language, meaning that rather than thought giving to language things to say, *language gives to thought* the target of its inquiry.

This insight gives to Chauvet a new conception of theology as a critical project. For Thomas, the “critical thrust” of theology, according to Chauvet, was to prevent overreach in our claim to knowledge of God via the unknowability of God. This is part of the reason that analogy is so critical a safeguard in his theology. At this point, however, Chauvet believes that the ontological priority of language forces a new critical thrust on theology. Rather than focusing its

---

<sup>40</sup> Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 40.

efforts on setting aright theological propositions by testing it against the unknowable God, Chauvet eschews what he believes to be an ontotheology masking itself as Christian apophaticism. Instead of disciplining theological propositions through the theology of an unknowable God who just so happens to be the Highest Being, Chauvet proposes that theological propositions must be tested against the truth of the believing subjects themselves.<sup>42</sup>

While this might sound like an embrace of theological relativism, Chauvet means something quite objective about it. Given what we have already seen about language, theology can rightly be called “a discourse from which the believing subject is inseparable,” meaning regardless of how much distance we might attempt to set up between our “language, culture, and desire” and our selves, our theology is still decidedly *our* theology. The embodied mediations that so define who we are play a vital role also in giving shape to our theology. Rather than preemptively surrendering the truth of theology to the vicissitudes of power or fashion, however, this provides an impetus for theology to purify its concepts based on the “*attitude*, idolatrous or not, they elicit from us.”<sup>43</sup> Far from granting a permission to turn Christian orthodoxy into a choose-your-adventure novel, the ontological priority of language places a more stringent demand upon theology—namely, to transpose us from one attitude to another within our embodied existence. Hence, we find this statement from Chauvet that nearly sums up his entire project:

The critical thrust in Christian theology is precisely this in our opinion: to show the conditions which render possible a passage – a passage which must be *continually undertaken* – from the attitude of a slave toward a Master imagined as all-powerful, clothed in the traditional panoply of the attributes of *esse*, to the attitude of a child towards a God represented far differently because this God is

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 43.

seen always in the shadow of the cross, and thus to the attitude of a brother or a sister toward others.<sup>44</sup>

Whatever conditions may render such a passage possible, the wisdom of philosophy that Chauvet is appropriating for theology's use is that such a passage will have to do with language, since language is where human subjects come to be not only human subjects but *ethical* subjects as well.

A question might present itself at this point: Why bother with theology if the existential philosophy of Heidegger or the deconstruction of Derrida can get us beyond metaphysics and ontotheology? Should not theology be defending itself against the seeming annexation of its traditional territory by philosophy? Here, then, Chauvet must justify his appropriation of late Heideggerian philosophy as the essential foundations that undergird the sacramental project yet to take place. He does so by claiming that the existential philosophy of language we have been examining and the sacramental system of the Church share a "homology of attitude." Perhaps we can clarify this odd phrase by again saying what it does not mean to say. The first difference between the sacramental system of the Church and the project of overcoming metaphysics is their respective objects. For Chauvet's sacramental system the object is, as we have seen above, the God revealed through the Logos of the Cross—the God whose presence is as absence and whose divinity is actual in God's humanity. For Heidegger, the object of overcoming metaphysics was to figure out how to think properly and then, more importantly, how to think Being, or even just to let Being be. A habit that Heidegger formed in his later work to help this along was to "cross out" the word Being in his writing. This was a physical sign that was meant to keep the reader, and Heidegger himself one would think, from slipping into the ontological

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

forgetfulness that would think of Being as a thing or being. Chauvet is thus decisive when he says that the God of the Cross is *not* crossed out Being.<sup>45</sup> The two quests share different objects.

Chauvet's contention, however, is that they share a common attitude or approach toward thinking their respective objects, and, moreover, that this homology undermines any argument, even Heidegger's own contention, that philosophical and theological thinking are entirely distinct from one another. For Chauvet, what bridges this divide between philosophy and theology is nothing more than that which most clearly separates the two: the Logos of the Cross and the "folly" of thinking involved in articulating it in theology.<sup>46</sup> The attitude of the theologian when faced with the Crucified God is the same, so Chauvet argues, as the attitude of the philosopher when confronted with the possibility of truly thinking the forgotten ontological difference. Hence, Chauvet writes, "If theology cannot express the message of the cross, it must nevertheless begin its thinking with that message."<sup>47</sup> This sounds remarkably close to what Heidegger often said about trying to think Being, and it led him to transform radically what he meant even by the term "thinking."<sup>48</sup> For to think Being one could not make out of Being an object, otherwise one had already failed in the task. Instead, it seemed that the thinking which

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 74. Tellingly, Chauvet actually "crosses out" the word God differently than Heidegger "crossed out" the word "Being. Heidegger "X's out" Being, while Chauvet superimposes a literal Cross over the word God, communicating, I think, that a similar attitude of respect for the presence of absence is at work, but that the sort of absence under discussion is based in revelation rather than phenomenological analysis.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>48</sup> Consider, for example, a quote from the Introduction to *Being and Time*: "As a seeking, questioning needs prior guidance from what it seeks. The meaning of being must therefore already be available to us in a certain way. We intimated that we are always already involved in an understanding of being. From this grows the explicit question of the meaning of being and the tendency towards its concept." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 4. For an excellent survey of later Heidegger's transformation of the concept of thinking see William J. Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (New York: Fordham Press, 2003), 577-620.

could truly think being was not a thinking best described as representing an object and analyzing but more something like a “way” to be followed but never completed, almost like a spiritual discipline.<sup>49</sup> In that case, Chauvet says, the sort of thinking that we are after is not a discourse separable from us; rather, the way we are after involves ourselves, our whole being, “in our corporality.”<sup>50</sup> One can hear an obvious echo of Jüngel’s notion of thinking already discussed above. Still, the respective approaches of a theology and a philosophy who see themselves as based in a work or a way that transforms not just propositions within our head but the whole of our very being certainly seem homologous. As Chauvet writes,

This is a labor that involves not only the *eidōs* and its representations but also the *eros* and its desire to extend its control over all that is. This amounts to the slow work of apprenticeship in the art of “un-mastery,” a permanent work of *mourning* where, *free of resentment*, a “serene” consent to the “*presence of the absence*” takes place in us, little by little. In gospel terms, this is a work of conversion to the presence of the absence of a God who “crosses himself out” in the crushed humanity of this crucified One whom humans have reduced to less than nothing and yet where, in a paradoxical light, faith confesses the glory of God.”<sup>51</sup>

It worth saying again, therefore, that far from being merely a baptism of late Heideggerian philosophy, Chauvet’s embrace of the constitutive nature of language and symbol is thoroughly grounded in a theology of the Cross.

#### *Back to the Body: Language and the Symbolic Order*

The “folly” of the theology of the Cross we have just been describing forces us to accept the death of “the illusion that we can somehow pull ourselves out of the necessary mediation of symbols, situate ourselves outside of discourse, and apprehend reality directly, without passing

---

<sup>49</sup> Chauvet’s treatment of Heidegger on this matter can be found in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 54-55.

<sup>50</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 73.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

through cultural tradition or the history of our own desire.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the site of a theology that takes as its starting point the absence of God in the presence of the Crucified One must not only recognize the unavoidable mediation of what Chauvet calls the “symbolic order” (more on that below) but must embrace such mediation as the proper place of its reflections. For Chauvet, it is precisely the *sacraments* that are the place for such an embrace of mediation, in that they “force us to confront *mediation* –mediation, by way of the senses, of an institution, a formula, a gesture, a material thing – as the (eschatological) place of God’s advent.”<sup>53</sup> The sacraments, therefore, send us “*back to the body* as the point where God writes God’s self in us.”<sup>54</sup> Hence, an analysis of the fundamental and embodied mediation which characterizes the human subject’s being will be critical to any adequate theology. For the “*theos*” in our “*theo-*logy” is now no longer the distant God of ontotheology but the God who has come near, even to the point of becoming a less-than-nothing in the form of a de-humanized and executed human being. An analysis of the embodied and mediated ways in which human subjects come to be is, so Chauvet argues, a path towards the places where authentic encounter with God Incarnate is possible.

Where then do we begin to describe that which is most human about us? Chauvet begins with our perception of reality. Far from being a separable and distant observer of objective phenomena, we never experience reality in such a neutral way. Rather, “reality is never presented to us except in a mediated way, which is to say, *constructed* out of the symbolic network of the culture which fashions us.”<sup>55</sup> The world in which we live and move and have our being never arrives to us as a neutral collection of things that are “out there” for us to investigate,

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 84.

rather our interaction with the world is precisely that, an *interaction* with something that communicates meaning just as much to the seeker as the seeker receives from the world. The objects we come into contact with are invested with communicative meanings by the culture, desire, and language of the human beings who have either crafted or have been crafted in such a way by their own culture as to perceive them as they do. In short, “the perceived object is always-already a constructed object.”<sup>56</sup>

This is not to say that the external world has no integrity on its own. Chauvet is not here embracing something like the absolute empiricism of Berkeley, for example. If a tree falls in the forest it does indeed make a sound, but the point Chauvet is driving at is that this is not the *world* with which we are concerned here. As Flahault puts it, “Certainly material reality has an existence independent of the awareness human subjects have of it; but it is not with *that* universe that infants are initially confronted; it is rather in a world *inhabited* by other humans that they make their way.”<sup>57</sup> Human experience of the world, therefore, in so far as it is rightly called human experience, is of a world that is always already imbued with signification from top to bottom. There is no “neutral” or “natural” object free of this cultural and linguistic trace.

Hence, we are able at last to say how it is that Chauvet justifies his refrain that without language no human subject comes. Since the world as we encounter it is always already seeped in human signification, there is no real way for anyone to become a subject without engaging this signification. As Chauvet puts it, there is just no possible path to becoming a human subject without “subjugation” to the “law” of the “symbolic order.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, this process is obviously a two-way street since, in becoming subjects through subjugation to the law of cultural mediation,

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>57</sup> Françoise Flahault, *La parole intermédiaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 84-85. Quoted in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 86.

<sup>58</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 86.



human beings also further “the conversation which we are,” to borrow a phrase from Hölderlin, through their own cultural and linguistic activity.<sup>59</sup> The symbolic order, therefore, is just the “mediation through which subjects build themselves while building the real into a ‘world’” or, put metaphorically, it is the “contact lenses which cannot be seen by the wearers...but through which all their vision of the real is filtered.”<sup>60</sup>

The principal mediation of the symbolic order, that place wherein subjects come to be as subjects and make the world in which such subjectivation is possible, is *language*. Language is not a thing that human beings use but is rather itself just a “mediation,” such that it is not *by* language that human beings come to be but *in* it. This process of building our personhood and building the world is obviously one that occurs simultaneously. Neither Chauvet nor Heidegger have in mind a magical sort of linguistic mysticism here. Rather what is meant, to quote the famous linguistic philosopher Emile Benveniste, is something like this: “We never discover humans apart from language and we never catch them in the act of inventing it...It is always humans speaking that we encounter in the world, always humans speaking to other humans; and language gives us the very definition of a human being.”<sup>61</sup> The reader may be reminded here, as in Chapter One, of Heidegger’s love of that particular line from Stefan George: “Where word breaks off no thing may be.”<sup>62</sup> The subject comes to be in and through language because the

---

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Routledge, 1966), 428.

<sup>60</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 86.

<sup>61</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 259.

<sup>62</sup> Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 60.

“word precedes us,” as Chauvet says, and is the only manner in which we ever encounter the world in the first place.<sup>63</sup>

Even more critical for Chauvet is how this constitutive nature of language changes what we mean by the term “expression.” Under the instrumental view of language we might have thought of expression as a neutral segment of linguistic utterance meant to communicate a particular idea that we could engage with or disregard. Now, however, the term expression takes on a new dynamism that is in keeping with the profoundly creative nature of language. For Heidegger this was best seen in the *poetic* expression. Poetry for him was the distinctive linguistic activity of humans, meant to answer the call of Being and make that call hearable for other human being through poetic expression. Hence, Chauvet says that the task of the poet is to “manifest the very essence of language” as an “invitation addressed to entities to come into presence while remaining in their absence – the creation of the universe as a ‘world.’”<sup>64</sup> The poet is the great example of letting language be itself, and in that letting-be, calling others to do the same.

What does this have to do with “expression?” Well, what philosophers like Heidegger have been often troubled by is this: the supposedly “common sense” notion that all expressions are the “accidents,” while the content of those expression are the real “substance.” The substance or truth of expressions, thus, lies somewhere “behind” the actual and accidental nature of the expressions themselves. This is to make our exterior expression, the material and audible things we say, to be ontologically inferior to the *interior* reality of thought. The sense in which expression ought to be taken is, according to Chauvet, something more intimate to our personhood. To express something is not “to give an exterior covering to a human reality already

---

<sup>63</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

there interiorly,” rather, to express something is to *give it a body*.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Chauvet eschews the exterior-interior view of the human person in favor of a more holistic picture. We are not beings with “real” interiors struggling to get them out there into the “mediated” exterior world through language. Instead, Chauvet claims that “there is no human reality, however interior or intimate, except through the mediation of language or quasi-language that gives it a body by expressing it.”<sup>66</sup> This idea of “giving a body” to something will be an essential idea for Chauvet because it is precisely where he seems to be breaking from Heidegger and the social scientists whose work is so influential here. What Chauvet is driving at seems to be a vision of the human reality as most *real* precisely in its *embodied* and *mediated* nature. So the real truth of human subjects is not to be found in an interior core that is free from the mediation of language and culture but rather is to be found precisely in the expressive means by which human subjects live and move and have their being in the world they co-create together—what we might call, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, the “whole hurly-burly of human actions.”<sup>67</sup> To express something, then, whether via “verbal, facial, or gestural,” is to give to it a body in order for it to share in the only reality there is.

What Chauvet is being quite careful to do here is to eschew the schema of cause and effect that he used to critique Aquinas. An expression, under our new paradigm of language, is not an attempt to effect something exterior through an interior cause. The expression is rather *outside* of the realm of cause and effect. The best way to read what is meant by this is not to say that expressions do not cause something or have effects. I think there is no way around that rather common sense way of thinking about the nature of our expressions. The important thing

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 90

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1967), 99.

for Chauvet and Heidegger is that the expression and the result of the expression occur *simultaneously* such that there is no reality that takes precedence over the reality made exterior in the expression. I hope the reader can sense the danger involved here. If we take expressions to be the effect of an interior cause, as we have explained above, then language becomes nothing more than an instrument again. Yet, if we truly come to be in and through language then the cause of the expression just *is* the expression, and the effects of the expression are, once again, *just the expression*. In this way an expression effects what it signifies and effects it *solely through signification*. Cause and effect is not transcended in the expression, rather the two simply occur all at once. This is what makes the symbolic order, the order proper to this new conception of expression, fundamentally different than what Chauvet pejoratively calls the “metaphysical order.”

Thus far we have seen *that* subjects come to be through language, but we have not seen *how* this process occurs according to Chauvet. Here is a pivotal point in *Symbol and Sacrament* because it is where Chauvet quite literally pivots from a philosophical outlook informed by the “turn to language” to the social sciences, particularly to linguistics and structuralist anthropology. This move is appropriate, according to Chauvet, because while the post-metaphysical philosophy we have been examining is a manifestation of the “invitation by Being (always linked to the *Logos*) to the human being” the discourses of linguistics and psychoanalysis reveal the “concrete process of this invitation.”<sup>68</sup> It is a paltry analogy, to be sure, but perhaps one could think of the philosophy we have worked through thus far as the “theory” and the linguists and analysts yet to be discussed as the “practice.” Either way, it is clear that Chauvet feels this “rapid detour” into the social sciences is appropriate because it *puts flesh* on

---

<sup>68</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 92.

the philosophical and existential principles we have been concerned with up to this point. I highlight this transition here because it is a central point of contention for critics of Chauvet's work. Chauvet's critics hold that this turn is not a detour but a crash. Rather than plumbing the depths of philosophical insight and then applying them to sacramental theology, Chauvet attempts to use as concrete examples discourses that are fundamentally incompatible with the philosophical perspective he has already taken up. In short, the objects that the social sciences and post-metaphysical philosophy seek to understand are just not the same things. As Belcher puts it, "Linguistics and psychoanalysis...make no attempt to show the invitation of Being to human beings; on the contrary, they are interested in all kinds of language acts (and subconscious movements) *between* human subjects, but only in these."<sup>69</sup>

Is there any defending Chauvet's making equivalent the objects of post-metaphysical philosophy and the social sciences? I believe his move makes sense in light of his use of Jüngel and others to reimagine the doctrine of God, particularly the critical claim that God's divinity is actual in Jesus' humanity. Chauvet's embrace of reformed doctrine might seem puzzling given the Catholic orientation of his project.<sup>70</sup> However, what Chauvet is really trying to get at with his appropriation of Jüngel and other predominantly Protestant thinkers is the way in which the doctrine of Divine Freedom and grace not only are compatible with sacramental theology but even *require* the sacramental system as the symbolic expression of the theology of the Cross. This, then, changes the way we ought to perceive what, on its face, does seem a dramatic turn to the social sciences. Chauvet is so apt to engage the social sciences not to equate Heidegger's notion of language with, say, the linguistic work on symbol of Edmond Ortigues but, rather,

---

<sup>69</sup> Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in Trinitarian Mystery*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011) 40-41.

<sup>70</sup> Perhaps we should not be surprised given that Chauvet wrote his dissertation on the theology of John Calvin.

Chauvet is eager to engage the social sciences because they disclose *the concrete manifestation of that which is most authentically human*. If the social sciences do this successfully (and Milbank will certainly have a great deal to say contrary to this), then these very sciences also disclose places in which God might be made present as the One who has chosen to be thought in terms of humanity. Thus, far from betraying the integrity of his theological project, a turn to the social sciences as revelatory of the concrete and embodied ways that human beings come to be human subjects seems entirely in keeping with Chauvet's stated purpose.

What Chauvet hopes to accomplish in this controversial turn is to set up a common frame for understanding the innovative ways he is going to talk about two traditional theological claims. The first claim is that God and humankind *communicate* with one another but retain their radical difference. The obvious danger for Chauvet is in eliding the radical difference between God and humanity he might unwittingly make of God a being among other beings, hence committing the same ontotheological mistake he proscribed from the start. The second claim is that there is "no truly human life that is not radically crossed by death."<sup>71</sup> Chauvet has to set up this latter truth because, again, his sacramental theology will have to deal with the traditional notion of sacramental *presence*. Yet, given what we have seen so far, there is just no way to conceive of the notion of "presence" in the same way as before. So the use of the social sciences is to show that human lives as fully human come to be lives in that they are crossed by death, marked by it from the start. This will help Chauvet further elucidate the difficult but critical interrelation between presence and absence, identity and difference, Same and Other.

Chauvet, thus, launches into a very quick description of Benveniste's and Ortigues' theories on how human development takes place through language. For both thinkers the word

---

<sup>71</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 92.

“I” is a unique case for the linguist. Strictly speaking, the word “I” doesn’t accomplish what we typically hope to accomplish with our words. We often expect our words to refer to some sort of reality whether a mental reality, cultural reality, or material reality. Words like “book” or “Arab Spring” or “Liverpool Football Club” have concrete referents that we can point to in order to understand their meaning. But the word “I” does not function in that way, nor does its correlate “You.” As Benveniste himself states, “The instances of the use of *I* do not constitute a class of reference since there is no ‘object’ definable as *I* to which these instances can refer in identical fashion. Each *I* has its own reference and correspond each time to a unique being who is set up as such.”<sup>72</sup> The word “I” cannot refer to myself and someone else in precisely the same way. The word “I” has no strict external referent but is, rather, only definable within each given context. In other words, what the term “I” actually refers to is the subject who is currently speaking.

Despite this liminal space that the *I* seems to inhabit, it is a fact of linguistics that all discourse is dependent upon precisely this murky concept. For “consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast.” The *I* immediately defines itself in opposition to an Other. In fact, the speaker only uses *I* when speaking to “someone who will be a *you* in my address.” This is not only the birth of the designation “YOU,” a pronoun that shares in the same ambiguity of reference as did the “I,” it is also the birth of human subjects themselves. “It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*.”<sup>73</sup>

As of yet, however, this sequence is incomplete. For while the “I” can define itself as subject precisely through dialogue with a “YOU,” they are still nothing more than mirror images of one another, having no real distinction between the two, without the introduction of a *third*

---

<sup>72</sup> Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 218.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-225.

*term.* This “*third*” is the “IT” or the “social and cosmic world.”<sup>74</sup> The “I-YOU” relation only constitutes genuine human subjectivity through the mediation of the “Neuter” or the non-human reality that the “I-YOU” share together. In short, a linguistic analysis of communication and the mediation that is fundamental to it, reveals the path to the possibility of the “existential subjectivity” Chauvet has heretofore been describing.

I said above, however, that the point of this is to help Chauvet reinterpret traditional theological categories of communication and presence. The linguistic view of human subjectivity gives to Chauvet a critical principle for this work in the I-YOU-IT schema. What such a schema shows is a radical transformation of what “difference” means. It has been the stalwart doctrine of orthodoxy that God and human beings are radically different, but our discoveries from the linguistic viewpoint redefine what precisely we mean by difference in general, thus forcing a rethinking of the precise way in which God and humans are differ from one another. Under the linguistic viewpoint, difference can no longer be conceived of as, what Chauvet dubs “distance-separation.” Chauvet argues:

[O]n the axis of contradiction, [the linguistic YOU] occupies the opposition opposite the I, from which, as a consequence, it is the most different; but it is also the most similar to the I since it designates the interlocutor insofar as he or she is capable of taking in his or her turn, and in his or her own name, the same linguistic I as the one who is speaking. This paradoxical position is rendered possible by the third agent, the IT, the social and universal Other under which both the I and the YOU abide and which permits them, spoken as they are by the same culture, to understand one another.<sup>75</sup>

The I-YOU-IT relationship shows that difference and similarity are not fundamentally opposed concepts. The I and You’s difference is what allows them to communicate with one another, but this very difference is also their most profound similarity. Now, this is not to say that they are not

---

<sup>74</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 93.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



spatially separate things. As Chauvet admits, Kant was correct in saying that space is a fundamental part of our human experience of the world.<sup>76</sup> However, if we think of difference in terms of distance or separation—imagining the I and the You as two fundamentally *separate* things—then we occlude the truth that the I and You are the reversible of one another and only come into being through the other. Put another way, thinking of the I and You under the schema of separation actually misleads us, since the I and You are not entirely separable in their development from one another. As Chauvet puts it, “the anthropological difference should not be conceived as a distancing which attenuates or even cuts communication but rather as an *otherness* which makes it possible.”<sup>77</sup> Far from being an obstacle to the discovery of truth, then, difference functions instead as “the very place where truth is brought about” since it was only through the difference of the You that the I came to be in the first place. Hence, when Chauvet constantly employs the phrase “symbolic Other,” it is precisely this sort of otherness—a difference that reveals rather than stifles truth—that he means.

More than declaring the truth of the subject as based in otherness, Chauvet often declares that the subject is the product of a “breach” or a “lack.” To explain what he means by this, I must explicate Chauvet’s subsequent turn to psychoanalysis. Here Chauvet is reliant on Lacan’s account of the “stage of the mirror” in infant development.<sup>78</sup> Put plainly, an infant notices its self in the mirror but cannot fully come to subjectivity until it sees itself as named by another. This is a very useful analogy for Chauvet since the unity of self that the infant receives when it sees itself in the mirror as named is a *symbolic* unity, i.e., it is a unity based on something that comes from outside itself. “Thus, it is through a break with the immediate image [the child’s mirror

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>78</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 75-81.

image] that access to true subjectivity begins.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, the “breach” or “lack” that Chauvet is describing is the break that happens when the infant is named and is no longer one with its immediate image in the mirror. The true ascent to subjectivity comes only through the mediation of its being represented by a name that is not its own creation. Ultimately, Chauvet writes, “The truth of the subject, as we see, depends on its psychic consent to the lack which constitutes it and which language opens within it.”<sup>80</sup>

If the truth of the subject begins with consent to the lack that ensues from its being represented in language, then there is a greater break that must be consented to if the subject is going to live out a full human life, namely, death. The human subject might come to be initially through this division into the symbolic order, but it is only as consenting to the radical crossing out of death that the human subject fully comes into itself. So just as symbolic otherness through language was the law that birthed the subject, so the consent to the presence of death in life is a vital process that the subject must undergo. I say process because, in keeping with our emphasis on becoming rather than Being, “the subject’s conquest of its liberty and truth...is effected by an *unending process* of costly ‘working through,’”<sup>81</sup> what Freud called *Durcharbeitung*.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the truth of the subject is not a particular breakthrough point but rather “the *path* itself,” the continual working through of the fact that its life only exists as radically crossed by death. Here, again, incommensurables work with one another rather than against one another. Identity and otherness, life and death, presence and absence, co-inhere and seem to call forth the truth of one

---

<sup>79</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>82</sup> Freud introduced the concept of “*durcharbeiten*” in 1914 in Sigmund Freud, “Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse (II): Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für ärztliche Psychoanalyse* 2, no. 6 (1914): 485-91.

another rather than cancel it out. This is why Chauvet will continue to call the truth of the subject the “*consent to the presence of absence*,” a consent to the continual process of becoming that characterizes the subject’s life and the ever-present lack-in-being that constitutes its existence. Precisely this way of thinking is what Chauvet means by the *symbolic* as opposed to the *metaphysical* order—an order of thought grounded in the groundless place of mediation rather than in the supposedly solid foundation of identity.

### *Chauvet on the Gift: Symbolic Exchange*

I have been describing the way in which Chauvet seeks to use the truths of the social sciences—linguistics and anthropology, in particular—to examine the truth of human subjectivity. He did this, the reader will recall, not as an attempt to baptize a fundamentally non-theological discourse but precisely because the Logos of the Cross shows that such examination of the human condition is a means of discovering the truth of the God whose divinity is made actual as God’s humanity. We could think of these philosophical waypoints as the beginning and end of subjectivity—the “beginning” in the symbolic otherness that constitutes our identity by our being named, and the “end” of death that is the impetus for the never ending process of working through the truth of our existence. The “in-between” of these two waypoints, the “rule” or “law” of the life that we live in and amongst other human persons is what Chauvet calls “symbolic exchange.”<sup>83</sup> The importance of this concept for Chauvet’s work can hardly be overstated. In short, the structure of symbolic exchange is the wellspring out of which his unique account of the interrelationship between Eucharist, language, gift, and politics flows. To this vital piece of the puzzle, therefore, I now turn.

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 99.

I have shown above that human subjectivity, for Chauvet, is of the symbolic rather than metaphysical order, but the foundation of Chauvet's understanding of symbolic exchange is the concept of the symbol. His work is, after all, entitled "*Symbol and Sacrament*," and I have perhaps come a long way without explicitly naming what Chauvet means by this term. To start, Chauvet introduces what he calls a "heuristic" distinction within language between "sign" and "symbol."<sup>84</sup> These two linguistic realities will represent two poles within language itself, but, again, this distinction is not meant as a hard and fast statement of fact. The distinction helps reveal a critical truth about what happens in language-acts that tend towards the epistemological schema inherent to sign or symbol respectively. The "sign," Chauvet argues, represents the use of language most focused on communicating information. Under the logic or order of the sign, the person attempts to make statements about objects that accurately represent the referent in question. Hence, "signs" always point away from themselves towards something else and we judge the sign based on its ability to evoke this something else in adequate detail. Therefore, the sign is always governed by a logic of *value*. We judge the value of the sign based on its ability to communicate information accurately.<sup>85</sup> Signs, in other words, are always already caught up in an economy of meaning.

The "symbol," however, is of an entirely different order. Chauvet points back to the ancient use of the term *symbolon* as an example of its vital difference from signs. The ancient *symbolon* was an object used to represent a union or agreement between two groups. It was an object cut in two with one part of the object given to each group. When the two groups met together the object could be fit together again, literally symbolizing their union or alliance in a concrete way. Relying on the French linguist Edmond Ortigues, this shows for Chauvet that

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 118.

symbols “introduce us into an order to which it itself belongs.”<sup>86</sup> In other words, the symbol’s primary function is not to convey accurate information, but “to *join* the persons who produce or receive it with their cultural world...and so to *identify* them as subjects in their relations with other subjects.”<sup>87</sup> The symbol is not just a more complicated version of the sign. Rather, the symbol is indicative of an entirely different logic or order within the human milieu. The symbol takes *priority* over the sign because the function just mentioned of joining us to a cultural world and identifying us as subjects in this very process is itself the *primordial function of language*. So to tell the story of language as primitive sounds meant only for signs, which then only gradually managed to build up to the complexity of symbols, has things the wrong way round. It turns out that the smallest phonemes of human language are *originally symbolic* in that they introduce us to the human order by their very utterance.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the best illustration of this claim that Chauvet offers is the plane crash in the Amazon. Chauvet imagines a survivor of a plane crash in the Amazonian jungle hearing, as they claw their way through the deadly environs, the word “flower” spoken by a human being. Now, taken under the form of sign, the word “flower” evokes a certain piece of information but also brings to mind other scientific discourses. Horticulture, biology, and botany are all indicated in the mention of the word flower. The sign “flower” points beyond itself to them. But, for the survivor of the plane crash this is precisely *not* what comes to mind. The survivor does not hear “flower” spoken in the jungle and think, “Well! Someone is speaking about horticulture; I’ll join the conversation.” Instead, they think “Thank God! Another human being! I’m saved!”<sup>89</sup> Thus,

---

<sup>86</sup> From Edmond Ortigues, *Le Discours et le Symbole* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1962), 65. Found in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 113.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-121.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-115.

<sup>89</sup> Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 75.

the mere speech of a human being, from the word “flower” to even a mere phoneme, introduces the hearer into the order to which it belongs, namely the linguistic order of human subjects. So the survivor of the plane crash hears in the word “flower” not an attempt to communicate information but the whole human order to which they desire to return.

This example also illustrates a critical truth of the dichotomy between symbol and sign, namely that the two always interpenetrate one another. After all, the person whom the survivor overhears speaking about a flower probably is using this word as a sign, despite the fact that it is heard as a symbol by the victim of the crash. The logic of signs is always present in the symbol and vice versa. An easy example of this is the “White House.” We could use “the White House” as a sign, telling a lost graduate student how to find his way back to his D.C. hotel, but even in this use “the White House” still bears the trace of its symbolic use as representing America itself. Hence, while the symbol might bear witness to the primordial function of language, it still bears the trace of the sign in its expression. There are, therefore, no “pure” symbols.

Most importantly, however, the symbol eludes the logics of value or calculation that we have seen so heavily criticized above. It does this in several ways. First, the symbol’s meaning can only be understood in *relation*. It is only by being joined to the other piece of the hewn object that the ancient *symbolon* functioned. In the same way, the symbol, whether in the linguistic plane or beyond it, only functions in its relation to the whole of the symbolic network to which it belongs. Moreover, the symbol does not communicate an accurate representation but evokes the entire symbolic order to which it belongs. In other words, there is no real way to value the symbol apart from being summoned into or challenged by the symbolic order that it introduces to us. I think this is what Chauvet means when he continually notes that there is no grasping of truth without first being *grasped by* the truth. The symbol seems to call the human

person into the symbolic order to which it belongs and only in consenting to that order does one come to understand the symbol's meaning. Now, if this strikes the reader as remarkably akin to the Christian description of faith, that is no accident; for Chauvet calls the symbol a "witness to the founding faith of humanity."<sup>90</sup> What he means by this is that the symbol is a witness to the "distance" or "otherness" of mediation that constitutes human experience of the real as human experience. Thus, the symbol belongs to an entirely different order than that of the sign and the logic of value that follows with it.

What would it mean, then, to *exchange* symbols or to be a part of an exchange that is *symbolic*? Are we not right back where we started with Derrida's aporia of the gift if we plunge the symbol into any form of *exchange*? Would this not obliterate the gift and make impossible its reception? Chauvet seems to think the answer is "no," and while he does not answer Derrida directly (*Given Time* was published almost a decade after *Symbol and Sacrament*), Chauvet seems to hold firm in his defense of the logic of obligatory generosity. The dichotomy Chauvet has set up between sign and symbol clears the way for this defense of the gift as remaining outside of the logic of economy that Derrida held would cancel the gift. "The difference between sign and symbol thus appears as *homologous* to the difference which exists between the principle of the value of something as an object, which governs the *market-place*, and the principle 'beyond value' of the communication between subjects, which controls *symbolic exchange*."<sup>91</sup> Understanding symbolic exchange is thus the very foundation for understanding the *admirabile commercium* or "marvelous exchange" of grace between God and human beings.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

But what *is* symbolic exchange and, more importantly given our prior reading of Derrida, *how* is it? Chauvet here gives a telling treatment of Mauss' *Essai sur le don* wherein he transposes Mauss' analysis of the gift into his theological and philosophical framework. Chauvet emphasizes two important traits of the gift that we have already seen above. First, that the gift is a "total social fact," meaning that it touches on every domain of society and their respective exchanges.<sup>93</sup> Second, and most importantly, Chauvet sees Mauss as evidence for placing the gift as belonging fundamentally to the *symbolic* order. For, as Mauss says, "it is something different from the merely useful that is passed around." The gift is not valued based on its use. Hence, "the *principle* which regulates general exchange is of a *completely different order* from that of the marketplace or of value."<sup>94</sup> This is further evidenced by the "obligatory generosity" that Mauss observed in the gift-exchange of traditional societies. Since the gift is given "for nothing" but still communicates an obligation upon the recipient, so the gift must belong to an order beyond the realm of utilitarian value.

Chauvet anticipates in some ways Derrida's critique of Mauss in that the idea of gift and return-gift raises clearly the problem of language and translation. Mauss himself saw this problem as well: "The terms which we have used – present, gift – are not in themselves completely exact. We find no others; this is the best we can do. These concepts from economics and law which we like to oppose to each other – liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity, luxury and thrift, interest, utility – need recasting."<sup>95</sup> The reality that for traditional societies "every gift received obligates in its turn" needs a linguistic recasting since, as Derrida has rightly

---

<sup>93</sup> Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990), 1-21.

<sup>94</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 100.

<sup>95</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1973), 267 as quoted in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 102.



shown, to call something a gift which subsequently creates a debt seems to make the gift into something like a loan, which is no gift at all. Chauvet seems to be attempting that very recasting of language, taking the idea of gift-exchange, in which the very presence of “exchange” cancels the reality of the “gift,” and converting it to “symbolic exchange,” in which the inclusion of “exchange” does not have the same corrosive effect.

Chauvet will thus still retain the structure of Gift—Reception—Return-Gift as essential to his theological project. In fact, it is this structure that makes up symbolic exchange itself, and it is precisely this fundamental structure of human relationships that the ontotheological presuppositions of metaphysics so often cover over. As he writes,

For in our societies, so many centuries of metaphysical tradition, technological civilization, and the dominance of business values have passed, enshrining the notion of equivalence, that by an almost historic fatality, our languages have forgotten the original ambivalence of our vocabulary of exchange. This is why it is difficult for us to recognize that the fundamental system of “obligatory generosity” and “mandatory gratuitousness,” organized according to a process of gift—reception—return-gift, continues to pervade our exchanges. We have trouble recognizing that it is nevertheless *what allows us to live as subjects and structures all our relations in what they contain of the authentically human.*<sup>96</sup>

For what allows us to live as truly human subjects is not reducible to the “order of the useful.”

That which is authentically human must be beyond this realm of value, and so Chauvet dubs this this the “order of... ‘graciousness’ or super-abundance.”<sup>97</sup>

But what is actually given in such exchanges? And is it a true gift or is the true gift canceled by the fall into economy and value? As to the first question, symbolic exchange is the exchange of the *subjects themselves*, not any one particular object:

For what is being exchanged through yams, shells, or spears, as through a rose or a book offered as gifts in our own culture, is more and other than what they are worth on the open market or what they may be useful for. It is more and other

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 103.

than what the objects are in themselves. One is here outside or beyond the regime of usefulness and immediacy. Rather, the principle which rules here is one of *super-abundance*. *The true objects being exchanged are the subjects themselves.*<sup>98</sup>

An object being used as an intermediary—hence, of no value—provides the means to assert our subjectivity and receive recognition of that subjectivity in return, a reception which itself constitutes that very subjectivity. At the same time, we perform the same feat for the one with whom we exchange our very self. They receive through our recognition that full identity that is only got by being given the recognition of a fellow subject. Hence, symbolic exchange is shown to be that very same process as language, i.e. that which through a consent to mediation allows human persons to come to be as subjects through the mutual recognition of the Other.

As to the second question it seems clear that Chauvet does not believe in a pure symbol. Thus, while the symbol is “beyond” the realm of value it still bears the trace of the sign. Heidegger’s essay on the “Origin of the Work of Art,” an essay for which Chauvet expresses great admiration, demonstrates this dynamic particularly well. Therein, Heidegger expresses his admiration for the existential power of art to bring forth truth as an “advent” in which we might participate through encounter with the work itself.<sup>99</sup> Particularly relevant to our current question, however, is the simple fact that, despite this wondrous potential of works of art, they still possess the character of *things*. “Works of art are shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest. During the First World War Hölderlin’s hymns were packed in the soldier’s knapsack together with cleaning gear. Beethoven’s quartets lie in the storerooms of the

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>99</sup> I’m taking “advent” from the phrase “advent of truth” as translated by Albert Hofstadter’s in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 81. It should be noted that the translation of this phrase was changed to “propriative event,” in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 206, possibly to eschew the theological connotations of advent.

publishing house like potatoes in a cellar.”<sup>100</sup> The “thingly” character of works of art cannot be ignored no matter the heights of aesthetic bliss they may call forth in us.<sup>101</sup> Yet, it is decidedly the case that their essence is something else over and above their thingly nature. So it is with the symbol and the sign. All symbols undoubtedly possess a “signly” character, but their essence is decidedly more than this. The ancient *symbolon*, after all, might’ve been nothing more than a pot or, to use one of Chauvet’s favorite examples, the torn five-dollar bills that OSS agents carried during World War II. The split bill was certainly a half of a five dollar bill, a mere sign, but the true essence of the bill was its function as a symbol, identifying the one who carried it as occupying a particular role in a system. Chauvet, thus, seems to agree in a certain sense with Derrida in that the Gift—Reception—Return-Gift pattern of obligatory generosity will always be haunted by the logic of economic value inherent in signs.

Yet, Chauvet is insistent that the symbol remains free of the logic of value, or at least that its symbolic status cannot be canceled by the presence of value. While the symbol is haunted by the sign and always seems to bear the trace of economy and calculation, it is decidedly not *bound* to these entities. In fact, this mutual inherence seems to be the very dynamic which allows the symbol to function as symbol in the first place. For as we described above, presence and absence, identity and difference, do not cancel one another out. Rather, the one works *with* rather than *against* the other. Hence, we might think of Chauvet as thinking beyond the aporia of the gift not by denying the contradiction, but by claiming that the contradiction itself serves to make the gift into a gift in the first place.

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

This is what I think Chauvet means when he says that there is always a place of “cognition” in every symbolic expression meant at “recognition.”<sup>102</sup> Symbolic expressions primarily serve to establish the interrelations of subjects through mutual recognition, but there is no symbolic expression free from the role of cognition and information. Chauvet returns to the example of Van Gogh’s painting of the peasants shoes from Heidegger’s famous essay to illustrate this. It is necessary to have a “minimum knowledge if Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant woman’s shoes is to exercise its power of symbolization.”<sup>103</sup> We should need to know something of Van Gogh’s life, something of the canon of great art to measure the painting against, but even more importantly, we must know something of shoes in general and their use in life. However, the knowledge of such things does not produce the aesthetic experience in us. This means that the “symbolic experience is not sufficient unto itself,” and accounts for the fact that “*every symbol tends towards a discourse of cognition*, a discourse of truth which is the ambition of all language.”<sup>104</sup> This is the great pragmatism of Chauvet and reveals his decided resistance against making the symbol the whole of truth. Far from causing the gift to disappear, then, the condition of the truly human mediation at the heart of finitude seems to be the very condition that makes the gift possible in the first place, just as effective symbolic expressions always bear the trace of calculation and information.

One objection might linger, however, and from none other than Thomas Aquinas. How is it, so the objection might go, that symbolic exchange is not just another name for *cause and effect*? Do we not cause an effect in the other and receive an effect in ourselves through their agency? Despite Chauvet’s continual assertion that symbolic exchange is beyond the

---

<sup>102</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 124-128.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

productionist scheme of ontotheology are we not *producing* something in the other and being *made* by them in the process? Indeed, Chauvet will draw upon anthropologists like Victor Turner, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Éric de Rosny to describe what he terms “symbolic efficacy.”<sup>105</sup> What those thinkers meant by such a term is the efficacy of rites within traditional societies, how it was that processes of symbolization were actually effective in changing or healing the socio-cultural order of a particular society. Chauvet retells several examples from the works of those just mentioned—Turner’s “pulled tooth,” Levi-Strauss’ account of the Cunas’ birth ritual, etc.—and comes to note one critical insight: if in a ritual of healing, for example, an actual physical healing occurs, it does not occur due to some magical cause. Rather, as Bourdieu notes, a ritual “acts on the real by acting on the representations of the real.”<sup>106</sup> If there is an “extra-linguistic perlocutionary effect” of a ritual it only occurs via the “intermediary” of the “illocutionary order.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, if something physical actually occurs it only does so through the *mediation* of language. This is what Chauvet means by an “intra-linguistic effect.” The physical healing brought on by the ritual is not a physical effect but a *symbolic* effect. The power of such rites is therefore performative and based in a “consensus that validates them” rather than in a spiritual force that intervenes to produce anomalous physical effects. For this reason, Chauvet believes he can claim that symbolic efficacy “cannot be identified with the scheme of cause and effect” because “the effect here is a ‘*symbolic* effect.’”<sup>108</sup>

Yet, does not this emphasis on the symbolic eschew the very embodiment that Chauvet had valued so highly? Do we not denigrate embodied physical presence here in favor of the

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 135-139.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>107</sup> Chauvet is borrowing the linguistic framework of J.L. Austin here. See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>108</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 139.

purely linguistic reality of the symbolic?<sup>109</sup> Physical effects of rituals, after all, seem subservient to their symbolic effects based entirely in an intra-linguistic realm. Critically, Chauvet turns to Derrida's work in this moment to remind us that all language—the means through which symbolic effects occur in the first place—is embodied. The Derridian notion of writing, the reader will recall from Chapter One, referred to this inescapable trace of the material in all thought and speech. So the use of symbolic efficacy in order to escape the schema of cause and effect turns out to *rely upon* rather than eschew embodiment. Chauvet goes further still in insisting that the body itself is speech:

Like language, the body is matter, matter significant from the first, that is, culturally instituted as speech. Outside of language, outside of culture, the body would be only an object or an instrument – indispensable certainly, in spite of its limits – which the soul would make use of to speak itself: humans would have bodies the same way they have language. Calling this traditional instrumentalist conception of language into question has immediate consequences for our understanding of the body. Humans do not ex-sist except as *corporality* whose concrete place is always their *own bodies*. Corporality is the body's very speech.<sup>110</sup>

Far from pulling us up into an ethereal linguistic plane meant to be the true site of the real, Chauvet's insistence on symbol and language returns us to the body, as the site where the very advent of God is possible. For the body itself is the “primary place of every symbolic joining of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside.’”<sup>111</sup> In other words, the body is the primordial *symbolon* that places us as signifying subjects into an always already signified world. Chauvet quotes an instructive phrase from Dubarle here: “The living body is indeed... ‘the arch-symbol of the whole symbolic

---

<sup>109</sup> It should be noted here that this is quite a modern question that a pre-modern Christian would have never imagined asking.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

order.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, the ontological, and therefore the *pastoral* payoff for Chauvet is that the most ontological is no longer an idealist reality but an *embodied one*. The symbolic order and the embodied flesh that we are have collapsed into one another such that our faith, for Chauvet, is nothing less than an embodied reality as well.

For this reason Chauvet reclaims a particular phrase from a critical passage in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

“Body am I, and soul”—thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children?  
But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else [*Leib ich bin, ganz und gar, und nichts ausserdem*]; and soul is only a word for something about the body.<sup>113</sup>

For Chauvet, I cannot say that “I have a body,” or even that “I am a body,” for this is to place the body as an object separate from the first-person subject that is speaking. Rather, “body *am I*.” The human being is an I-body such that the body is the subject of the verb rather than its object. The distance that the metaphysical picture of the human being placed between the Body and the I is now collapsed under Chauvet’s vision of corporality: “The concept of *corporality* seeks to express this symbolic order which holds that the human being does not have a body, but is body.”<sup>114</sup> Hence, the picture of the human person inherent in Scholastic theology after Aquinas is corrected by insisting that there is no account of subjectivity apart from corporality.

---

<sup>112</sup> Dominique Dubarle, “Pratique du symbole et connaissance de Dieu,” *Le mythe et le symbole: de la connaissance figurative de dieu* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 243, as translated by Madigan and Beaumont in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 151. While Chauvet does not mention him here, the influence of Karl Rahner’s classic essay “The Theology of the Symbol” seems paramount. See Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations, vol. IV*, trans. Kevin Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 221-252.

<sup>113</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 146.

<sup>114</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 149.

The body as the arch-symbol is thus the joining together of seemingly divergent realities. These divergent entities are what Chauvet refers to as the “triple body” of “culture, tradition, and nature.” What Chauvet is trying to get at is an adequate description of how it is that our bodies are speaking (i.e., the body as speech) and how they are always-already spoken (i.e., we are born into a particular language). Culture, tradition, and nature—far from being realities constitutive of our interior self, are constitutive as bodies of our very bodies. A person’s body is “spoken” therefore by the “symbolic network” of the group to which the person belongs, the “historic tradition” of that cultural group, and, finally, the physical universe. These three embodied realities are symbolically joined together in each person such that “the I-body exists only as woven, inhabited, spoken by this *triple body* of culture, tradition, and nature.”<sup>115</sup>

Securing this philosophical anthropology is critical for Chauvet precisely because, as we have already shown, that which is truly human—the symbolic order revealed in a vital way by the arch-symbol of the body—is the very place where the God, whose divinity is made actual as God’s humanity, can be encountered. Thus, Chauvet can claim that “*the anthropological is the place of every possible theological.*”<sup>116</sup> The “faith” that we now profess, therefore, is no longer a purely interior reality, a matter of the “head” or “heart,” but is rather an exterior reality “written” in our bodies. Whatever faith is, it is something corporal. This is the necessary consequence, Chauvet argues, of the theological transformation of the doctrine of God we saw when the scandal of the Cross is placed front and center. Faith can no more escape consent to the mediation of embodiment than can our language. Hence, the corporality of faith is the outcome of thinking about God as the God whose divinity is made actual as God’s humanity.

---

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 152.



To conclude, the necessity of the *sacramentality* of faith itself now becomes obvious. The sacraments are the “unavoidable stumbling block” which prevents every attempt of the believer to circumvent the consent to mediation that all faith requires. To become a believer, for Chauvet, requires that we “learn to consent, without resentment, to the corporality of faith.” The sacraments are themselves the expressions of this “*corporality of the faith*” in that within the rites themselves “the faith is at work within a ritual staging in which *each person’s body* is the place of the symbolic convergence...of the triple body which makes us into believers.” We are joined through the sacraments to the “symbolic network” unique to the Church (culture), the particular history that makes the rites possible (tradition), and the universe from which the sacramental elements are drawn (nature). The sacraments thus bar the way to the false notion of a faith free of mediation:

In their significant materiality, the sacraments thus constitute an *unavoidable stumbling block* which forms a barrier to every imaginary claim to a direct connection, individual and interior, with Christ or to a gnostic-like, illuminist contact with him. They represent in the feasible mediations, beginning with the church, outside of which there is no possible Christian faith. They tell us that the faith has a body, that it adheres to our body. More than that, they tell us that *to become a believer is to learn to consent, without resentment, to the corporality of the faith.*<sup>117</sup>

The sacraments are, therefore, the “wise pedagogy” that teaches us to encounter the God in the proper place to meet such a God as the God of Jesus of Nazareth, namely in the place that makes our human life to be human in the first place. Our faith requires a body. Embodiment is, at its root, linguistic. The sacraments are a place—not ‘the’ place, but certainly a place—in which our faith is given a body. Chauvet’s reference to Derrida here is quite telling:

Just as empirical writing is the phenomenal manifestation of an arch-writing that constitutes language as the place where the human subject comes into being, so the sacraments can be appreciated as the empirical manifestation of the ‘*arch-*

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 153.

*sacramentality' that constitutes the language of faith, which is the place where the believing subject comes into being.*<sup>118</sup>

Thus, faith in the God of the Cross, in the One whose presence is as the Absent One, in the God whose divinity is made actual as God's humanity, this faith must be given a body through the sacraments. If such is the radical philosophical and theological underpinnings of Chauvet's sacramental theology, then it remains only to analyze how the Eucharist accomplishes this as the symbolic figure that constitutes a believing subject through language and transposes them into a particular manner of communal, human belonging.

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 154.

CHAPTER THREE  
CHAUVET ON THE EUCHARIST:  
THE POLITICS OF THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

*Introduction*

I turn now to Chauvet's account of the Eucharist and will do so in two broad sections, corresponding to the overall purpose of this essay. The first is Chauvet's account of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist, particularly the way in which Christ is said to be present in the material elements of the Eucharist. The second is Chauvet's account of the political scandal of the Eucharist, particularly the way in which Chauvet elaborates the return-gift of Christian witness. Before that, however, allow me to offer a preliminary word on the way in which I think one's understanding of sacramental grace has to change when confronted with the radical theological and philosophical presuppositions that guide Chauvet's project.

Chauvet will combine his two axes—that of language and symbol plus that of the *Logos* of the Cross—and call the sacraments the “symbolic figures of God's effacement.”<sup>1</sup> I take it that by “God's effacement” Chauvet means something in keeping with the insights of Jüngel's (but also Moltmann's and Kasper's) radical theology of the cross, which we examined in the previous chapter. Chauvet thus, following Jüngel, reads the Crucifixion as an event in the life of God. The cry of dereliction is not a put on, in other words, but a decisive event in the manner in which God chooses to be Godself. In short, God chooses to efface Godself and identify this self-effacement as part of what it means to be God in the first place.

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. & Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 490).

The Eucharist (along with all the other sacraments, to be sure) is a symbolic figure of this effacement. Yet, despite the vast amount of territory we have now traversed it might still seem odd to suggest that a “symbolic figure” is responsible for an ontological and political scandal. We might agree with much of what Chauvet has said but find ourselves still tempted to think of the Eucharist as a mechanism that causes something irresistible. For are we not downplaying the actual scandal of the Eucharist if the Eucharist is *just* a symbol? As one author put it, whatever the Eucharist is it cannot be just a “mere symbol.”<sup>2</sup>

We have already seen why it is only natural to think of symbols in this way. The information and sense-data that press themselves upon us in our ordinary experience of the world seem to come first. Only later, through a combination of artifice and manipulation do we arrive at symbols for this reality, but even given their aesthetic and practical power such symbols are not *real* in the proper sense. The real seems to come before the symbol we make to represent it. Calling the Eucharist a symbol seems to distance it from that reality as well, even if we claim that the Eucharist enacts a radical scandal of the real itself. Calling the change in the Eucharist symbolic seems to belie a stratagem designed to skirt the modern embarrassment brought on by the doctrine of transubstantiation. But things are precisely the other way around, according to Chauvet. For as we have shown, all reality is not just made into something symbolic after the fact, rather reality is *encountered* as always already saturated by human signification, as always already *symbolic*. Thus, symbols touch on the real to a greater extent than even signs can, since our experience of the real is always already saturated with symbolism. So, for Chauvet, to call the Eucharist a symbol is not to distance it from reality but to touch reality to the very quick.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Paul Hemming, “Transubstantiating Our Selves,” *Heythrop Journal* 44 (2003): 418.

<sup>3</sup> I am reminded here of the wonderful sentiment expressed by G.E.M. Anscombe in her essay on transubstantiation: “There is the now old dispute between Catholics and Protestants whether we

It is still a tenet of orthodoxy, however, that the sacraments are in some way involved in an economy of grace. Grace is somehow involved in Eucharistic change even if such a change is a symbolic rather than substantial change. Given the theoretical schema we have been explicating, what are the implications for our conception of sacramental grace? The reader might anticipate that Chauvet will try to move sacramental grace into the linguistic plane. Sacramental grace, under this schema, is given through communication between God and humankind and is, therefore, rescued from a derelict and out-of-fashion theology that would tell of a metaphysical change in our soul. We do, in fact, find a perspective like this in Chauvet's argument. Sacramental grace, for him, is the symbolic efficacy at work in the *expression* that the sacraments are. In other words, the sacraments give through their symbolic efficacy a "new relation of places between subjects, a relationship of filial and brotherly and sisterly alliance" through their very expression.<sup>4</sup> As such, the sacramental change brought about in us through these expressions works "within the purview of *intra-linguistic* efficacy."<sup>5</sup> The efficacy of the sacraments—sacramental grace—appears to work at the same level as language.

However, we then discover a rather surprising claim from Chauvet: Sacramental grace, he says, "cannot be reduced to this socio-linguistic process: this would be to transform theology into nothing more than a peculiar form of anthropology and to diminish the absolute otherness of

---

eat what only symbolises, or really is, the flesh of the saviour when we eat the bread consecrated in the Eucharist; drink his blood only symbolically or really. Because of this dispute it appeared as if only the Catholic belief were extravagant—the Protestants having the perfectly reasonable procedure of *symbolically* eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood! The staggering strangeness of doing such a thing even only symbolically slipped out of notice in the dispute about transubstantiation. But let us realize it now." G.E.M. Anscombe, "On Transubstantiation," in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe, vol. 3: Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 110-111.

<sup>4</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 140.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

God.”<sup>6</sup> Whatever sacramental grace is, it is not “merely” an intra-linguistic change. Sacramental grace is an *extra-linguistic* reality. “What we are proposing here,” Chauvet says, “is in no way a reduction of grace to the socio-linguistic mechanism of symbolic efficacy.”<sup>7</sup> One might ask at this point whether this contradicts most of what Chauvet has already argued. After all, this seems to undo the a central claim of Chauvet that the “anthropological is the place of every possible theological.” Is not the entirety of Chauvet’s philosophical moorings torn asunder by the radical Otherness of the God who gives grace?

I do not believe Chauvet has gone quite so wrong. In fact, what Chauvet is saying here is entirely in keeping with his earlier arguments. More importantly, his resistance to limiting sacramental grace to an intra-linguistic effect only seems contradictory if we forget the initial theological background that undergirds this move, namely, the Trinitarian Christology of Jüngel and others. I think there is something analogous in Chauvet’s statement on sacramental grace to Jüngel’s idea that God’s being is in becoming. Recall that for Jüngel there is a becoming that is proper to God simply because it is *God’s* becoming. God’s becoming is the way we speak of God’s free choice of becoming who God is for us. God chooses to be the God of the Cross and in so doing can be identified with the Crucified One, can stand in death itself and render it powerless. Such is the free choice of the God whose presence is as the Absent One. God’s being is not diminished by death if such is the being that God *chooses* to be. I think Chauvet means something similar in his account of sacramental grace. Chauvet’s constant refrain has been that God meets us at the most human places and this is so precisely because God is the God whose divinity is made actual as God’s humanity. The anthropological, therefore, is the location of every possible theological not because theology is fundamentally reducible to anthropology, but

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 443.

because *God has chosen to reveal Godself in those places*. In this way, to say that the sacramental grace brought forth by encounter with such a God occurs in the intra-linguistic plane is not to reduce God's grace to a merely symbolic reality. It is not to try, in other words, to skirt a deeply philosophical problem by surrendering the radical nature of divine grace, to correlate a theological truth to the questions of culture and in so doing evacuate it of its scandal. Rather, the claim that sacramental grace occurs within the intra-linguistic plane is grounded, for Chauvet, in prior commitments about *God*, particularly in what constitutes God's presence as well as God's particular *otherness*. So to claim that God's grace, communicated in the sacraments, is an extra-linguistic reality, despite the fact that it occurs within the intra-linguistic plane, is to affirm the freedom of God to become present *in precisely this way because God chooses to do so*. God's communication occurs on *God's* terms, but those terms are such because God is the sort of God who chooses *communication*. The effect is intra-linguistic because God comes to us in language, by God's sovereign choice; the reality is extra-linguistic because it is *God* who comes. In what way, then, does God come to us in the language of the sacraments? Answering this question is to give an account of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist, to which we now turn.

### *The Ontological Scandal of the Eucharist*

#### *Introduction*

Classically, the answer given by the tradition to the ontological scandal of the Eucharist was confirmed at the Council of Trent, naming the most appropriate term for such a scandal to be "transubstantiation."<sup>8</sup> For in the consecration of the elements, faith believes that there is a

---

<sup>8</sup> There is no lack of historical surveys with regards to the doctrine of transubstantiation. Of particular note for Chauvet is the influence of de Lubac's survey of the doctrine in Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma

conversion of the “whole substance” of both the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ. Such a doctrine is often caricatured as the Church’s dirty little secret. We find no difficulty with faith if all faith requires is right action or the acceptance of certain intellectual propositions, but accepting that bread becomes something other than bread or wine something other than wine seems to strike the modern person as akin to the primitive, magical thinking we have so blessedly left behind. There is a temptation, then, to read Chauvet’s motivations for re-imagining the Eucharist as an apologetic desire to make the scandal of the Eucharist more palatable to modern ears, but I think this is precisely not what Chauvet is after. Far from it, in fact. His hope, as I see it, is not to make the scandal of the Eucharist less so, but to point out how the scandal has actually not properly been seen in its full scandalousness. Under Chauvet, the scandal is heightened, not ameliorated.

First, however, a word about the context of this particular discussion within Chauvet’s overall work. The discussion on transubstantiation arises in the Third Part of *Symbol and Sacrament*, entitled “The Symbolizing Act of Christian Identity.”<sup>9</sup> The overall goal of that part is to examine the sacraments specifically, having already elucidated the structure of Christian identity of which sacraments are but one element (more on this below). Chauvet wants to show just what it is that is original or specific about the sacraments in contrast to the other elements of Christian identity, scripture and ethics. This consists of examining the sacraments’ “particular mode of expression,” namely “rituality,” which entails another deep dive through the work of a

---

Simmonds, C.J. with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens (Notre Dame: SCM Press, 2006). See also David N. Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), particularly, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 319-446.



great deal of anthropologists.<sup>10</sup> More important than the coherence of the sacramental expressions with ritual expressions, however, is the unique aspect of the sacraments as *instituting* and as *instituted*. In other words, what is most particular about the sacraments, as opposed to scripture and ethics, is that they are instituted by Christ and institute us into the Church. A brief account of what he means by instituted and instituting will therefore be necessary to set up an account of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist.

According to Chauvet, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the “exemplary expression: of the *instituted* character of the sacraments.”<sup>11</sup> In short, the Eucharistic presence of Christ is the paradigmatic figure of the instituted character of the sacraments because it encapsulates in one instance that which all the other sacraments aim at accomplishing, namely, “the *resistance* of God’s mystery to every attempt by the subject to appropriate it.”<sup>12</sup> But what does this resistance consist in? I think that we shall see in what follows that Chauvet holds the Eucharistic presence of Christ to be a truth that eludes our attempts at fully grasping it. The presence of Christ remains haunted by, even perhaps best described as, an *absence*.

It is important to note, as Chauvet does, that the term “transubstantiation” is only suitable *aptissime* or “in the most appropriate way” to describing what is happening in the Eucharist. Chauvet takes this to mean that transubstantiation is not to be treated as an absolute and he joins a good company of contemporary Catholic theologians, like Herbert McCabe for example, in taking this course. McCabe, for his part, explained the *aptissime* in this way: “The Council of Trent did not decree that Catholics should believe in transubstantiation: it just calls it a most

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 323-377. Chauvet’s discussion on “evangelizing” rituality in particular (found on pp. 353-355) is an excellent parallel to the discussion above on the intra-linguistic effect of sacramental grace despite its ultimate essence being an extra-linguistic reality.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

appropriate (*aptissime*) way of talking about the Eucharist, presumably leaving it open whether there might not be other, perhaps even more appropriate, ways of talking.”<sup>13</sup> Chauvet attempts just this maneuver, looking for an even more appropriate way of talking about Eucharistic change that might better describe the “specificity of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.”<sup>14</sup>

Defining the more appropriate way of talking about the Eucharist first seems to require, however, understanding the way of talking that the attendees of the Council of Trent found so convincing. This means inquiring after what is meant by “substance,” such that a “substance” can be transformed into another substance. Given how critical Chauvet has already been of Scholastic theology one might guess he has little sympathy for the Aristotelian definition of substance and accident that lead to the blessed neologism of transubstantiation. Chauvet, however, is surprisingly conciliatory in his account of the Scholastics on this issue. What the Scholastics were trying to do with the concept of transubstantiation, he says, was to find a way back from the harsh divide that had been wrought by the controversy over the teaching of Berengar of Tours. Opposition to Berengar’s apparent denial of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist led to a seeming overreaction that allowed for the rise of an ultra-realism taking its place. A highly “sensualist” notion of the presence of Christ came to rule the day since, as Chauvet puts it, there was no “sufficiently refined concept to express the ‘final reality’ of entities.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the Church lacked a concept for that which ultimately makes a thing the thing it is—so the presence either just wasn’t there or was there just like everything else: sensually. In the case of bread and wine, since they had no way of speaking about the final

---

<sup>13</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 115.; See also David N. Power, *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and its Reinterpretation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987) and Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert Daly (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 143-153.

<sup>14</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 383.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

reality of the bread being changed, the transformation had to be described as if one could *sense* the body and blood of Christ in the elements. Otherwise, what could we really mean to say that Christ was *really* present?

As a corrective to this, therefore, the Scholastics latched on to the conceptual boon afforded them by the Aristotelian notion of “substance.” The distinction between “substance” and “accident” could allow for the “final reality” of the bread and wine to change, while not requiring the subsequent claim that Christ’s presence could be sensed in the elements themselves. Thomas’s account of this is, as one might expect of the great doctor, the most sophisticated of his peers, and Chauvet’s appreciation for his innovation is readily apparent:

As simply the power to exist by means of this actuation through its accidents, the substance is first a category of the intelligibility of entities: “it offers no footing,” writes Thomas, “to any organ of sense or to the imagination, but only to the intelligence, who’s object is the essence of things, as Aristotle says.” By this fact, *one exorcises every spatial representation* of the Eucharistic presence: only the sacramental sign, made up of accidents which remain unchanged after transubstantiation, can be divided, multiply, moved, and so on. The reality of the glorified body of Christ, present *through the mode of substance* and not through the mode of quantity (the first of the accidents) escapes all of that....<sup>16</sup>

One might recall our earlier discussion of Thomas in which Chauvet expressed a similar sympathy for Thomas’ attempt, albeit one he took as a failure, to express the work of sacramental grace under the modality of the sign. Thomas’ particular read of transubstantiation was obviously a critical part of that attempt to leave behind language of causation and remain solely in language of signification. Chauvet ends the passage above with a quote from Thomas that could have very well been written by our French theologian himself: “The accidents of bread subsist in this sacrament so that it may be *in them* that one sees the body of Christ and not in its

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 385.

own aspect.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the grand innovation of the Scholastics, and particularly of Thomas Aquinas, was to push the Eucharistic presence of Christ “*outside any physicalism*.”<sup>18</sup> The body of Christ is not present in such a way that we could point to it or move it around. This is the great help that the Aristotelian concept of substance provided the Scholastics in their time.

The principal limitation of the Scholastic account, however, was this: By allowing their argument to hinge upon the concept of substance, their account of the “*how*” of the Eucharist was then forced to be myopically focused on the elements. The problem of the Eucharist that any rational account of the mystery had to solve was how the change of substance in the elements could actually take place. The notion of substance won a way of speaking about the Eucharist that was more accountable to the claims of reason—believers could, at last, think of the bread and wine as really changed without also needing the sensual presence of flesh and blood. But then the claims of reason still had to be answered: How, after all, does the substance of this bread become the body of Christ at the level of substance? This became the central problem facing theologians of the Eucharist.

Now, since my goal is to give an account of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist one might ask why such a focus is a limitation at all. A change in the elements at the level of substance certainly seems like the “ontological scandal” of the Eucharist. Shouldn’t this change from bread to Body and from wine to Blood be precisely the focus of any account of the ontological scandal? The difficulty with the Scholastic account is that while it helped theologians figure out how bread changed to Body, the “*how*” of the Eucharist as I have been calling it, their account gave very little account of the “*what for*” of the Eucharist. The “*how*” of the Eucharist is not just a process involving the substance of the elements. It is also a process constituted by

---

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 75, a. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 385.

those for whom such a change is meant. In other words, the explanation of the “how” of the Eucharist must in some way take account of “for whom,” of the Eucharist, i.e., the *Church*.

Yet, what other way of thinking about the Eucharistic presence is available to us?

Certainly one would agree that the sacraments are *for* the Church, but is not this “for” constituted by the mysterious presence of Christ, and that presence best described as a change in substance? Such thinking is characteristic of what de Lubac has described as the “deadly break” between *sacramentum* and *res*.<sup>19</sup> In other words, such thinking splits the ultimate reality of the Eucharist conceived under the mode of substance from those who happen to receive it. The Church, thus, becomes entirely extrinsic to the process and end of the Eucharist. The “full realization of the Eucharist,” as Chauvet puts it, ends up consisting solely in the “consecration of the matter.” This is the *esse* of the Eucharist under the rule of this deadly dichotomy.

Yet, for Chauvet this approach misses a critical element of the Eucharist that the Church Fathers, most notably Augustine and later Aquinas, never failed to point out—namely that the “ultimate reality” of the Eucharist was “the Church as the *veritas* of the Eucharistic corpus mysticum.”<sup>20</sup> Whatever the Eucharist is and however the Eucharist is said to occur, these answers cannot be so easily separable from the Church, for whom the Eucharist comes to be in the first place. Thus, the manual theology of Scholasticism—and here Chauvet does not intend to include Aquinas, of course—is beset by a limitation because their philosophical perspective, as

---

<sup>19</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds CJ with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens (London: SCM Press, 2006) 221-247.

<sup>20</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 388. “Corpus Mysticum” or “mystical body” is a phrase the uses of which de Lubac painstakingly chronicled in *Corpus Mysticum*. The phrase itself represents what de Lubac thought was an earlier consensus amongst Christians that the Eucharist and the Church were a sort of unity. The theology of the “real presence” only came about after something had gone wrong in Christian theology. A sort of Eucharistic ecclesiology ruled the day prior to the medieval period and at the heart of that ecclesiology was the idea of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, the *corpus mysticum*, each time it celebrated the Eucharist.

helpful as it was to the Church, ultimately leaves out the very body it hoped to build up through its theology. Chauvet's counter-proposal, born of his symbolic approach, is to assert that there can be no account of the *esse* of Christ's Eucharistic presence—the conversion of substance—without the notion of Christ's *ad-esse* to the Church—the conversion of the Church into the ecclesial body of Christ.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the ontological scandal of the Eucharist is, therefore, it must have something to do with the body of believers for whom the Eucharist exists in the first place. Chauvet thinks that there is another way to think of Eucharistic change than that of substance, and he couches his approach as an attempt to actually follow through with Thomas' original purpose, i.e. to conceive of the Eucharist solely *in genere signi*—under the genus of sign.<sup>22</sup>

As is his way, Chauvet's innovation is to widen the scope of what is meant by the particular sign that constitutes the Eucharist. While the scholastics had focused on the sign of the sacrament itself—in this case, the bread and the wine—Chauvet broadens that umbrella to include both the gathered ecclesial body and the gifted body of the Scriptures that announce the God who comes into presence. These two “presences” along with the Eucharistic rite itself, when form the “one great symbol” that must ultimately be understood in order to give an adequate account of Eucharistic change.<sup>23</sup> This means that the explication of Eucharistic change does not just attempt to understand what happens after the moment of consecration to bread and wine. Rather, the goal of an account of Eucharistic change is an explication of the mystery of the *whole celebration*. For the gathered body of believers becoming the members of Christ's own body is just as solemn and inscrutable a mystery as the change in the bread and wine.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. This echoes the language of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.” In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 56.

In order to further probe this mystery, Chauvet sets out on an analysis of the liturgical text of the celebration itself, i.e. the Eucharistic Prayer. The structure of the Eucharistic Prayer, he argues, reveals the merits of this wider focus in that the moment of Christ's Eucharistic presence can only be understood in its relation to the "whole of salvation history" and the "anticipation of the Church's future" in the Parousia as remembered in the liturgy.<sup>24</sup> Chauvet takes this to mean that Christ's presence is only properly understood "*in relation*," meaning that Christ's presence does not occur without the constitutive relations for which it arrives in the first place.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, then, Christ's presence is not simply a bare existence. Christ is not simply "there" so to speak, rather Christ's presence is as "*being-for*" or "*ad-esse*." Christ's presence does not just so happen to be for the sanctification of the Church. There is no presence of Christ that is not Christ's presence *for us*. This is what Chauvet means when he says "the *esse*" of Christ's Eucharistic presence is "*constitutively ad-esse*."<sup>26</sup>

However, what of the elements themselves? If we broaden our perspective on Eucharistic presence do the elements thereby remain entirely unchanged? Most importantly, the reader will recall that my stated goal at the outset of the project was to treat the ontological scandal of the Eucharist as concomitantly and constitutively a political scandal. Thus, whether the material elements of bread and wine are said to change at all is of great importance to my argument as a whole. What, then, does Chauvet say of them?

The difficulty we are presented with from the very start is that Chauvet's philosophical perspective has taken us into an altogether different epistemological terrain than that upon which most sacramental theology takes its place. Concepts like "substance" seem entirely unthinkable

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>25</sup> See in particular Chauvet's in-depth analysis of the Eucharistic Prayer on Ibid., 268-82.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 392.

given the vast transformation of what we mean by reality we have already undergone. Given that radical shift in perspective, Chauvet holds that we now can speak in an entirely different way of what bread and wine really *are* in themselves. Before we can say what kind of change bread and wine undergo in the Eucharist we have to ascertain what we mean by bread and wine prior to any such transformation. Hence, Chauvet once again takes a Heideggerian step back and attempts to take stock of how bread and wine must be viewed under the symbolic approach.

Far from being beholden entirely to philosophy, however, Chauvet starts with bread and wine's place in Scripture. Therein, Chauvet finds bread and wine to be preeminently symbolic. Bread in Scripture represents "the primordial gift of God" as well as the "whole of the earth and human work."<sup>27</sup> What we mean by "bread" in other words is not just a collection of physical and chemical properties. We mean quite literally these natural elements and the symbolic place that bread occupies in the form of life we live. No less with wine and its "association with messianic joy." The materials of the Eucharist are, when viewed with the utmost care from the Biblical perspective, always already caught up in the symbolic rather than merely natural order.

Chauvet turns yet again to Heidegger for support, in particular to his famous essay entitled "The Thing." At this point in his argument, Chauvet is trying to find a way to demonstrate that the ultimate reality of bread and wine are not confined solely to the chemical components of their biological makeup or a neutral metaphysical *substantia*. Both of these conceptions are not satisfactory for Chauvet, regardless of the object in question. This was a central insight of Heidegger's fundamental ontology and a central claim of his analysis in "The Thing." The question Heidegger is asking in the essay is quite simply, "What is a thing?" Human beings think quite a bit about quite a lot of things, but we rarely think about things *as things*.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 392.



Rather, we all too often think of things under the mode of something else. We think about the biology of things, the chemistry of things, the beauty of things, but never *just* things. As he puts it, “the thingly character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object.”<sup>28</sup>

Through phenomenology, Heidegger thus attempts to elucidate how the thing presents itself as thing, not as anything else. In other words, “we shall not reach the thing in itself until our thinking has first reached the thing as thing,” which requires a phenomenological presentation of our experience of the thing as thing.<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger’s chosen example, famously, is a pitcher.<sup>30</sup> What is the “thingly” character of the pitcher? How does the pitcher present itself as a thing? The first answer we might proffer is that the thing stands over against us as something other than us, but this is the etymological root of the German word for object, *Gegenstand*, and is thus not satisfactory in Heidegger’s view.<sup>31</sup> The jug can become an object if we think of it as such, as something represented, but this is to cover over rather than reveal the thingly nature of the pitcher itself. Heidegger sees this impulse in particular as the great downfall of the purely scientific perspective on things. As Heidegger trenchantly puts it, “Sciences always encounter only what *its* kind of representation has admitted as an object possible for science.”<sup>32</sup> The thingliness of the pitcher is thus something beyond the scientific analysis of its properties and of its standing over against us.

---

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 167.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>30</sup> The translation of Albert Hofstadter with which I am working translates *der Krug* as “jug.” I’ve taken the liberty to use “pitcher” since that is in keeping with Madigan and Beaumont’s translation of Chauvet’s text.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 168-169.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

Heidegger thinks that the thingliness of the pitcher is rooted not in its standing over against us but in the *emptiness* or *void* that is filled by the liquid poured into it.<sup>33</sup> This is an odd sounding answer, but it makes a great deal more sense when placed with other examples. Wine is not first and foremost liquid. We could describe wine in this way, but it is much more accurate to say that wine is *wine*, first and foremost, and only secondarily a liquid. Our experience of wine as wine, in other words, is not first and foremost the analysis of a liquid for chemical properties but in the sharing (or not sharing) of a drink, all of the symbolic capital that wine as wine carries with it. In the same way, a pitcher is not just sides or a bottom or an emptiness, rather the pitcher is *its* emptiness—an emptiness, in other words, made for a particular purpose. The purpose of the emptiness is obviously for holding liquid, and so the sides and the bottom are crafted to allow this void to perform its holding. But the nature of the pitcher is not limited to just holding but also is defined by the task of *pouring out*.<sup>34</sup> The essence of the pitcher, and it will not be difficult to see why Chauvet is so drawn to this argument, is constituted by the *giving* of pouring-out for which its emptiness is meant.<sup>35</sup> In short, to try to say what it is we mean when we say “pitcher” involves a great deal more than just an analysis of the natural properties of a particular jug. The pitcher in its essence as pitcher, as thing, simultaneously connects us to the whole milieu of what Heidegger called “world.” So to describe a thing as thing is to describe something implicated in the broader economy of *being-with* and *being-for* that constitutes the peculiar existence of *Dasein*. All of this is present in the nature of the thing as thing. Our normal everyday experience

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 169. “The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., “The void holds in a twofold manner: taking and keeping... But their unity is determined by the *outpouring* for which the jug is fitted as a jug. The twofold holding of the void rests on the outpouring. In the outpouring, *the holding is authentically how it is*” (my emphasis).

is not, therefore, of liquids and solids and gases, but of *things*. As Heidegger so esoterically puts it, “The thing things world.”<sup>36</sup>

Obviously the traditional conversation surrounding transubstantiation has little to do with questions like these. The Aristotelian notion of substance, at least as used by Scholastic theology, has no way of adding this symbolic character into its notion of the final reality of an object. Thus, the use to which Chauvet puts Heidegger’s account of the thing, so it seems to me, is to show that the Scholastic conversation about transubstantiation works with an incorrect notion of what we even mean when we say “bread” or “wine” in the first place. Whatever the ontological scandal of the Eucharist is, it must occur at the *truly* ontological level, which for Chauvet and for Heidegger means this deeper level of the symbolic network that constitutes material things as part and parcel of our shared world. This, I believe, is part of the purpose for which Chauvet calls on Heidegger’s work.

Now, I cannot pass through Chauvet’s reading of Heidegger’s “path of the pitcher,” if you will, without mentioning that peculiar notion of world which the pitcher calls forth in its thingness—what Heidegger calls *das Geviert* or “the fourfold.” It is worth mentioning here because Chauvet is among several other prominent sacramental theologians who have called upon this Heideggerian notion to provide a means to further legitimate for transubstantiation. Chauvet, along with Pickstock and Macquarrie, is heavily criticized in an essay by Hemming for it.<sup>37</sup> First, what did Heidegger mean by the fourfold? He seems to have meant the interrelation between—and this is the best phrase I can muster—the ontological poles of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities that are bound together and revealed in the event of Being or the “worlding of the

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>37</sup> See Hemming, “After Heidegger: Transubstantiation,” 170-186.

world.”<sup>38</sup> The pitcher or any thing as a thing reveals the unity of the four in the event of Being: “We have sought the nature of nearness and found the nature of the jug as a thing. But in this discovery we also catch sight of the nature of nearness. The thing things. In thinging, it stays earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Staying, the thing brings the four, in their remoteness, near to one another.”<sup>39</sup> As obtuse as Heidegger’s language is here, one can note the emphatic insistence that realities typically thought to be static are in fact active. The thing *things* and the world *worlds* in the *event* of Being. Moreover, we are not neutral observers of this activity but are conditioned by it. In our life as “mortals,” marked uniquely by death, we are conditioned by what the thing as thing reveals—our own unity in the event of Being with the earth, sky, and divinities.

For the theologian, obviously, the naming of “divinities” as a part of the fourfold is fertile ground. A sacramental theologian, in particular, will be heartily tempted to appropriate the idea that material things evoke in their very materiality the presence of Godhood or divinities. Yet, as Hemming rightly points out, this is a move that Heidegger specifically precludes. The thing “things” as the gathering together of the fourfold into one experience-able world, and, if that is the case, then the allusion to Godhood that the thing brings to presence is alluded to in *all* things, making the assertion that the Eucharist or Baptism occupies a special place in the material milieu untenable. “This aspect of Heidegger’s *das Geviert*,” Hemming says, “is intended to show how the worlding of world can be saturated with divinity, but not with the Christian God.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the point of the divine aspect of the fourfold is not to point out the inherently sacred nature of the created order but rather to indicate the way that the world as world seems to reach

---

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 177-182.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 177

<sup>40</sup> Hemming, “After Heidegger: Transubstantiation,” 177.

out towards the “divinities” in its very “worlding.” Hence, the problem of sacramental theologians invoking the fourfold is not that they would assert the presence of something sacred in material elements, but rather the inevitable consequent attempt to specify the nature of that presence and delimit the bounds of such presence to a particular location, ritual or otherwise.

What we can and must say, however, is that this account of the real as world in the Heideggerian sense—as the gathering or “staying” of the fourfold—requires a transformation of the typical starting point of an argument over transubstantiation. What is most real about the bread and wine is not that which would typically present itself to those of us enchanted by the power of scientific discourse. That is, bread and wine are not simply composed of “nutritive elements.” Bread is a “socially instituted food,” a symbol of food or sustenance itself.<sup>41</sup> The same is true of wine and the “messianic joy” it foretells symbolically. This true nature of bread and wine as material elements often goes unrecognized. For its part, bread comes closer to showing its true nature when, like the pitcher meant for the pouring-out, bread is *broken* and *shared amongst human beings*. This, so Chauvet argues, is what we actually mean—not just a collection of chemical properties—when we say the word “bread.” Here the help of Heidegger’s notion of the fourfold is explicit: “Bread is never so much bread as in the gesture of thankful oblation where it gathers within itself heaven and earth, believers who ‘hold fellowship’ in sharing it, and the giver whom they acknowledge to be God.”<sup>42</sup> In its most fundamental and basic materiality, bread is always already marked by this particular symbolism—it evokes in us the gathering together of the sky’s sun that gave it nourishing light, the earth’s soil that allowed its wheat to grow, the human hands that prepared it and baked it and broke it, and, finally, the great Giver of the universe from which all things spring in the first place. Bread is this evocative

---

<sup>41</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 397

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

symbol *first* and only later an analyzable or representable object. The symbol takes ontological priority over the sign, remember. Chauvet puts it this way: “No bread is first of all a simple ‘real’ bread and then only afterwards and under certain circumstances a symbol of this gathering. *All bread is essentially this symbol even if it is only in the symbolic act of religious oblation that its essence as bread unfolds itself.*”<sup>43</sup>

But just how much is Chauvet agreeing with or endorsing Heidegger’s ideas at this point? The answer is not entirely clear. For while Chauvet has made obvious reference to the fourfold in some of the passages cited above the concept has clearly been altered. Note the shift of mortals to “believers” and the divinities to the singular “Giver.” Yet, Chauvet has decidedly *not* claimed in his reference to the fourfold that this concept has now rescued Eucharistic change from the difficulties that it presents. This is why Hemming rightly notes that Chauvet finds himself “almost at a loss” and why Chauvet himself states that the symbolic approach to the reality of the thing, supported now by the concept of the fourfold is not enough.<sup>44</sup>

This symbolic approach is obviously *insufficient* for expressing the significance of the Eucharistic presence. For it does not suffice to say bread is never so much bread as in the religious gesture where it is recognized as a gracious gift of God; it is necessary to say it is never so much bread as in the religious, and more precisely, Christian gesture where, by offering it, the Church recognizes it as the gift of God’s very self, as the *autocommunication of God’s very self in Christ*: “The body of Christ – Amen!”<sup>45</sup>

Chauvet seems to have anticipated the very problem by which Hemming dispenses with other post-conciliar attempts at reinstating transubstantiation through *das Geviert*, namely that the potential reading of a thing as being-divine in its nearness—its entanglement with the world by which it is rightly called *symbolic*—is not sufficient to account for the presence of Christ in the

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Hemming, “After Heidegger: Transubstantiation,” 177.

<sup>45</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 398.

Eucharist. The divine potential of the fourfold can grant us an argument for the “blur of general sacramentality,” as Chauvet caustically described it in the opening of his work, but it cannot give us a *specific, located, and transformative presence in a particular thing*.<sup>46</sup> For what we are after in transubstantiation is not the presence of *God* in material things but the presence of *Christ* and, in that presence, the “*autocommunication of God’s very self*.”<sup>47</sup> Hemming is right to point out that such a presence is not suddenly tenable after we have reread the reality of the thing in Heideggerian terms. Chauvet must, therefore, intend something quite different by bringing up the fourfold in the first place.

The point of Chauvet’s invocation of Heidegger is, as has been his way throughout his work, to *discipline* our typical manner of thinking in order to lend greater clarity to the epistemological terrain in which proper theological questioning (and perhaps answering) can occur. It is, in my view, better described as taking up Heidegger to accomplish a rather Wittgensteinian purpose. In short, Chauvet is simply placing the fact that the meaning and significance of bread and wine are constituted by our engagement with them before us as a fact that requires our attention. Our continual attention, as it were, since Chauvet seems to be showing us that such things have to be brought to our attention again and again or we will forget them. We must be reminded, in other words, that things are the *full* sense of what they are only in relation to us. This does not mean that we can change a thing just by calling it something different, mind you. We cannot make the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ just by treating them as such. We cannot even do this with material things. I am thinking here of Charles Davis’s excellent example of using a saucer as an ashtray. Despite the fact that we would

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 398.

call such a saucer an ashtray we would always be aware that this isn't *really* what it is. It is a saucer, despite the way we treat it.<sup>48</sup>

In the same sense, Chauvet is decidedly not saying that the only real change in the Eucharist is the significance it has for human beings and, furthermore, he is decidedly not saying that the Eucharist acquires this significance just because we treat it *as if* it does. If we were to object to Chauvet on such grounds we would be forgetting the depth with which Chauvet has treated the question of sacramental grace, particularly his insistence that sacramental grace cannot be described as solely an "intra-linguistic" affair. Instead, the allusion to Heidegger's account of the thing and the fourfold should be taken as a mechanism for clearing away foolhardy presuppositions we might instinctively cling to regarding the theoretical and practical "distance" from us, if you will, that the bread and wine occupy in the ritual. For Chauvet, the bread and wine are constituted as bread and wine only in relation to us, which means that whatever we might say about their change once consecrated, "the mystery of the Eucharistic body of the Lord cannot be expressed... unless it carries with it the symbolic richness of bread."<sup>49</sup> That is as far, for now, as Chauvet's reference to Heidegger gets us.

The most Chauvet can say about Eucharistic change at this point, therefore, is that there will not be (and indeed *cannot* be) a need to determine how the bread changes into something that is not bread. "To express all [transubstantiation's] radicalness, not only can one no longer say but one must no longer say, 'This bread is no longer bread.'"<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that the question of Eucharistic change is no longer about the *being* of bread. It certainly must be that if it is to be an ontological scandal. What Chauvet is insisting, however, is that what we mean when

---

<sup>48</sup> Charles Davis, "The Theology of Transubstantiation," *Sophia* 3, no. 1 (1964): 19.

<sup>49</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 400.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



we say “the being of bread” has been rebuffed by the consent to mediation that language and most importantly the sacraments themselves are. “On the altogether different terrain of symbolism,” different than those of metaphysical substance which guided the decrees of the Council of Trent, “the verb ‘be’ no longer has the same status it had at its origin because *Sein* is inseparable from the human *Da-Sein* and thus from language.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Eucharistic change, the sense in which bread can “be” the Body of Christ “requires that one emphasize all the more it is indeed still bread, but now *essential* bread, bread which is never so much bread as it is in this mystery.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, Chauvet explicitly ties the ontological scandal of Eucharistic change to language since “the bread which nourishes human being in this most human dimension of their humanity is the bread of the *word* and this word where bread comes-to-presence in communicating itself to others is itself, according to the faith, a mediation *where the Word*

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. I should also note here that Hemming equates Chauvet’s assertion that the Eucharistic bread is “essential bread” with Pickstock’s claim in *After Writing* that all bread is “on the way” to being the Body of Christ, since the essence of bread itself is to be offered in precisely this manner. I don’t believe this is what Chauvet is saying here. In fact, just the opposite. Chauvet seems, in my view, to go to great lengths to insist that the Eucharist, while existing well within the human milieu of ritual and symbol and language, constitutes a decided breach from those “natural” categories, if you will. We call the bread of the Eucharist “essential bread” or “THE bread” not because all bread is on the way to becoming the body of Christ but rather because the conditions of the world are such that no bread is allowed to reach its full essence save in the holy, and dare I say, miraculous moment of Eucharistic offering. The dichotomy between Chauvet and Pickstock’s perspectives on how the essence of bread being defined in the Eucharist affects our view of all creation – a symbolic sacramentality vs. a participatory sacramentality, one might say – is a defining feature of the dialogue between Milbank and Chauvet. In short, a participatory ontology that sees all of creation as participating in the very being of God must see all bread as on the way to being the Body of Christ since such is its essence. But Chauvet’s perspective resists such a infectious sacramentality—the general “blur” as he called it. All bread is decidedly not on the way to being the body of Christ, but the bread that becomes the body of Christ is essential bread. I will say a great deal more about this below. For now, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 167-273.

*delivered by God in Jesus Christ to humanity unto death takes on flesh.*”<sup>53</sup> The seeming mystery of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist is that it occurs within the linguistic milieu that constitutes the human dimension of subjectivity but, more importantly, that this same ontological scandal is *not* ultimately reducible to an affair of language. I mentioned above that I thought Chauvet was using Heidegger to make a Wittgensteinian move. I think I can say what I meant by that now through a quote from Fergus Kerr describing the work of Anscombe on transignification: “[T]he ‘odd thing’—‘which is apparently not noticed’—is that ‘what gets trans-signified in the Eucharist is not the bread and wine, but the body and blood of the Lord, which are trans-signified into food and drink.’ *That is ‘the mystery,’* Anscombe concludes.”<sup>54</sup> So the particular nettle that Chauvet seems to have grasped is not how to describe a change in the substance of elements—even if we were to only attempt a change in their “significance”—but rather, Chauvet is after how to describe Eucharistic change in keeping with the *type of God that could undergo such change*. This, I think, is Chauvet’s aim in clearing away faulty philosophical presuppositions through Heidegger.

It is of note that Hemming’s critique of Chauvet stops at this point in his argument, and if Chauvet had in fact stopped here then Hemming’s biting critique of his account of transubstantiation might be open to the charge that it says nothing that one could even call transubstantiation in the first place. Chauvet has nearly “grasped the nettle” that the problem of Eucharistic change is the being of bread not just the meaning of bread—as transignification seems to contend—but Chauvet hasn’t said anything of consequence in contending that the bread of the Eucharist is “essential bread.” The difficulty, it seems, really does come down to some sort

---

<sup>53</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 400.

<sup>54</sup> Fergus Kerr, “Transubstantiation After Wittgenstein,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 2 (April 1999): 121.

of *substantial* change in bread and wine such that something else can be said to be *present* in the bread, even if we contend with enthusiasm that the bread itself never ceases to be present as bread. It is unfortunate that Hemming ceased his reading of Chauvet at this point in *Symbol and Sacrament* because Chauvet has a great deal more to say on precisely this point in the sections that follow.

One can perhaps already guess at Chauvet's counterpoint to the objection: If we worry over whether or not Christ is actually present in the bread we have once again lapsed into concern over "presence" before having a proper conception of what we mean by presence in the first place. Remember, however, that what Chauvet means by presence is laden with not only Heideggerian influences but with the profound theological influence of Eberhard Jüngel. The presence of Christ in the bread—the change in the being of bread which transubstantiation names or in the being of the meaning of bread which transignification means—must be rethought such that we begin not only with a proper notion of what bread and wine are but also of what it would mean to say that Christ is *present in them*. Chauvet's contention, based in what we've already seen from Jüngel, will be that Christ's presence in the elements cannot be thought save as inevitably marked by *absence*.

Chauvet's unique claim is that Christ must be said to be present in the bread and wine not just as marked by absence but *as an absence*. How can this be so? Recall that in our treatment of Jüngel above we saw that by taking the Cross as the starting point of theology Jüngel was forced to radically change what we mean when we say that God is present. The presence of God had to be intimately connected to, even constituted by, an absence if the Crucified One were rightly to be called the image of the Invisible God. If that is the case, then to say that Christ is present in the Eucharist cannot quite mean the sort of "substantial" presence that traditional explanations of

transubstantiation set as their goal. Rather, Christ's presence must be rethought as being constituted by and forever marked by Christ's absence. Chauvet puts it this way: "in the symbolic order, presence and absence are not two complete realities that would be dialectically inseparable, a little like the two sides of a piece of paper – they do not form two countable entities. They are not bivalent, but form one ambivalent reality."<sup>55</sup> To find a way to talk about this ambivalent reality, Chauvet will return to two significant elements of the whole Eucharist celebration: the *adesse* we have already mentioned and the breaking of the bread.

"The *adesse* of a presence is of a different order from the simple *esse* of a mere thing."<sup>56</sup> Such has been a continual but necessary reminder from Chauvet: the world around us is not something that is passively there but is actively *coming-into-presence*. That phrase, "coming-into-presence" is the better way of describing what is happening in transubstantiation for it takes into account the absence that makes presence possible in the first place, just as the YOU made possible the I and vice versa in our account of the linguistic subject above. The coming-into-presence "precisely marks the absence with which every presence is constitutively crossed out," so to say that Christ is present is also to say that this presence is *constitutively crossed out* by Christ's absence.<sup>57</sup> Hence, Christ is present in the Eucharist under the mode of presence-as-absence.

This can be a profoundly disorienting way of thinking of the Eucharist if one does not guard against slipping back into thinking of the reality of the Eucharistic elements as substances to be transubstantiated in order for Christ to "appear" in any "real" sense. Or, even more importantly, it can be entirely disorienting if we allow ourselves to slip away from the single

---

<sup>55</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 404.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

question that Chauvet continually asks in light of the scandal of the Cross—what *kind of God* are we talking about when we say God is present in the Eucharist? In short, we must keep on our guard, so Chauvet argues, not to allow this slippage in either sense. If we remain within the symbolic view of things we can think of Christ as being *really present* only under the very mode of presence-as-absence, and the appropriate response to such a presence must be the consent to a “mature proximity to the presence of absence” to which Chauvet has been calling his reader throughout *Symbol and Sacrament*.<sup>58</sup> Hence, to judge the actuality of Eucharistic presence by the standard of full and without absence presence—the sort of presence we often think the things and objects around us possess—is both to hold the Eucharist to a false standard and to attribute a false notion of presence to things and objects. Even more importantly, however, if we wish to say that the Crucified One is present in the bread and wine in any other way than as presence-as-absence then Chauvet will insist that we have misunderstood the truth about God that the Cross reveals. If God is present in the Eucharist then it is certainly as nothing other than as the Absent One of Calvary.

Christ’s presence-as-absence also cannot be adequately characterized as presence without taking into account who or what his presence is *for*, and this is where Chauvet’s earlier remarks about taking into account the whole milieu of the celebration of the Eucharist, most importantly the *assembled community*, come to the forefront. The Eucharistic presence of Christ in the bread and wine, which Chauvet never avoids, *comes from* Christ’s presence in and as the assembled community. This assertion is not only characteristic of traditional sacramental theology but is fundamentally in line with the phenomenological approach Chauvet has taken from the outset.<sup>59</sup> It is thus constitutive of the Eucharistic presence itself that the consecration takes place *for* the

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>59</sup> See de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 221-247.

sanctification of the gathered assembly of believers. One cannot demonstrate the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements without this context.

It is also worth noting that Chauvet is emphatic that the Eucharistic presence of Christ is dependent upon the prior *gift* of the Scriptures. There is an “architectonics” or a structure that the Eucharistic presence depends upon, indeed the Eucharist is itself the “crystallization” of this prior structure into one symbolic action.<sup>60</sup> To try and put that a bit more simply, the Eucharist depends upon the prior gift of a narrative that identifies us as those to whom Christ has promised to become present in the Eucharist. Without this context the rite of the Eucharist would be meaningless, and the implicit assertion by Chauvet seems to be that without this prior act of the Church telling its story through the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Table would not result in the presence of Christ. The presence of Christ arrives in the bread and wine as the “crystallization of the Word in visible form,” requiring the Word of the God of the Cross in order to become present for and through the body of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

One might wonder, therefore, where exactly Christ is present? For the difficulty of transubstantiation was to figure out how it was that Christ became present in the elements, but the difficulty for Chauvet seems to be how to get Christ to be “here” in an intense or transformative sense in the elements themselves. If Christ’s presence is equally powerful in the assembly then do we not then make the Eucharistic rite superfluous? Chauvet’s answer to this is to point to the power of the breaking of the bread as the symbol par excellence of Christ’s gift. Given what we already know of symbols this is not to afford the breaking of the bread a

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>61</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, “The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence,” in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Lambert Leijssen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 253.

particularly effective nature to make Christ present for the gathered believers. In one of the seminal passages of *Symbol and Sacrament*, Chauvet brings this idea to its culmination:

Now, the Eucharistic bread as the “here” of the glorious Lord presents itself as a *closed*, dense reality, without a break. Without a break? But is not this bread destined for the most symbolic opening there is since it is here only *to be broken*. . . . So much so that the great *sacramentum* of Christ’s presence is not the bread as such in its unbroken state. Or rather, it is indeed the bread, but *in its very essence*, bread-as-food, bread-as-meal, bread-for-sharing. *It is in the breaking of the bread that its ultimate reality is manifested*, its true essence revealed. . . . For the breaking of the bread unites symbolically in one action the aspect of *communion between the members* (but “in the charity of Christ”), expressed by the sign of peace, and the aspect of *communion with Christ himself* (but in brotherly and sisterly charity), expressed by the rite of Communion. The breaking of the bread, inasmuch as it is a sharing between members for their unity of one body broken for all, sacramentally manifests the indissoluble bond with Christ and with others which it joins symbolically.<sup>62</sup>

What Chauvet seems to be saying here is that the symbolic action of breaking the bread is the most effective manner of symbolically joining Christ to his Body, thus making Christ present in the Eucharistic in a real way. Yet Chauvet is careful to note that Christ’s presence in the Eucharistic elements is a presence “inscribed, but never circumscribed.” Christ’s presence in the elements “comes forward through the mode of being open,” not, in other words, as a presence that is merely “here” or “there” or “in” something else.<sup>63</sup> Christ’s presence is best shown in the breaking of the bread because the void of the bread-as-broken reveals Christ’s presence as a presence-as-absence. Christ is here not as a locatable substance but as a the *gift* of Christ’s absence—the gift of Christ’s giving his own life for the life of the world.

---

<sup>62</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 406-407. This is in keeping with the structure of the Roman Rite that places the sign of peace prior to the breaking of the bread with communion following immediately thereafter.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.

Chauvet quickly clarifies this convoluted manner of speaking through the classic expression of Augustine on the Eucharist: “Be what you see and receive what you are.”<sup>64</sup> Since the presence of Christ comes about through the gathered assembly as Christ’s body, to receive the body of Christ is just to receive what we already are. Yet, the symbol of the broken bread joins us symbolically to something that we are not at the moment we receive it—the Body of Christ broken for the life of the world. In short, the symbol of the broken bread makes Christ present both as a reality which we receive in the mystery of the Eucharist and as a *call* to a particular mode of being in the world. This call, however, grafts us into this mode of being by our consent to the rite itself. This is what Chauvet means when he writes:

It is indeed the risen *Christ* himself who is received in Communion; but he is received for what he *is*, that is, *gift* from God’s very self, only when he is joined to his *ecclesial* body. The symbol requires the radical distinction of the two, but it also requires their indissoluble intrinsic relation. Is not the *res* (“ultimate effect”) of the Eucharist the *Christus totus*, Head and members?<sup>65</sup>

The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a presence-as-absence that not only skirts the difficulties of a metaphysics of substance but, furthermore, entails within its very mode of being-present a call to a manner of living that would give such a presence a body in the here and now.

The leap one might imagine we should take at this point is headlong into the details of the practical and political implications of the Eucharist for Chauvet’s theological project. But such would be a leap taken too early, and for this reason: it is not entirely clear at this point *how* the Eucharist transforms us and calls us into this form of life, given the radical transformation of the concept of Eucharistic presence Chauvet has offered us. How does presence in “the mode of being open” communicate to the Church the unique political identity of brotherly and sisterly

---

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, Sermon 272 in Augustine, *Sermons III, vol. 7: On the Liturgical Seasons*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993), 300.

<sup>65</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 407.



charity? To ask this question is in essence to ask, how is grace *given* or *communicated* to us in the sacrament? In Chauvet's terms, we have established that the Eucharist is instituted by Christ—it is based on the gift of the Scriptures, given to the assembled community by Christ, and only possible via the gathered body of Christ—but we have yet to say precisely how the Eucharist is “instituting” us as the body of believers. Chauvet's argument will be that the Eucharist does this not under the modality of *cause* but under the modality of “revealer” and “operator.”

*Beyond Causality: Eucharist and the Language-Game of Faith*

I find it to be of great interest that at this point in Chauvet's argument—the pivotal point in which he will at long last detail how it is that sacramental grace (the very presence of Christ's gift of His own life in human rites or material elements) is given to Christians in the sacraments—Chauvet's references to Heidegger fall away almost entirely and references to Wittgenstein come to the fore. Indeed, Chauvet, following in the footsteps of Jean Ladrière, goes so far as to call the “language of faith” a specific “language-game” that is in itself the expression of a particular “form of life,” two concepts essential to the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein.<sup>66</sup> Now, this concept of a language-game can create profound difficulties in any argument on behalf of religious belief. Its late introduction in Chauvet's argument (well into the latter half of the

---

<sup>66</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 426. The work of Jean Ladrière to which Chauvet gives reference is a two-volume series on questions of language as it relates to scientific and religious discourse. For those, see Jean Ladrière *L'articulation du sens, vol. 1: Discours scientifique et parole de foi, vol. 2: Les langages de la foi* (Paris: Cerf, 1984). Only the first volume of this series has been translated into English. For that translation see Jean Ladrière, *Language and Belief*, trans. Garrett Barden (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1972). Elsewhere, Chauvet quotes Fergus Kerr's *Theology After Wittgenstein* with great affection, but, oddly enough, in that same work Kerr actually objected to calling religious belief a “language-game” or a “form of life.” For that argument and an in-depth treatment of the concepts of “language-game” and “form of life” as they relate to theology, see Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (London: SPCK, 1997).

Third Part of *Symbol and Sacrament*) might rightly be criticized as muddying the waters. Let me offer the slightest defense of the worth of this concept of “language-game” to Chauvet’s argument.

The main difficulty I imagine one might have in hearing religious belief called a language-game has little to do with language and more to do with the idea of belief being equated with a sort of “game.” It would seem that we are making out of religious belief an insular pursuit amongst initiates that has no relevance to the outside world and no actual grounding in reality—like a game played amongst children wherein only they know the rules. Indeed, we may balk at the insular nature of this comparison and perhaps even bemoan the irrelevance it seems to assign to faith—so faith is *just* a word game?—but this would be to miss the point Chauvet is making. That point, I think, is twofold: The first bit of the point is that calling faith a language-game is simply saying that faith is something quintessentially *human*. Faith has the power to transform our very subjectivity precisely because it exists within the plurality of language-games that constitutes the essence of human life. It is based in embodiment and has no metaphysical foundation, no ultimate Ground outside the “whole hurly-burly” of human action, to use a phrase already quoted.<sup>67</sup>

This groundlessness might seem to imply that faith is a rather frivolous illusion of those who hold to it, but that is certainly not what Chauvet (or Wittgenstein, for that matter) means to say with regards to faith. That particular objection, in fact, brings us to the second part of the point, and it is a profound assertion on Chauvet’s part. As I see it, what Chauvet has committed himself to in saying that the language of faith is a language-game—faith in the God of the Cross, remember—is that this language-game is itself *a supernatural gift*. Here Chauvet has stretched

---

<sup>67</sup> Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 99.

the Wittgensteinian category far, perhaps to the breaking point. Still, let us follow him into the borderlands for the moment.

In claiming that faith is a unique language-game Chauvet seems to be saying that faith occurs in a naturally supernatural way. Naturally, in that it is a language-game. Supernaturally, in that it is a language-game that, by right, really ought to be *impossible*. Yet, it persists in the life of the Church anyway. The best analogy to this claim I can muster as a means of explanation is to the dogmatic notion of the Incarnation. As affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon the life of Jesus was itself a fully human life. Yet, the affirmation of the Christian faith is that within that human life was a profound and miraculous *gift*, an inbreaking within the human milieu of a *divine* life, given for the life of the world but which did not cancel out the human life of Jesus.

Such, so it seems to me, is the sort of point Chauvet is trying to make by calling faith a language-game. Chauvet is trying to say that the language-game of faith in the God of the Cross is the only way of speaking about faith that is in keeping with the revelation of God in the Pasch of Christ—a human life that, by divine gift, radically alters the parameters of the language that makes us human. It seems to me that Chauvet is combining the insights of Trinitarian Christology from the likes of Jüngel, Moltmann, and Kasper, with the insights of later Wittgensteinian philosophy, in order to take seriously both the radical implications of God’s presence in the crucified Jesus and the radical implications involved in taking seriously the linguistic constitution of human subjects.<sup>68</sup>

We should not be surprised, then, to hear Chauvet claim that the Eucharist is an “effective symbolic expression,” meaning that the rite transforms those who submit to it according to the linguistic efficacy we have already encountered in Chauvet’s work. The

---

<sup>68</sup> This combination is made most explicit in the Fourth Part of *Symbol and Sacrament*. See Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 490-509.

empirical efficacy of religious rites is obtained through this “symbolic efficacy” by “setting up a new relation between subjects or between subjects and their socio-cultural ‘world’ or both.”<sup>69</sup> In short, once we have challenged the way in which Christ is present in the Eucharist according to the symbolic perspective, we now see that the manner by which we are transformed by receiving said presence in the Eucharist is through precisely this sort of change in our relation to other subjects and to our world. This is not, however, a “merely” symbolic or metaphorical change. It is a re-location in and through the language that makes us who we are in the first place—an inauguration into the language-game of faith.

Chauvet will claim that the Eucharist enacts this sort of transformation by simultaneously functioning as a revealer and an operator. All sacraments, not just the Eucharist, function in this way. The sacraments *reveal* the event of grace already initiated by God and in so doing *bring about* as an operation that which is revealed. Chauvet’s example of this is not, in fact, the Eucharist but the sacrament of reconciliation. As the Tradition affirmed, the sinner is pardoned by God simply by moving themselves to repent, but the mystery of the sacramental act is that expressing this repentance in an embodied way brings the essence of the act to its fulfillment. In other words, the holy realities involved (God’s act of pardon, our act of repentance) seem to *reach out essentially towards taking a body in the form of a sacramental action*. The transformation by grace is irrevocably tied to its embodied expression in sacrament.

So what Chauvet is arguing is not that there is no *causation* when it comes to sacramental grace. This is a sticking point both for Blankenhorn and Mudd in their treatments of Chauvet.<sup>70</sup> Their critique seems to rely on a devastatingly simple question put to Chauvet’s argument by

---

<sup>69</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 425.

<sup>70</sup> See note 72 above.

Maloney, “Is this not efficient causality under another name?”<sup>71</sup> I think Chauvet would readily admit now, and does in *Symbol and Sacrament*, that there is causality involved in his account of sacramental grace. What he would resist wholeheartedly, however, is the idea that his account of sacramental grace speaks of a causality or an operation that takes place outside of the symbolic milieu. His hope in offering this resistance is to avoid the ontotheological entrapment into which considering sacramental grace under the modality of cause led. More importantly, Chauvet wishes to ensure that a purely subjectivist path is also avoided, wherein the sacraments would only serve as the “mere” revelation of something that was already there. Hence, Chauvet writes:

The sacraments are not instruments for the *production* of grace since their operation, of the symbolic order, is inseparable from the revelation they bring about. But no more are they simply instruments for the *translation* of a grace that is already there since the revelation they make of it is inseparable from a symbolic of labor, new each time, within the believing subject. The scheme of translation is no more valid than the scheme of production.<sup>72</sup>

Chauvet admits of operation, but only an operation that is inseparable from the symbolic revelation that the sacraments themselves are. Moreover, the focus cannot be solely on the revelation of a prior truth, since it is only through the path of symbolic labor, to which we must continuously return, that such truths come to fruition. Here we see Chauvet’s two principal convictions poised in a remarkable balance. The intra-linguistic effectiveness of the rite is essential for understanding the true nature of sacramental grace. We have no other means of even discussing what grace is outside of this symbolic perspective. Yet, the remarkable revelation of *the human rites themselves* is that there is an extra-linguistic grace at work here that is not subject to or dependent upon the structures of ritual, language, and symbol. The anthropological is indeed the location of every properly theological, but the Spirit blows where it wills.

---

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Moloney, “Review of *Symbol and Sacrament*,” 148.

<sup>72</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 431.

To conclude this section, I would like to make a final point about the potential charge of insularity. At this point in my telling of Chauvet's argument, it might seem that there is little reason to trouble ourselves as Christians with anything *other than* the Sacraments. If the sacraments are effective symbolic expressions that graft us into the language-game of faith then what need have we of anything else? More importantly, doesn't this make the Eucharist solely an ontological scandal? Or perhaps better, given how transformative the Eucharist is at the symbolic level, does not Chauvet's account have only a tangential relationship at best to politics? If, as I said above, the Eucharist is both an ontological and political scandal for Chauvet, then the connection between the Eucharist and politics must be shown to be essential to the nature of the Eucharist. The sacramental grace gifted to the Church in the Eucharist, in other words, must be a form of *graced politics*. Chauvet's answer to this objection will have to do with the need for those "spiritual" matters to be "given a body" in order truly to fulfill their essence. Faith, in other words, cannot be merely a matter of the heart if it is to truly be faith. The truth of faith is given to us in the grace imparted through the body of the sacraments, and this gift impels the Church to the return-gift, the making corporal of its faith in the practice of Christian witness. Thus, the very faith of the Church is structured sacramentally. It is to this structuring of faith—the very political scandal of the Eucharist—to which we now turn.

### *The Political Scandal of the Eucharist*

#### *Introduction: The Sacramental Structure of Christian Identity*

Such an assertion has a pleasant ring to it, but what can it mean that faith is *structured* sacramentally? And in what sense is such structuring a *political* scandal? Are we not with the "political," perhaps, assigning a category to Chauvet's that Chauvet himself would avoid? In

short, I believe Chauvet thinks that the language-game of faith, once consented to, follows the same structural pattern. That pattern, it turns out, is the structure of *symbolic exchange*, which we spent a great deal of time explicating above. Hence, Chauvet's account comes full circle.

All faith, since it must become corporeal, follows the pattern of Gift-Reception-Return-Gift. But what aspects of Christian life make up the elements of Gift, Reception, and Return-Gift? Chauvet proposes that the Christian life is made up of a “*tripod*” of Scripture-Sacraments-Ethics that coincides, respectively, with the elements of Gift-Reception-Return-Gift.<sup>73</sup> Chauvet understands these three traditional doctrinal categories of Scripture, Sacrament, and Ethics in unique ways. Under the banner of Scripture, Chauvet means not only the Bible but also “everything pertaining to the understanding of revelation.”<sup>74</sup> Hence, things like catechesis, the theological texts that make up what we normally call the Tradition, and contemporary theological sources all fall under the broad category of Scripture.

The category of Sacrament has a similarly broad application. By Sacrament Chauvet means not only the seven sacraments instituted by Christ, but any celebrations that worship God through liturgy. This opens the way for treating things like prayer, Eucharistic adoration, and pilgrimage as belonging to the category of Sacrament.<sup>75</sup> Finally, and most importantly given the topic of this section, Chauvet claims a wider application for the category of Ethics than just personal piety. Ethics means “every kind of *action* Christians perform insofar as this is a

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>75</sup> This broadening of the notion of sacrament is largely in keeping with what Metz and Schillebeeckx call “the mystical.” See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1993); and Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007).

testimony given to the gospel of the Crucified-Risen One.”<sup>76</sup> Critically, this means that the Ethics of Christians are not confined to commands regarding interpersonal relationships but must also apply to social praxis. Chauvet does not use the term “politics” here, but it is no stretch to insist that under the category of Ethics, the return-gift obligated by the reception of God’s Gift, Chauvet has opened up space for an account of the political scandal of the Eucharist.

What remains to be said, however, is how this theological tripod of Scripture-Sacrament-Ethics corresponds in any meaningful sense to the logic of the gift. How is it, in other words, that Scripture can be taken as a *gift*? Does this change what we mean when we say of the Eucharistic elements that they are the “gifts of God”? Finally, to what extent is the political scandal of the Eucharist—the obligatory return-gift of Ethics—haunted by the aporia of the gift as articulated by Derrida? For Chauvet, the answer to these questions results in a collapsing of the distinction between language and gift-giving. The Gift of God is given in the form of a Word communicated. The truth of that Word only reaches its truth when it is made Flesh. This is the logic of gift-giving inherent in all three elements of the “tripod” and is the foundation, for Chauvet, of any further Christian politics.

Chauvet devotes full chapters to the elements of Scripture and Ethics in their relation to the category of Sacrament, not on their own. This is in keeping, I think, two fundamental truths that Chauvet continually emphasizes: first, that no element of the structure of Christian identity can function on its own, and, second, that taking the Pasch of Christ as our starting point requires thinking of God in terms of corporality. The most spiritual will always take on corporality as the fulfillment of its truth. This means that we cannot even think Scripture or Ethics without also simultaneously thinking their flight into symbolic, embodied expression, i.e. their flight into the

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 179.



Sacrament. Hence, to understand the political ramifications of the Eucharist and their basis in the logic of gift it will be necessary to understand (1) what Scripture is in relation to Sacrament, since this is the Gift given by God to be received in the Eucharist, and, (2) what particular form of Ethics the Sacrament obliges us to perform, since this is the obligatory return-gift of Christian Witness.

We have already seen above that Chauvet broadened the definition of Scripture beyond the Bible itself. Even more important for our purposes is Chauvet's continual affirmation that the gift of God is not limited to any of these finite forms of embodied knowledge. The true gift of God is revelation, but revelation thought under the mode of *Word*. It is the *Logos* that is the true gift of God. This might sound as if Chauvet has allowed the gift of God to become entirely ethereal, but the insistence on not giving the gift of God a single location in any particular book or body of knowledge is meant to safeguard the divine sovereignty that making the Pasch of Christ the starting point for theology requires. The Word of God is present in the Bible, but the Word of God is not limited or exhausted by the words of the Bible. This is what makes the analogy to the manna in the wilderness such an appealing one for Chauvet. It is given by God afresh each morning, it sustains the community even though it is literally "no-thing," but can never be accumulated in one place. The Word is given by God's initiative alone, and such free giving is proper to the kind of God whose being is in God's becoming, as we saw above.

Chauvet has therefore posited a sort of gift whose origins are beyond the hauntings of finitude. The gift under discussion here, after all, is ultimately God's *grace* or God's very *self*. Yet, while I believe I am correct to say that Chauvet is positing a supernatural or impossible origin for the language-game of faith—that form of life made possible by the Pasch of Christ and made actual in the sacraments as "symbolic figures of God's effacement"—the fact still remains

that we have never encountered a *pure* symbol entirely free of the logic of value and exchange. All symbolic expressions, however effective, are haunted by the presence of sign, value, and economy. This might seem as if Chauvet has held out what we have been seeking all along only to draw it back at the last second. Here is a gift beyond the logic of value, a singular instance that confirms the possibility of what Derrida called the “impossible,” the gift of grace itself, only to pull back and surrender even such a powerful gift to the vacillations and limits of the finite. I think, however, this move is entirely in keeping with what Chauvet has already made explicit. To say that an impossible gift might become fully present in the finite order is to go back on the hard work Chauvet has already done regarding the proper meaning of becoming “present” in the first place. The faith that believes in the presence of the impossible gift will only be faith if such a presence is marked by absence, mediation, and corporality. It is not, therefore, that we are surrendering the power of God’s gift of grace to finitude by contending that the symbolic expressions of such grace are ever marked by the absence that is characteristic of all actual presences. It is rather the precise thing that faith should say, namely, that the gift is *for human beings*. The wisdom of Derrida, unknown to Chauvet at the time, seems to be upheld for the most part. For how could we really call grace a true gift if it were not able to become present, to appear in order to be received? And if grace appears, it will not be as a pure and unmediated presence but as a coming-into-presence. Such is the limits of faith, not because of the chastening of secular reason, but because there can be no *human* faith otherwise. And what is a faith that is not a faith for human beings?

The gift of God, therefore, arrives to us as an event of grace in the effective symbolic expression of the sacraments. As we have already seen, all gifts, as soon as they are received, obligate us to a return-gift. Now for Derrida this obligation meant nothing less than the presence

of *debt*, eroding the nature of the gift as gift. One received a gift from another and was bound to pay it back in some way to the giver, even if that was with nothing but an acknowledgment of thanks. A debt of thanks is still a debt, which means that the gift was no gift in the first place. Chauvet, however, modifies this structure. For Chauvet the gift does indeed obligate the one who receives it, but since the exchange in question is *symbolic exchange* the structure of indebtedness does not apply. Person A gives Person B a gift, but instead of immediately becoming indebted to pay back a return-gift to Person A, Person B is instead obligated to give the return-gift to Person C. This is not a debt but rather an *obligation to further the presence of Person A's gift*. Gift-giving, thus, is not “purified”—the logic of the market-place will still haunt the furtherance of Person A's gift—but there is an almost prevenient sort of grace buried in the structure of symbolic exchange that undercuts the economic logic that Derrida saw as canceling the gift. Chauvet sees instead a subtle, even hidden inbreaking of grace at the base of all communication, and such a coming-into-presence of grace cannot be canceled or voided by the mere hint of economic or market logic. Grace can only be grace for human beings if it is marked by such absence from the beginning.

The form of Ethics obligated as a return-gift by the Church's reception of the Sacraments will be an ethics centered around the logic of symbolic exchange. Yet, we must be careful here not to mistake Chauvet as saying that the Ethics of the Church is entirely dependent upon the Sacrament for its content. The pegs of the tripod are not statically arranged but are dynamic, allowing for a shifting of emphasis as the situation of the Church changes. In this way, Chauvet can claim that the Eucharist is a “symbolic practice” that “comes from” and “sends us back to” the element of Ethics.<sup>77</sup> Here the decisive influence of Chauvet's fundamental theology of

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 254.

sacramentality comes to fruition, for “it is above all in the everyday that the Risen One is encountered. It is corporality itself that is the fundamental mediation for Christian liturgy.”<sup>78</sup> Embodied, everyday existence, in other words, can function *eucharistically* or *sacramentally* in that it serves as a gift to be received in symbolic action. Our encounters with the oppressed and broken of this world do not need the Eucharist to be made prophetically challenging to our politics. They already are, precisely because these encounters are encounters with the God whose presence is best described by reference to the Crucified One. In other words, the influence of the Eucharist on our politics is not a one-way street. Our everyday life and, more importantly, our encounters with the memories of the oppressed embodied in history serve to send us back to the symbolic figures of God’s own effacement, especially the Eucharist. Hence, for Chauvet the Eucharist is a political scandal while, at the same time, our encounters with those who we treat as no-thing scandalizes the liturgical life of the Church in a *eucharistic* manner.

What seems to make a Christian politics distinct from other forms of religious politics (Judaism, for example) or secular politics is the *eschatological memory* that constitutes it. The Eucharist does indeed seek to make present for the Church a past event in the narrative of institution, but the memory being evoked in the ritual is a “memory of the future,” i.e. of Jesus’ *second* coming.<sup>79</sup> Still, this memory is based in the gift Pasch of Christ such that “the ritual memory of Jesus’ death and resurrection is not Christian unless it is veri-fied in an *existential* memory whose place is none other than the believers’ bodies.”<sup>80</sup> The political scandal of the Eucharist as a rite, therefore, is the making present of the “dangerous memory” of Jesus Christ, both his Pasch and his Parousia. Making present this memory of the future in the present is to

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 260.

become nothing less than a living sacrament of a new political community, one that *is* and yet *is to come*. As Chauvet puts it, “The ritual story at each Eucharist, retelling why Jesus handed over his life, sends all Christians back to their own responsibility to take charge of history in his name; and so they become his living memory in the world because he himself is ‘sacramentally’ engaged in the body of humanity they work at building for him.”<sup>81</sup>

If this ethical vision sounds like it lacks accomplishable particulars that is no accident. After all, Chauvet has consistently said that the task of becoming a believer, of a life of faith, of giving the Word a place in our very bodies through Sacrament and Ethics, is *never a fully accomplished task*.<sup>82</sup> We would expect, then, that the political scandal of the Eucharist would serve more as a political paradigm than a series of political recommendations. The Eucharist, for Chauvet, does not serve as a “text” from which we may read a series of political positions but rather serves as a pedagogical tool by which we receive the task of a new manner of human belonging. We do not read our task from the Eucharist, but instead the Eucharist *reads us*, as it were, into certain forms of identity fostered by the *gift* of God’s grace in the memory of Jesus Christ. Hence, Chauvet writes:

The element ‘*Sacrament*’ is thus *the symbolic place of the on-going transition between Scripture and Ethics, from the letter to the body*. The liturgy is the *powerful pedagogy where we learn to consent to the presence of the absence of God, who obliges us to give him a body in the world, thereby giving the sacraments their plenitude in the “liturgy of the neighbor” and giving the ritual memory of Jesus Christ its plenitude in our existential memory*.<sup>83</sup>

The political scandal of the Eucharist is not necessarily a particular set of practical commands but a type of *subjectivity*, a *communal* and *institutional* subjectivity that is nothing less than a

---

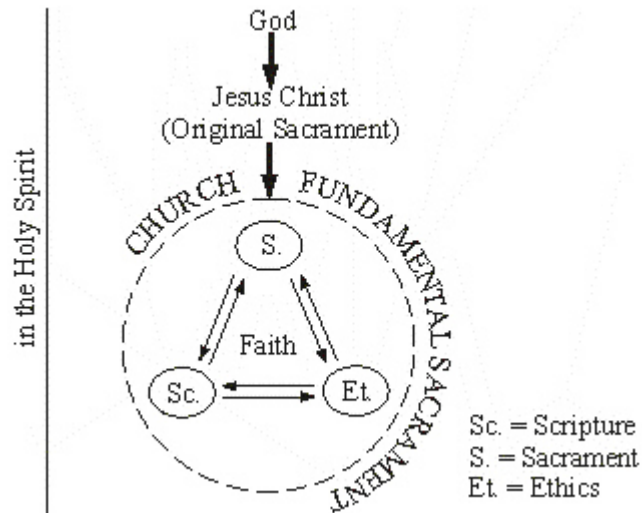
<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 265.

new placement through the symbolic expression of the Eucharist into the language-game of faith, whose moral and social outcome is that of “*agape between brothers and sisters.*”<sup>84</sup>

This is why Chauvet includes the following figure on the nature of the Church:



Scripture, Sacrament, and Ethics are here shown to stand in an equal relation to one another.<sup>85</sup> It is the continual flow between the three of them that constitutes the identity of the Church. More importantly, however, is the dotted line that indicates the porousness and permeability of the Church. The agapic community pours out beyond its boundaries and is also influenced from beyond its boundaries. Such a community cannot maintain a strict and hard boundary between itself and the world. There is, in other words, a certain mode of *being open* that is constitutive of the Eucharist *and* of the community it creates. The Church’s nature, as the community of the Eucharist, is ultimately analogous to the porous and permeable nature of the human subject—in that, we are irrevocably formed as an I by a series of exchanges with the other.

The Eucharist is thus a political scandal *not* because it contains the criterion for a certain mode of human belonging based in *agape*. The Eucharist is a political scandal because it

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 172.

*constitutes* such belonging in its very performance. It *reveals* the presence of such belonging and in so doing *accomplishes* the coming-into-presence of the agapic community of brothers and sisters. The political scandal of the Eucharist thus comes about through the schema of revealer and operator expounded above. Receiving the Gift of God in the sacraments seems, therefore, to be the most scandalous political act the Church can commit. For while our Ethical return-gift is of course an essential part of veri-fying the truth of the Gift given in the sacrament, it is the act of receiving the sacrament, receiving the very symbolic figure of God's effacement, that accomplishes a mode of human belonging that ought to be impossible within the immanent frame. The act of receiving the Eucharist makes the body of believers into the Body of Christ by revealing them as such—the sacramental presence on Earth of a manner of human belonging that the conditions of finitude seem to necessarily deem un-appearable. Yet, in the act of the Eucharist such an eschatological inbreaking occurs, according to Chauvet, albeit an inbreaking ever haunted by the absence of the eschatological not-yet. Hence, "Be what you see and receive what you are," is just the same as saying with Chauvet: "[In the Eucharist] it is [the Church's] very identity [that] it acts out here, proclaiming symbolically what it is and what it has yet to become. At the level of language, we have here the most expressive unfolding of its essence and truth."<sup>86</sup> The political scandal of the Eucharist, for Chauvet, thus turns out to be less about explicating a political theology from the liturgical practice of the Eucharist and more about insisting that the Eucharist is a symbolic act that constitutes a political community bound by agapic love.

Yet, Chauvet's account is limited by his decision to bind the political scandal of the Eucharist—along with the very possibility and intelligibility of grace—to the Maussian

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 430.

conception of gift-exchange. As I have attempted to make clear, the great benefit to incorporating Mauss, along with the further insights of anthropology and psychoanalysis, was to show that the communication of grace was through that very process by which we come to be subjects in the first place. However, the grave *risk* that accompanies this gain is that Chauvet's accounts of the ontological and political scandal of the Eucharist stand or fall based on the credibility of Maussian gift-exchange. While Chauvet has rightly noted that the *presence* of grace is not subject to linguistic processes alone, it must be said that our *access* to grace is granted solely through such processes. For that "principle which transforms these elements into a Eucharist or which assures the Eucharistic nature of the whole," is nothing else than symbolic exchange.<sup>87</sup>

While the theoretical challenges to Maussian gift-exchange have already been cited above, it is worth noting that Susan Ross has challenged Chauvet's insistence on the necessity of mediation from the standpoint of justice. The difficulty of characterizing the Eucharist as a symbolic exchange that functions to teach us to consent without resentment to the presence of the absence is that it leaves us with little avenue to question or challenge the ways in which such symbolic exchange might be compromised by patriarchy or other forms of oppressive ideology.<sup>88</sup> The body is not solely a necessary mediation but also the site of profound *ambiguity* and *ambivalence* for Ross, particularly for women in their experience of the liturgy.<sup>89</sup> Rather than forcing women to consent to the presence of absence, Ross insists that the sacraments can function to show that God is present in the embodied experience of women, and listening to that

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>88</sup> See in particular her assertion that the *practice* of the sacraments amongst women at the margins of sacramental practice reveals a renewed sacramental theology. Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 209-29

<sup>89</sup> Ross links this explicitly to Chauvet's symbolic approach. Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 157.



embodied experience can provide much needed renewal for sacramental theology. Critically, this lends lay women the authority to insist on women's presence in worship and to critique those forms of oppression that utilize the Church's symbolic network to further patriarchal forms of power. The lack of attention to this difficulty by Chauvet, in other words, seriously calls into question the validity of symbolic exchange and, thereby, the political scandal that follows from it.<sup>90</sup>

Chauvet's theology is, like all theology, a product of its time. As Lieven Boeve put it in an appraisal of Chauvet's project, "It is the awareness of a theological urgency that drives Chauvet to his reconsideration of the sacramental structure of Christian existence."<sup>91</sup> Beyond the limitations of what Chauvet counted as theologically urgent, it is also worth asking just to what extent Chauvet's context has faded from view and, along with it, the urgency that characterized it. As Boeve again says, "At the same time it remains true that, because of its starting point and dialogue partners, *Symbol and Sacrament* testifies to the theological struggle of a particular generation, a struggle with which many of my generation, children of the linguistic turn, are hardly still familiar."<sup>92</sup> Chauvet's hermeneutical project in our time rings as "an excessively dangerous and insufficiently reassuring position in a context too easily evaluated as nihilistic and relativistic."<sup>93</sup> Chauvet's project, as protean as it is, risks being co-opted by a context that is no longer postmodern but also is *post-Christian* in its constitution. Chauvet's location of grace, in

---

<sup>90</sup> It is also worth noting that in his "relecture" of *Symbol & Sacrament* some twenty years later Chauvet still did not address this concern in any depth. See Louis-Marie Chauvet, "Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*" *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 88 (2007): 111-125.

<sup>91</sup> Lieven Boeve, "Theology in a Postmodern Context and the Hermeneutical Project of Louis-Marie Chauvet," in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God—Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, ed. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce Morrill (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>92</sup> Boeve, "Theology in a Postmodern Context," 23.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

other words, in that which is most human, all too easily loses its “extra-linguistic” efficacy and fades into that which Chauvet sought so heartily to avoid—the blur of general sacramentality. I turn, then, to another figure who sought to articulate the ontological and political scandal of the Eucharist through gift and language, but one who did so with his eye squarely upon the post-Christianness of our context.

CHAPTER FOUR  
MILBANK ON GIFT AND LANGUAGE:  
THE SACRAMENTAL AGAINST THE SECULAR

*Introduction*

If Chauvet represents one of the great attempts at correlating the theoretical gifts of postmodern thought into a theology oriented around the sacraments, then John Milbank, the founder of Radical Orthodoxy and pugilistic defender of Christian thought, is surely one of the great instantiations of a thinker utterly opposed to the merits of such correlation. As controversial as they are protean, Milbank's genealogy of the secular, his radical re-reading of Thomas Aquinas, and his attempt to "purify" gift-exchange beyond Mauss and Derrida all smack of one with whom Chauvet's project would have very little in common. Yet, as if points on a circle rather than a line, the seeming distance between the two figures actually belies a telling intimacy. The goal of this chapter will be to explicate that nearness-in-distance, so to speak, in order to reveal the ways that Milbank's project and Chauvet's both culminate in accounts of the Eucharist as the gift of political language. Their utterly divergent theological presuppositions yield vital truths for future attempts at thinking the political implications of the Eucharist.

Before I begin, however, I must note that this chapter is *not* a chapter on Radical Orthodoxy as a whole. I think this is the right course, first, because I do not believe there is a coherent and persistent school of thought that might be called "radical orthodoxy." The edited volumes that bear the moniker "radical orthodoxy" certainly share general concerns about the legitimacy of modernity and the relationship between theology and philosophy, but there is no single, shared worldview to which a discernible group of thinkers subscribe that one might place

under that appellation. Those who contributed to the first volume have had varied responses to Milbank's grand polemic against modernity, and even the original editors themselves have not all gone in the same direction after the collected volume's publication.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter's focus, as one might infer from the title, is on the figure at the center of Radical Orthodoxy since its inception—John Milbank—and the one who arguably just *is* radical orthodoxy, if the name is to apply fully to any one thinker. Yet, if one were to read the whole of Milbank's *oeuvre* one might be surprised at the lack of direct engagement with the theology of the Eucharist. In fact, at the times when one might imagine Milbank turning a particular argument into an engagement with the Eucharist, something else occurs. Typically, Milbank demurs from a direct engagement with the Eucharist and instead gives a decidedly ebullient citation of a single theologian—Milbank's former doctoral student and now a theologian in her own right, Catherine Pickstock. For that reason, Pickstock will also appear in this chapter so as to bring forward details of just what Milbank might consider a proper theology of the Eucharist.

This chapter will thus follow a similar outline to the previous chapter. The key difference between the two, however, will be the continual re-emergence of Chauvet as a critical interlocutor for understanding Milbank. This chapter will thus commence as an explication-in-dialogue, weaving the notable moments of agreement or disagreement from our previous encounter with Chauvet into our present engagement with Milbank. The chapter shall follow a similar structure to the chapter previous—in keeping with the deep alignment of the two thinkers on the proper place of the sacraments in relation to theory and practice, ontology and politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Graham Ward's work in particular has taken a notably different path than Milbank and Pickstock's. Other original contributors to *Radical Orthodoxy* that have diverged in notable ways from Milbank and Pickstock are William Cavanaugh, Lawrence Paul Hemming, and Fergus Kerr. For their original essays see *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999).

Hence, I begin with an analysis of Milbank's critique of "the problem." While his emphasis on ontotheology is not as singular as Chauvet's, I will show that Milbank's relationship to the Heideggerian project of overcoming metaphysics is a decisive part of his theological enterprise. It is precisely his rejection of this project and, hence, of any subsequent "homology of attitude" between overcoming metaphysics and Christian orthodoxy, which will set the course for Milbank's particular account of language and the gift.

Once I have articulated the precise relationship between Milbank and ontotheology I will have to situate Milbank's project within the broader historical narrative now subsumed under the name "radical orthodoxy." Like my reading of Chauvet, this will entail an explanation of leitmotifs from Milbank's most famous and often inscrutable work, *Theology and Social Theory*. The most notable of these shall be "ontological violence," which fuels his opposition to the project of overcoming metaphysics and of all currents of thought, theological or otherwise, that might be characterized as postmodern. I shall then turn to Milbank's unique account of language and gift-exchange, in that order. I shall show that rather than utilizing postmodernity to elucidate resources already latent in the sacramental system for Christian theology, Milbank instead adopts a pugilistic attitude towards postmodern thought, contending that theology and theology alone is able to properly think the realities of language and gift-exchange. Postmodern accounts of radical semiosis and critiques of the pure gift as impossible ultimately end in a form of political and ontological nihilism. Christian theology alone is able to reconcile the radical difference in language and the seeming aporia at the heart of the gift.

*Milbank and Vico: The Roots of Milbank's Doctrine of God*

With Milbank, the great difficulty of any account of his thought is picking a suitable beginning. The prolific nature of his writing would be hard enough in this regard if not for the fact that his writing covers such a wide-range of topics. Unlike my engagement with Chauvet then, where I intentionally reversed the typical telling of Chauvet's thought, perhaps it is best to begin with the very beginning of Milbank's work. This beginning shall be prior even to the book that made him famous, *Theology and Social Theory*. Indeed, I shall begin with Milbank's doctoral dissertation on the work Giambattista Vico in order to examine what I consider to be the key underlying principle to nearly all of Milbank's theology, whether his conception of a properly orthodox ontology or politics. This key is a single sentence from Vico himself—*verum esse ipsum factum*. The truth is itself made, or what Milbank then called the “*verum-factum*.”<sup>2</sup>

For Milbank, Vico is one of the first in a long and perhaps unending chain of orthodox thinkers that were able to resist the gravitational pull of the Enlightenment towards what we now call modernity. Part of the reason Vico was able to do so occupied Milbank's early thought as to push the young scholar to devote his dissertation to the religious implications of Vico's work. Milbank would later expand the dissertation into two volumes that attempted to show the deeply theological and political implications of the nuances of Vico's thought that might have given academia an alternative vision for modernity. Such a vision, according to Milbank, can only now be recovered as a theological corrective to a reified and presumed modern frame of thought that is either hopelessly metaphysical or nihilist. The crux of this corrective is what Milbank called

---

<sup>2</sup> The connection to Milbank's work on Vico and a great deal of systematic work in *Theology and Social Theory*, *The Word Made Strange*, and *Being Reconciled* has been helpfully summarized in an excellent dissertation turned monograph by Peter Samuel Kucer. For that argument see Peter Samuel Kucer, *Truth and Politics: A Theological Comparison of Joseph Ratzinger and John Milbank* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

Vico's "first truth" of metaphysics, Vico's alternative to the Cartesian *cogito*, namely, that the truth was convertible with the made.

What does this seemingly obscure phrase mean? How can that which is true also be that which is made? The natural reticence one might have towards the stark claim that proposition betrays a series of presuppositions that Milbank sees Vico specifically contradicting. Perhaps Descartes will serve as the best example here. For Descartes, the first truth of all philosophy was the *cogito*, "I think therefore I am."<sup>3</sup> The securing of the existence of the self, and within the self the infinite idea of God, allowed Descartes to secure knowledge gained through the senses from the constant critique to which they seemed irredeemably vulnerable. If God exists and has given us our senses to use, whether our reason or our empirical senses, then we can trust their results. And yet, what the *cogito* inevitably seemed to privilege as a result were fields of knowledge that focused on laws of a similar transcendental nature as that of the *cogito*. Mathematics and science, whose laws were natural and ordained by God, were favored over history and linguistics, whose content was utterly contingent as purely human creations. Vico's grand innovation was to break with Descartes on precisely this point, and through a theological principle for good measure. Vico asserted that it was actually the seemingly contingent fields of knowledge—things like history, linguistics, civics, etc.—that were the surest forms of knowledge, whilst study of the laws of the natural world, through mathematics and science, could not attain full degrees of certainty. This was the case because God was the maker of those laws and hence God alone knew the full and infinite measure of them. Humans, on the other hand, had not made the cosmos and thereby could not know it perfectly. Mathematics and science, as the study of the laws of this cosmos, counter-intuitively, are shrouded by the limits of human cognition. But, Vico argues,

---

<sup>3</sup> See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

human beings can know things of which they themselves were the cause, and those things that they have made are the purely human creations of language, culture, and history. As Vico puts it,

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by man, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, he alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since man had made it, men could hope to know.<sup>4</sup>

The real truth to be known, in other words, is not the eternal laws beyond the human order but precisely the *constructed* truth human beings have made via their shared world together, and the access we have to that truth is in and through *language*.

Several scholars of Vico have read his work in this way but have taken no further theological import from it.<sup>5</sup> Milbank's unique interpretation of Vico, as first argued in his doctoral dissertation, was to read *verum-factum* not as having oblique or inessential theological consequences but rather as stemming *directly* from a theological and metaphysical principle. That principle was the generation of the Second Person of the Trinity by the Father—the *Logos*, the *Word*, or as Vico was fond of calling the Second Person of the Trinity, the *Verum*. Again, the notion is seen most clearly when contrasted with an opposing idea. Traditionally, Truth was convertible with the Good, the Beautiful, and with Being itself. Christians, particularly those influenced by Plato, saw God as ultimately convertible with these transcendentals as well. In other words, Truth could be predicated to God's very being, along with the other transcendentals.

---

<sup>4</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), 1.3.331, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin's analysis of Vico is a good example of this, and one that Milbank specifically opposes. For Berlin's account see Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth, 1976).



Yet, this leads to what Vico thought was a mistaken notion of truth in the life of the Godhead. Milbank describes the misread in this way: “[T]here is a prior truth in God, preceding all images and works, and human understanding, forced through its material involvement to express itself in words and images, participates in the original through a dim recall of the purity of truth.”<sup>6</sup> Such a conviction renders the relation between *created* truth and the *eternal being* of God unclear. In an effort to correct this, Vico *reverses* this formulation:

For Vico, this picture is precisely reversed: the perfection of divine understanding consists in its character as a completed work, a perfect spiritual artifact; the imperfection of human understanding consists in its relatively *theoretical* and less perfectly constructive and practical character. Participation is therefore not the backwards ascent from images up towards the original, but through the historical path of making towards the telos of the infinite *factum*. Once human images imitated divine ideas, now human ideas tend towards divine images; once understanding was memory, now it is anticipation.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than being a truth from the finite order that has its analogue in the life of God, the principle of *verum-factum* is derived from the Trinitarian life of the Godhead, a “perfect spiritual artifact” that is not the result of the truth but is itself the truth that God is in Godself.

The theological import of *verum-factum* extends beyond Vico’s linking it, upon Milbank’s reading, to the generation of the Son in the Triune life of God. It establishes two correlates that are vitally important to Milbank’s later work. First, that God is “*primordially* creative,” meaning God is not first a collection of eternal attributes and then later a Creator by virtue of the economy of salvation.<sup>8</sup> God is rather always already creative in God’s very being, prior to the existence of the world or to God’s relationship as Creator to it. The world only subsists in so far as it *participates* in that creative dynamism that is the life of God, which, in

---

<sup>6</sup> John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico (1688-1774), Part I: The Early Metaphysics* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 113.

<sup>7</sup> Milbank, *Religious Dimension I*, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Kucer, *Truth and Politics*, 109.

turn, is in keeping with Vico's *hylozoic* rather than *hylomorphic* metaphysics. Matter (*hyle*) does not have its ground in a static and stable form (*morphe*) but is rather an instantiation of the dynamic life (*Zoë*) of God.

Second, those acts that we tend to see as being abstractions from the real life or matter of the world are, under the light of the *verum-factum*, now seen as something quite different. Vico's participatory *schema*, according to Milbank, "denies that the ideas of making, of representation, and imaging, are necessarily connected with the corporeal or mind-body world, although for human beings this is, contingently, the case. Abstraction from body no longer means abstraction from art and from language."<sup>9</sup> The divide between construction or artifice and the properly enduring truth of God becomes blurred, on Milbank's telling. In the time of the "not-yet" that is our human world, processes like making or representing are connected with the embodied and finite order. This is not always going to be the case, and that is so precisely because it is not *ultimately* or *necessarily* the case that artifice, abstraction, and creation are fundamentally opposed to the pure spirit of the life of God. Since God is primordially creative, the revelation of the Trinity in the persons of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit reveals that the eternal truth of God as pure spirit is convertible with the "perfect spiritual artifact" that God Godself is. Since God is nothing else other than the socially created reality that is the *perichoresis* of the Triune God, that which is made is not secondary to that which is true. Making is not, therefore, something *only* identifiable in material or corporeal phenomena. Making is essentially spiritual and physical.

These two theological correlates give critical insight into two key aspects of Milbank's later thought, particularly for our purpose of elucidating an account of the Eucharist as the gift of political language in his theological program. First, Milbank's recovery of the *verum-factum* as a

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 113.

metaphysical first-truth shows why Milbank found the terrain of postmodernity particularly *comfortable* and particularly *familiar* for Christian theology. *Comfortable*, because postmodern thought's emphasis on flux, difference, and the instability of essences fits well with Vico's insistence that construction is not secondary to truth, not to mention his hylozoistic metaphysics that portends Deleuze's later destabilization of substance.<sup>10</sup> *Familiar*, because Milbank finds even Vico's opinion nothing more than an advancing of earlier meditations of Christian theologians on the nature of the Triune God as a communion of love. Had we listened to Vico, Milbank might argue, (or Herder, Hamann, Cusa, but especially Aquinas!) we would have already arrived at a great many of these so-called "postmodern" conclusions about the nature of truth.<sup>11</sup>

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Milbank drew from Vico the idea that construction and truth are only now "contingently" related to the human finite order. I think this reveals why Milbank is firmly committed to the idea that a Christian *polis* founded on the principle of Christian charity is an *accomplishable* project in our time.<sup>12</sup> For if the truth of such a *polis* were primary and the attempts to construct or make such a *polis* were ever secondary to that truth, then there would be an impossible abyss that stretched between the kingdom of charity and the sacred *polis* the Church seeks to inaugurate here and now. But if the made is convertible with the true then there is a sense in which we might create a *polis* that is *analogous* to the truth of the Kingdom of God and analogous to such an extent as to have not only an evocative

---

<sup>10</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul R. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> This sequence is made apparent with particular clarity in Milbank's work on language in *The Word Made Strange*. See "The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn," in John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 84-122.

<sup>12</sup> See in particular John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of People* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 184-269.

similarity to but rather a substantial continuity with the reality to which it points. Vico's insistence on the primacy of artifice and construction become, for Milbank, the impetus not only to work towards the coming of the Kingdom, but to *make* the truth of the Kingdom in the here and now.

Ultimately, Milbank's reading of Vico in the early days of his career already shows traces of one of Milbank's most controversial theses. In the work of Vico, as I have already mentioned, Milbank saw a single instance in a long stream of thought that runs counter to the predominant current of modern, secular thought. There is already, in other words, an "us versus them" storyline taking shape, in that many of Vico's positive contributions were accomplished by *opposing* a seemingly irresistible epistemic undertow that characterizes modernity as a whole. Vico stands in a long line of thinkers of which Milbank imagines himself a continuation, a line of thinkers who resisted the ills of modern thought but did so without overreacting in the manner that postmodern thought later comes to do. Hence, I turn now to Milbank's meta-critical account of the formation of the secular and the way in which postmodern thought came to instantiate its implicit nihilism.

### *Ontological Violence: Milbank's Meta-critical Rescue Mission*

The most concise telling of secularity's tale of woe from Milbank comes in one of his more recent works, *Beyond Secular Order*. Therein, not only is the theoretical importance of a Christian ontology made apparent but also the case for the connection between ontology and politics is rigorously made. There is little speculation forced upon us as to just what it is that Milbank thinks on the matter. What then is the story we have to hear so as to think and act in the world aright? What conceptual and practical boon awaits us in the retelling of the human fall into

secularity? The answer is both the revelation of a problem and the path towards an answer—the ontological violence of modern ontology and the possibility of the community of peace called the Church.

Perhaps it is because of the genealogical nature of Milbank's argument or the sheer audacity of some of his claims, but the "story" I am about to describe often takes on the quality of a master myth. In being treated this way, Milbank's genealogy of the secular can come to be equated with other myths to which it has no absolute or essential relation. Particular among these is the notion that Milbank conducts his archaeology of the secular in order to call us to return to a pre-modern perspective. The Milbankian genealogy actually calls for precisely the opposite conclusion and begins from a perspective that disavows even the possibility of such a return. As he puts it in the first pages of *Theology and Social Theory*:

[T]heology has rightly become aware of the (absolute) degree to which it is a contingent historical construct emerging from, and reacting back upon, particular social practices conjoined with particular semiotic and figural codings. It is important to realize that my entire case is constructed from a complete *concession* as to this state of affairs, and that the book offers no proposed restoration of a pre-modern Christian position.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, Milbank wishes to tell the story of the secular's emerging in order to show that the secular arises from a fundamentally *theological* error. The secular, and the problems that come along with it, stem from particular theological innovations whose tragic result was the creation of doctrines that became untenable. In other words, the rise of the secular was not an act of intellectual aggression against a vibrant and worthy theology. Rather, the creation of the secular was the result of decay within theology.

---

<sup>13</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> eds. (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 1-2.

Milbank's story begins in the High Middle Ages and at the height of a society that was particularly saturated in theology and liturgy. Thomas Aquinas was in his heyday of engaging all the wisdom of philosophy from the standpoint of a devoted faith, and society itself was structured and organized around an ontology that was rightly and decidedly Christian. What happened next was not the rise of an atheistic opposition but rather a dereliction in the very *theology* upon which society and orthodoxy relied. The noted culprit of this theological demise was none other than a monk from the British Isles—John Duns Scotus.

Before I begin, however, a note of caution is in order. The narrative I am about to recount with regards to Scotus has come under severe criticism since Milbank's major works were published. In particular, Daniel Horan has devoted an entire monograph to criticizing what he calls the "Scotus story" that Milbank (along with other thinkers associated with Radical Orthodoxy) defends throughout his many works.<sup>14</sup> Horan finds Milbank's reading of the "Subtle Doctor" to be quite unsatisfactory, and Milbank's response to Horan in a recent symposium hosted by the Syndicate Theology Network did not give any significant evidence that Horan's criticism of Milbank's "Scotus story" will be constructively or adequately countered.<sup>15</sup> I want to be clear, therefore, as to the precise use to which I am putting Milbank's account of Scotus. I take it that retelling the genealogical narrative of the secular with Scotus at its center is critical for understanding Milbank. Moreover, as I hope to make clear later, I have a great deal of sympathy for many of Milbank's theoretical insights, but many of these insights do not depend upon definitively laying the blame for modernity's ills at the feet of the Subtle Doctor. I present,

---

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> For Milbank's response to Horan's text and Horan's forceful rejoinder to Milbank see John Milbank, "Saving the Scotus Story," and Daniel Horan, "Reply to Milbank," last modified December 25, 2017. <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/postmodernity-and-univocity/>

then, Milbank's story as he tells it so that the reader may understand how it is that the current historical debate arises, but, even more importantly, I present it so that the reader might see the theoretical targets that Milbank attacks, while perhaps leaving aside the proper names attributed (with far too much certainty) to the origin of those ideas.

Scotus, Milbank argues, was instrumental in dismantling several key theological tenets of the ontology that guided the High Middle Ages. Most importantly, Scotus in many ways *created* the branch of ontology as a decided non-theological affair. Before Scotus, theology and philosophy were two entities that had a relatively compatible relationship. Philosophy has never “existed in pure independence from religion or theology.”<sup>16</sup> The ancients saw the love of wisdom as itself a spiritual exercise.<sup>17</sup> Yet, at the same time theology has never been superior to philosophy outright. “Truth was seen as one, and revelation as the restoration of a fullness of truth” from the Church Fathers to Aquinas.<sup>18</sup> It was only when Christian theologians forsook this theological tradition—and this will become a very common refrain for Milbank—that this complementary yet distinct relationship between theology and philosophy was torn asunder.

Milbank sums up the irony of this situation:

So the paradox is that the theoretically secularizing gesture, which permitted the arrival of a pure, autonomous philosophy, was entirely a theological gesture, and even one which sought to conserve the transcendence of God and the priority of the supernatural, by mistakenly insisting on the sheer ‘naturalness’ and self-sufficiency of human beings without grace, as a backdrop for augmenting grace’s sheer gratuity.<sup>19</sup>

Duns Scotus, along with some predecessors and plenty of successors, were the primary guilty party in inaugurating this separation, and they did this through four vital substitutions. As

---

<sup>16</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

always, the breadth of Milbank's historical claims is striking. Those four substitutions are what he calls the "four pillars of modern philosophy," and they are the substitution of: (1) univocity for analogy in ontology, (2) mirroring representation for knowledge by identity in gnoseology, (3) the primacy of possibility for the primacy of actuality in modal theory, and finally (4) the concurrence of created causality with divine causality on the same ontological plane for an earlier notion of divine *influentia* on a different ontological level.<sup>20</sup> These substitutions, as has already been intimated, were done to bolster rather than undermine the legitimacy of Christian orthodoxy. They are thus intellectual tendencies original to the Church, Milbank contends. What happened, however, was the creation of a fulcrum by which the whole of the Christian world could be moved, not only moved but also overturned, with disastrous theoretical and practical effects.

The first pillar of modern philosophy—univocity—is perhaps Milbank's favorite target, as he has objected stridently to its presence in theology in just about every major work he has published.<sup>21</sup> I must, therefore, clarify what Milbank means by univocity and why its substitution for analogy was so deleterious to theology according to him. As we saw in Chapters One and Two, theology's predicament in the postmodern age is mostly due to how theology thinks of Being. For Milbank it was theology's great failure to think Being properly that led to the arrival of the "secular" and (as we shall see later) the problems of ontotheology that Chauvet sought so hard to combat. Duns Scotus figures in this arrival of the secular by being one of the primary proponents of what is traditionally called the "univocity of being." This is to be contrasted with the "analogy of being" as Aquinas and many other prominent theologians have defended. The

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Horan's book is, again, a very helpful resource in cataloging the scope of Milbank's critical engagement with univocity within and beyond Scotus. For that see Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity*, 15-58.



primary difficulty involved in the distinction between univocity and analogy has to do with what one can and cannot predicate adequately of God within human language. One major strand of the Christian tradition, notably represented by Aquinas, held that all predication of perfection to God through the medium of human language had to be done *analogously*. In other words, God's goodness and human goodness are similar but they are not the same thing. God possesses goodness just as we do but in a manner beyond our full comprehension. Thus, we cannot say precisely what God is, but we may say things with precision about our finite state (being) and apply them, through analogy, to God.

Duns Scotus, so Milbank tells it, is one of the first instantiations of a tradition that sought to defend God from the apparent abyss involved in the *analogia entis*. We must, so he argued, be able to predicate with accuracy something of the Being of God, and we must be able to do so naturally, in keeping with our creaturely dignity as made in the image of God. Rather than predicating perfections to God in an analogous way, we can predicate perfections of God and creatures *in the same voice*—hence, *uni-vocal*. This required, fatefully, the establishment of a neutral plane of Being that both God and creatures shared.

Being, [Scotus] argued, could be either finite or infinite, and possessed the same simple meaning of existence when applied to either. “Exists,” in the sentence “God exists,” has therefore the same fundamental meaning (at a logical and ultimately metaphysical level) as in the sentence, “this woman exists.” The same thing applies to the usage of transcendental terms convertible with Being; for example, “God is good” means that [God] is good in the same *sense* that we are said to be good, however much more of the quality of goodness [God] may be thought to possess.<sup>22</sup>

While this allowed, so Scotus thought, an increase in our ability to predicate perfection of God, Milbank holds that it allowed, for the first time, the tearing asunder of theology as the science of God from metaphysics as the science of being. Now there came to be a science of created

---

<sup>22</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 305.

existence that could be undertaken without any reference to the Creator of that existence.

Milbank's description of this event is characteristically severe:

And here we have reached the absolute crux of this matter, and the turning point in the destiny of the West. For insofar as Aquinas appeared to leave some ambiguity regarding how it was possible to speak of God by first speaking of finite beings, Duns Scotus resolved it in an untraditional direction by affirming that this is because one can first understand Being in an unambiguous manner, sheerly 'existential' sense, as the object of a proposition, without reference to God, who is later claimed 'to be' in the same univocal manner. Here...arises for the first time ontotheological idolatry regarding God, and the placing of God within a predefined arena of being...<sup>23</sup>

The secular and its companion ontotheology were thus largely the result of this first and fateful substitution.

The second pillar continues the domino effect of early modern theological error into epistemology. For with the substitution of univocity for analogy came a change in the account of what God was in Godself. The key difference for this second substitution has to do with how God's existence relates to God's intellect and how this difference is subsequently applied to our ability to know things within the finite order. Aquinas, famously, had held that we know God best by knowing what God is not, and the first thing we know God cannot be is something material. This means, under the epistemological influence of Plato and Aristotle, that God can be nothing other than intellection, indeed the pure act of intellection is God's very substance. This means that God's intellect and God's being are not different things. As the great doctor puts it, "in God to be is the same thing as to understand."<sup>24</sup>

Duns Scotus disagreed on this point, and his disagreement "encouraged," though Milbank seems to shy away from claiming such disagreement *directly* led to, a new model of knowledge *by representation*. Scotus' positing of Being as something that could be apprehended without

---

<sup>23</sup> Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.14.4.

reference to God allowed for the formal distinction between God's intellect and God's Being. God's knowledge of something was now no longer seen as the known's participation in the divine being but rather, since Being is something that God and creatures now possess in the same way, so their intellects can now be spoken of in the same, univocal way as their existence could. As Milbank puts it, for Scotus, God, through God's "'objective' knowledge of things," now "*precisely and univocally represents*" the objects to be known in the divine intellect.<sup>25</sup> Whereas for Aquinas the matter is entirely different—God "knows [things] truly by achieving them in [Godself] as more than themselves and only knowable in their alien finitude as the participability of their infinitely perfect exemplary instance."<sup>26</sup> God's knowledge of things no longer adds a particular dignity to the thing known—"no longer is the stone as known by God 'nobler' than the stone as it finitely exists."<sup>27</sup> Instead, God perfectly and "efficiently" produces the image or copy of the thing in the divine intellect.<sup>28</sup>

When applied to the knowledge of things within the human intellect problems begin to arise for Milbank. What guaranteed the accuracy of our knowledge of things under the Thomist and Aristotelian notion of knowledge by identity was the "unmediated identity of the abstracted form in the mind with the form as it exists when combined with matter in the material substances of which we have knowledge."<sup>29</sup> Our minds were joined, in other words, through the matter we encountered, to the abstract form of which that matter was an instantiation. Yet, when we replace that knowledge by identity with knowledge by representation there arises a drastic problem. All our knowledge seems dependent upon "the subjective efficient and discursive production of an

---

<sup>25</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 32.

image”—meaning that the accuracy of all knowledge is dependent, first, upon a subject that is safe from critique itself so as to produce representations that can be counted accurate.<sup>30</sup> Second, and more importantly, it means that—“for the first time in history,” Milbank insists—the idea of an *object* comes into being. Knowledge of an object is knowledge that is not identical with the thing known as it exists. A dangerous abyss between the knower and the thing known opens up. This inevitably produces the state of affairs wherein knowledge of even finite things, but *especially* knowledge of metaphysical realities, comes under threat of constant skepticism. The problem, therefore, is one of epistemological skepticism and a derelict doctrine of creation. The substitution that opens up a horizon of “doubting any intrinsic connection between names and things” is the same that “underrates the nobility of the material creation.”<sup>31</sup>

This denigration of our perception of the created order as possessing a particular (perhaps one could even say sacramental) “nobility,” results in the turn to the third pillar of modern philosophy—which Milbank dubs “possibilism.”<sup>32</sup> Critical for our purposes, this substitution has to do with the distinction between reality as “gift” and reality as “given.”<sup>33</sup> Possibilism, for Milbank, denotes the sort of thinking that rejects a participatory metaphysics with its priority of the actual in favor of a ontological framework that sees the created order as one possibility amongst others, all of which could have been actualized if God had so willed. The real rub of possibilism for Milbank, however, is not merely that it eschews participation in its metaphysics but that it sees the actuality of the created order as “synchronically shadowed” by the “hypostasized logical possibility” from which it came.<sup>34</sup> Put plainly, the logical possibility of

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 37.

contingent reality comes to be the deeper reality than the actualization of that possibility. The connection to the distinction between gift and given now comes to the fore: If actuality is given ontological priority, then the world can be seen as an arriving *gift*, but if possibility is given ontological priority then the world as actual is nothing more than the material instantiation of a preceding and “inert” possibility.<sup>35</sup> This irrevocably removes the connection between actuality and “an infinite mysterious depth” that the finite creation participates in, further eroding the sacramental nobility that the created order possessed under thinkers like Aquinas.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, if the stress of the doctrine of creation is no longer on an emanation in keeping with God’s perfect act of intellection and subsequently shifts towards a stress upon God’s freedom to choose by fiat from one possibility amongst others, then the negotiation between divine and human causality takes on a new intensity. The initial substitution of univocity for analogy now has profound consequences for how human and divine freedom can be achieved in the world. “[T]he more divine freedom is construed in univocal and so ontotheological terms as guaranteed by its power to out-compete and trump created freedom, the more—as an indirect paradoxical consequence—created freedom is then also granted an autonomous space outside divine causation.”<sup>37</sup> Univocity now becomes a double-edged sword that degrades, so Milbank argues, both divine and human freedom.

The degradation comes from placing divine and human freedom on the same ontological plane, since existence is now something that God and creatures possess in the same manner. Within this shared ontological plane, then, the question becomes how God can act without destroying human freedom. Not wanting to deny the dignity of the creature as created with free

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 42.

will, univocalist thinkers, according to Milbank, proposed the causal model of “concurrency.” Under this model human freedom was preserved in that univocity made it “possible to think of infinite and finite causes as each contributing distinct if unequal shares to any particular causal upshot...”<sup>38</sup> Contrary to Aquinas, we could now think of divine and human causal concurrence as “two horses pulling a barge,” working to create the same effect in a “complementary” way.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, the cost of preserving human freedom in this way was that it created a “zero-sum game” in which divine and human causes were inevitably seen as competing with one another. The terms of the game could only be that “the more of divine, the less of created causality at work, and vice versa.”<sup>40</sup> The participatory framework, Milbank contends, allowed for the possibility of different ontological levels upon which causes could function independently and simultaneously in order to produce the same effect. This was the basic standpoint of a tradition within theology heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, what Milbank calls the causal mode of divine *influentia*.

According to this notion, a higher cause in a chain of causes (for example the heat and light of the sun as opposed to the nutritive power of the earth) is not nearly a (de-metaphorized) external ‘influence’ upon a cause lower down in a causal series, which would therefore act as but one ‘factor,’ albeit predominate one, in bringing about a certain effect – like a man pushing along a supermarket trolley, but being slightly assisted by his toddler son. Instead, the higher cause is ‘flowing into’ the entire lower causal scenario, such that it conditions, at a qualitatively higher level, *both* the lower effect *and* the lower cause, just as the sun’s heat has already determined in large part the shapes taken by the surface of the earth which allows plants to grow within it.<sup>41</sup>

The great benefit of this perspective is twofold. First, this model preserves what Milbank sees as a remarkably important relationship between matter and form. Second, this model alone

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 42.

preserves, in a similar way to the matter-form relationship, a sort of *exchange* between God and human beings that will be critical to Milbank's account of the gift still to come.

As to the first, Milbank points out that the hierarchical model of higher and lower causes gives us a picture of higher causes working "more powerfully" at all levels of the hierarchy in a "covert fashion."<sup>42</sup> Higher causes therefore operate "unilaterally" on their own level while influencing lower causes by giving rise to a certain sort of "response" on the lower ontological planes. This unilateral work can lead one to wrongly privilege higher causes over lower ones in our conception of the matter-form relationship. Yet, the distinctly Christian theological underpinning of the hierarchical model of causation, so Milbank argues, does not allow for a purely unilateral vision of causation, precisely because of the *material* nature of the created order. A certain "*reciprocity*" obtains between matter and form, provoked by the unilateral nature of higher causes, the highest being the act of creation itself. Form and matter bear this reciprocity because "matter is only actualised through form, while in the terrestrial sphere form can only be realised and 'individuated' through material limitation."<sup>43</sup> Matter, therefore, "provides only a mysterious field of passive potentiality that limits and so particularises the active potential of form in its abstract essential reach."<sup>44</sup> The causal model of divine *influentia* thus preserves a sense of reciprocity between the material instantiations of higher causes while avoiding the inevitable prioritizing of the formal over the material that comes with a model of causation by concurrence.

Second, and more importantly, preserving this sense of reciprocity and unilateral action within the same model of causation avoids the degradation of the gift that inevitably comes

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 43.

through the turn to univocity and concurrence. In a footnote Milbank notes the explicit connection between “two different and apparently unrelated monisms,” and the inability to reconcile “reciprocal exchange” with the zero-sum game of causation by concurrence.<sup>45</sup> Under the model of divine *influentia* “reciprocal exchange is unilaterally given from a higher level,” i.e. gift-exchange does occur unilaterally but what is given is *the very possibility* of reciprocal gift-exchange itself. On the other hand, an “*univocalist* metaphysics and a merely *unilateralist* and impossibly purist account of the gift” can only envision reciprocal *or* unilateral exchange *but not* both. Hence, univocal metaphysics and unilateral gift-exchange are inextricably linked and their pairing inevitably results in the contamination of the gift.<sup>46</sup> I shall say more on this below, but for now I note that Milbank’s historical genealogy of the secular explicitly includes not only an accounting of heretical missteps in the field of metaphysics but also a direct link between said missteps and the disavowal of the possibility of the gift.

If we left Milbank’s genealogy of the secular here then his theology would seem to be no more than a quibble over certain historical connections between postmodern philosophy and medieval theology. But this is decidedly not the extent of his analysis, nor is it all that he thinks such analysis reveals. For at the heart of his genealogy of the secular are two seemingly irreconcilable and divergent ontologies (both, in fact, are actually theologies) that undergird two irreconcilable visions of the *polis*—one secular, the other sacred. There is either a secular ontology of violence whose ontological presuppositions allow for the positing of the political apart from theological reference, or there is a Christian ontology of peace whose metaphysics (in the good sense) allows for the reality of the gift and the political possibility of reconciliation. Hence, it remains to show how the substitutions of univocity, representation, possibilism, and

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 46, n. 66

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



concurrence, when taken together, lead irrevocably to an ontology that has at its root an original violence that colors the conditions of the possibility of the political realm.

The grave difficulty with the four pillars, according to Milbank, is that they in turn create a God in whom human beings could not put their faith. Heidegger's appraisal of the God of ontotheology is clearly being echoed here. Before the God of the nominalist-univocalist cohort, best exemplified by Duns Scotus, humanity could neither offer a prayer nor a sacrifice, could not bow down on their knees in awe. The devastating critique of postmodern philosophy—Milbank mostly has in mind here Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze—was an inevitable outcome of such disastrous theological moves. Yet such critiques do not get beyond the fundamental problem of the four pillars. They do not move beyond it, Milbank contends, because they leave the basic ontological problem that afflicted these nominalist-univocalist theologies still in place, even as they vehemently critiqued Christian theology. The problem they leave in place is an ontology that envisions all difference as ultimately irreconcilable. The reality defined by such difference is thereby subject to an interminable series of violent conflicts at both an ontological and political level. In trying to move beyond the violence done to the other in theologies that postmodern philosophers saw as characteristically ontotheological, such critiques only managed to enshrine interminable violence within the very heart of finitude.

The rise of the secular, thus, is a rise brought on by theological rather than atheistic impulses. Milbank famously opened the first chapter of his *magnum opus* with the severe declaration, "Once there was no 'secular.'"<sup>47</sup> The secular had to be "instituted or *imagined*" and this institution was more than just a subtraction story—more, in other words, than a draining away of the sacred things from the realm of the profane. The secular was a positive invention

---

<sup>47</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

that stemmed not from the fading away of religion but from, so Milbank argues, a particular set of *religious moves*, moves which we have just been describing above. The secular did not come to be because something was lost through a particularly Christian impulse to denigrate the created order in favor of “things of the Spirit,” but rather it was an intra-Christian conflict that resulted in a “completely privatized, spiritualized, and transcendentalized” version of the sacred which then led to a subsequent vision of “nature, human action and society as a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power.”<sup>48</sup> This theological move was integral in the invention of a new object for science—the “political,” posited as a “field of pure power.”<sup>49</sup> This object, according to the earliest theorists of it (Grotius, Hobbes, Spinoza), was “natural,” since human beings share this primacy of will with their creator. Hence, “self-preserving *conatus* provides the universal hermeneutic key for nature and society.”<sup>50</sup> Granting primacy to divine freedom as pure will thus produces a picture of the natural order that is in keeping with the God who created it—a presumed state of nature wherein Adam’s charge of care for the creation is recast as sovereign dominium.

Critically, however, this object called “the political” was also *artificial*. The reader will recall that Milbank placed a great deal of emphasis on the artificial in his earlier work on Vico, and that earlier argument lies behind a great deal of Milbank’s assertions in the opening chapters of *Theology and Social Theory*. Indeed, he makes the connection explicit when he writes, “The new political knowledge could rest on the material foundations of *conatus*, but from then on, the knowledge of power was simply a retracing of the paths of human construction, an analysis of

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

*factum* (the made).”<sup>51</sup> It is easy to see why the connection between the *factum* and the secular was made in the first place. What human beings have constructed under the conditions of finitude does seem to lend itself, first and foremost, to the realm of pure contingency. Perhaps not conflict *per se*, but surely the constructions of human culture and history lend themselves to a conception of the secular—a sphere of ordinary rather than sacred time, if you will. Yet, it is precisely this “obvious” connection between the secular and the *factum* that Milbank wishes to vehemently deny from the outset. It might be tempting to suppose that the realm of the made or “the instrumental” is rightly cordoned off from theological matters, but Milbank argues that this equivalence is foolhardy—like calling poetry something technological, since both are products of human work. To identify the secular with the *factum*, a theological invention had to be carried out so as to institute a new vision of what it meant to be human and a new vision of finitude.

The theological moves that make an equivalence between the *factum* and the secular possible are, Milbank argues, twofold. First, such degradation of the *factum* requires an anthropology, wherein human beings “when enjoying unrestricted, unimpeded property rights and even more when exercising the rights of a sovereignty that ‘cannot bind itself,’ come closest to the *imago dei*.”<sup>52</sup> Second, and more importantly, the abandoning of the participatory framework that grounded Aquinas’ metaphysics allows for the primary relationship between God and human beings to be seen as a “covenantal bond,” which subsequently allows for inter-human relations to become “contractual” in nature.<sup>53</sup> Milbank explicitly links both these moves to the four pillars of modern philosophy. It is only under a univocal conception of Being, one in which “there is an arena of ‘sheer’ human freedom in response to grace,” since God and creatures share

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

existence in the same manner, that creates such a vision of the *factum* as free from any real influence of or participation in God. As Milbank puts it, “*This* is the space in which there *can* be a ‘secular,’ or secular knowledge of the secular—and it is just as fictional as all other human topographies.”<sup>54</sup> In sum, it was a political *theology*, one concerned primarily with crafting a vision of *creation* but which also carried with it a theological anthropology “for which human willfulness, in certain circumstances, guarantees divine origin,” that invented the theoretical conditions that made the new science of politics possible.<sup>55</sup>

The new study of “political economy” would expand this work, for Milbank, beyond the individual will and into the very makeup of society itself. Human collaboration, rather than coming to be seen as a natural tendency towards union, was seen rather as a sort of theodicy and agonistics: theodicy, because the providence of God directs the continual conflict of the economic realm towards the greater good of humankind, thus defending God's goodness from charges of complicity in economic evils; and agonistics because what was needed was not a toning down of this interminable conflict within the political realm but rather an *embrace* of conflict via Machiavellian political *virtu*. This argument brings to completion, in a sense, the basic analysis of the object of political science. The “political” as a field of pure power now just *is* the various conflicts and collaborations of human society. The primacy of the social—*defined in an entirely secular way*—now comes to be seen as a foundational assumption of all legitimate humanistic discourses, including *theology*. Even more importantly, the ontology at the root of the new fields of political science and political economy is a vision of reality that presupposes *conflict* as original to all creation. Milbank can thus paint the entirety of secular thought as dependent upon this original or *ontological* violence for the institution of its theoretical purview.

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 26,

The early modern thinkers who institute this new space for knowledge called the “secular,” Milbank argues, commit two fatal errors, errors that will inevitably lead to the devastating critiques of postmodern philosophers. First, they allow the God of univocal being (which Milbank thinks is also the god of ontotheology) to ground their justification of the secular’s independence. Second, within their supposedly self-contained arguments with regards to the political, they presume as a foundation the self-presence of the subject based on the defunct theological anthropology of Adam’s *dominium*. The God of univocal being came under harsh scrutiny from a criticism we have already encountered, namely Heidegger’s critique of *ontotheology*. The second came under severe criticism by Derrida, among others, as grounding itself in a notion of subjectivity that was untenable.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Chauvet largely agrees with their criticisms of ontotheology and the self-presence of the Cartesian subject. He joined them in affirming that the God of ontotheology is not one in which believers can put their faith. He also joined these critics in their contention that what is most true about the human subject is not presence to self but rather a symbolic otherness—an identity not in contrast to alterity but rather *by means of alterity*. Sacramental theology and the overcoming of metaphysics, along with, to a certain extent, the critique of the subject, were said to be homologous in attitude. Chauvet thus incorporates positive aspects of the thought of philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida into his sacramental theology so as to construct the “axis of language and symbol” that undergirded his account of the Eucharist.<sup>56</sup>

Milbank shares Chauvet’s admiration for the critiques of philosophers like Heidegger, Derrida, and others. He takes the demolition of both the god of ontotheology and the self-

---

<sup>56</sup> See Chapter Two above.

presence of the subject to be necessary critiques of untenable arguments.<sup>57</sup> Where he decidedly does *not* share Chauvet's enthusiasm is on the value of such thinkers' substantive counter-claims for the theological enterprise. Milbank puts the impasse in characteristically stark terms: The ontology of difference, characteristic of these postmodern accounts, turns out to be nothing more than a mythology that is the "least self-deluded, self-description of the secular."<sup>58</sup> Since it is nothing more than a self-description of the secular, the same choice faces the theologian from the outset: Theology cannot "contest or learn from [secular 'scientific'] understanding as such, but has either to accept or deny its object."<sup>59</sup> Chauvet, so Milbank would argue, has attempted in his own way to contest the conclusions of thinkers like Heidegger and Derrida, while accepting the legitimacy of the objects of their discourse. For Milbank this is already to contaminate theology with an ontology of violence and, thus, to render it heretical. Ontologies of difference and the theology of the Cross cannot possess a "homology of attitude." The ontology of difference must be denied and countered with an ontology of peace. Theology, in order to be properly theological, must set its own course as a "metadiscourse," a discourse that explicates the conditions for the possibility of discourse, a metadiscourse that no longer has to "take account" of the findings and perspectives of secularity in order to be counted as a legitimate academic inquiry.<sup>60</sup> Thus, we now turn to Milbank's criticism of the philosophical project of overcoming metaphysics that occupied a central role for Chauvet's sacramental theology.

---

<sup>57</sup> See in particular John Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short *Summa* in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions" *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (April 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

*Heidegger Made Strange: Theology Beyond the Homology of Attitude*

We began Chapter Two by examining the ways in which Chauvet's foundational theology of sacramentality saw between itself and the Heideggerian project of overcoming metaphysics a "homology of attitude" and the implications this shared attitude had for a subsequent account of the ontological and political scandal of the Eucharist. Heidegger and Derrida (among others), with their insistence upon absence, difference, writing, and indispensability of language for thought, radically altered the ways in which a theologian could begin to think of the Eucharist. For Chauvet, their work did not pose a challenge so much as an opportunity to rescue theology from the dangers of modernity, the pinnacle of which was ontotheology. Under ontotheology, language came to be seen as nothing but a mere instrument, the gift came to be ignored in favored of market exchange, and sacramental grace, worst of all, came to be seen solely under the modality of causation.<sup>61</sup> When faced with the challenges of postmodern philosophy, a theology so imbued with these ontotheological presuppositions can only but wilt as philosophy announces the death of the god of ontotheology, who served as such theologies' foundation. In order to think properly the twofold scandal of the Eucharist, to which all theology must return, Chauvet draws on such postmodern critiques as the necessary remedy for the pastoral and theoretical challenges facing the Church today.

Not surprisingly, Milbank and Chauvet engage ontotheology quite differently. If there is a single argumentative move that sheds light on this vast difference it is that Chauvet thinks Christian theology, including Thomas Aquinas, had, prior to the postmodern turn, accepted ontotheological presuppositions as foundational for theology. Milbank flatly and trenchantly denies that this is the case, particularly for Aquinas but also for a broader current of theology that

---

<sup>61</sup> See Chapter One above.

runs up to the postmodern turn. The two thinkers agree that a theological critique of ontotheology opens out into a properly Christian vision of the universe as *sacramental*. However, Milbank's project, though utterly critical of modernity, is also an apologetic on behalf of the Christian tradition against accusations like those that Chauvet embraces. Milbank insists, in other words, that *Christian theology alone* was uniquely able to resist ontotheology before, during, and after metaphysical thinking came to its apex in the period we now call modernity. Hence, his aim in *Theology and Social Theory*, as well as his subsequent volume of collected essays *The Word Made Strange*, is to show how it is that this strand of Christian thought maintained its hold as orthodox over against ontotheology. Even more importantly, Milbank aims to show how this current of theology free from ontotheology must be recovered as a mode of thinking that can truly earn the names *post-modern* and *post-metaphysical*. The essential claims from Milbank that we shall have to get hold of are the following: (1) that the project of overcoming metaphysics as Heidegger framed it is just another ontology of violence that Christian theology must reject and (2) rather than succumbing to ontotheological presuppositions, Christian theology sustained a current of thought that was uniquely able to resist such presuppositions so long as it remained properly orthodox. I shall treat these claims in turn.

Milbank's entire engagement with ontologies of difference is meant to show that too much has been made of their critique of metaphysics. There is a great deal in their critiques that Milbank himself agrees with and, not only that, much that he believes theology should embrace. The important thing is to nuance the implications of those critiques for Christian theology, a discourse that inevitably must deal with matters beyond (*meta*) the physical.

The strategy, therefore, which the theologian should adopt, is that of showing that the critique of presence, substance, the idea, the subject, causality, thought-before-expression, and realist representation do not necessarily entail the critique



of transcendence, participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology and the Platonic good, reinterpreted by Christianity as identical with Being.<sup>62</sup>

The first series of topics we might call the purview of metaphysics under the conditions of the secular, but the latter series of topics fall under the purview of *Christian* metaphysics, where “metaphysics” no longer carries the pejorative connotation it does for Chauvet. Milbank can still recommend that metaphysics be overcome, but this overcoming will not occur in the way that it did for Heidegger and, consequently, for Chauvet, i.e. by viewing secular metaphysics as a necessary stage in the destiny of Being. Such metaphysics were a mistake and, even more importantly, the perspective that would see in metaphysics a step in a larger progression will be infected with untenable presuppositions from the very start.

Those presuppositions are that of what Milbank has been calling “ontological violence.” This, for him, is where the nihilist critique of theology which he identifies with the work of Heidegger and Derrida among others, ultimately founders. Milbank’s hermeneutic strategy, therefore, “far from just denying the nihilist critique, or leaving it altogether intact, points out an unexpected fissure traversing its blank face of refusal. This fissure is opened up precisely at the point where the nihilist critique passes over into a differential ontology, with its presupposition of transcendental violence.”<sup>63</sup> There is an ironic reversal of argumentative moves here, in that where Chauvet used Heidegger to redefine what was most real about reality for the would-be partaker of the Eucharist, so Milbank attempts a similar move by *denying* the supposed merit of Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis. His reading of the Heideggerian project thus attempts to expose “the critical non-necessity of the reading of reality as conflictual,” and, even more importantly, he points out that even Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, as an ontology of

---

<sup>62</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 297.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

difference, is “hopelessly metaphysical.”<sup>64</sup> The new vision of that which is most original to reality is no longer conflict, violence, or force. Rather, “an alternative possibility of reading reality as of itself peaceful is gradually opened to view, and the notions of transcendence, participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology and the Platonic Good will be shown to belong inextricably to this reading.”<sup>65</sup> Milbank will thus partially affirm “the postmodern reduction of substance to transition” (recall Heidegger’s notion of Being as “unconcealment,” explained in Chapter One) but will then radically question “the reading of transition as conflict.”<sup>66</sup>

Milbank begins by suggesting that Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology in favor of the “irreducible questionableness of the relation of beings to Being” presents a problem. The problem is that this particular reading of the ontological difference is not able to secure for itself the privileged status that Heidegger seems to suggest it possesses by default.<sup>67</sup> In other words, the choice to read the ontological difference in the Heideggerian way seems just as much a positive choice as to read the difference in another way, regardless of how deleterious to thinking the truth of Being such an alternative might appear to Heidegger. An alternative reading of the ontological difference, Milbank contends, is not even undermined by Heidegger’s reading of *Dasein* as defined, existentially, by its historicity, mortality, linguistic nature. It seems “the necessity for commitment to some historical tradition, to some mode of linguistic ordering, suggests rather that we must always see our preferred finite stance, which otherwise would be sheerly arbitrary, as a particularly privileged key to Being itself.”<sup>68</sup> In short, Milbank reads the early Heidegger in a “meta-critical” way to show that Heidegger has already given an “*answer to*

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 300.

the question of Being which is as arbitrary, and as metaphysical, as any other cultural or philosophical reply.”<sup>69</sup>

The same applies to the later Heidegger. Indeed, Milbank reads Heidegger’s abandonment of the hermeneutical circle in favor of the turn to language as an attempt to alleviate some of the vulnerability of his original account. Here, however, we come to the vital aspect of Heidegger’s work that Milbank sees as joining the project of overcoming metaphysics with ontological violence. The earlier Heidegger thought that *Dasein*’s “care” was the “unique site of the opening of Being,” but now this is displaced in favor of the sheer happening of Being in and through our linguistic belonging together. Heidegger thus “pursues the near-impossible task of occupying the vantage point of the repetition of Being itself, its endless happenings as the ‘difference’ of various historical epochs.”<sup>70</sup> Hence, what comes to be central, not only to understanding the essence of *Dasein* but also of encountering the truth of Being in language, is an attempt to understand “what lets Being be *in* this difference.”<sup>71</sup> What matters is not so much the happening of Being but the happening of Being *as difference*. Ultimately, for Milbank, this means that difference becomes “the sole ‘transcendental,’” such that our *a priori* picture of the world assumes “that a radical heterogeneity, incompatibility, non-hierarchy and arbitrariness pertain amongst every knowable thing.”<sup>72</sup> This is just another way of saying, as Heidegger often does, that our experience of everyday, ontic phenomena *conceals* the appearance of Being. Here Milbank pounces:

There is therefore a kind of primordial violence at work here, which can only be countered by a mode of interpretation which is itself a ‘doing violence’ (*gewaltsamkeit*), and which follows the opposite course from the ‘falling tendency

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 301-302.

of Being and of customary understanding'...Heidegger is, of course, right to insist that the ontological difference can never be held up for our inspection: if beings are entirely *constituted* by their relationship to Being, then this is not a relationship we can survey, and Being remains forever absent, forever concealed behind its presentation in the temporal series of beings. However, to give this concealment the overtones of dissimulation, of violence, of a necessary suppression, is an entirely different matter.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, the account of reality that Heidegger seems to embrace in his turn to difference is one that views reality itself as *agonistic*. At the very root of Being itself is a deep *conflict*, hence Milbank's term, "ontological violence."

Milbank argues that the situation does not have to be this way. We do not *have* to read difference as conflict, and the decision to do so is ultimately *arbitrary*, not logically or existentially *necessary*. More importantly, Milbank claims that it is not difficult to see a clear link in our political history from ontologies of violence to political theories that endorse the use of force to settle interminable conflict. Hobbes is perhaps the most well known example of this. Without a sovereign power to compel human beings into peaceful collaboration through fear of punishment humankind would exist forever in the state of nature, constantly at war with one another, a "nasty, brutish, and short" existence.<sup>74</sup> An account like this can only be taken as legitimate if it is first grounded in a vision of reality as itself interminable conflict. Hence, combating ontological violence is both a philosophical and a political work.

As I have already said, there can be no "homology of attitude" between the project of overcoming metaphysics and Christian theology. We might say that even overcoming metaphysics must be "overcome" by re-establishing theology's place of authority as a metadiscourse, a discourse *beyond* the limitations and standards of a philosophy pre-determined

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1994), 76.

by ontological violence. The counter-ontology that asserts its legitimacy beyond the conditions of ontological violence is referred to by Milbank simply as theology. Hence, as the title of one of his seminal essays says, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics.”<sup>75</sup> Milbank attempts to establish the titular thesis via a critical dialogue with French phenomenologist (and arguably a theologian in his own right), Jean-Luc Marion.

Milbank finds that this position doesn’t go far enough, particularly, and this is where a comparison to Chauvet is quite telling, with regard to Marion’s reading of Aquinas. Indeed, where Chauvet read Aquinas as inadvertently playing into the hands of ontotheology, Milbank reads Aquinas as the very solution to ontotheology’s ills. Marion notably strikes up a conciliatory tone in the preface to the English edition of *God Without Being* with regards to his reading of Aquinas. For in saying that God must be without or beyond Being, Marion seems to run roughshod over one of Aquinas’ central theses—namely, that God is pure *esse*. Marion explicitly denies this and argues that Aquinas himself saw the difference between God’s pure *esse* and the Being of creation, or the *ens commune*. Milbank thus argues that Marion was right to take seriously “Heidegger’s diagnosis of modernity as the consummation of metaphysics which fulfills the will-to-know objects as the will-to-power over nature, including human beings.”<sup>76</sup> He explicitly links this recognition to ontotheology since it follows that “metaphysics has a fundamental *onto-theological* constitution, such that the highest being, or first cause, is identified as a perfect instance of what is fundamentally knowable, namely a ‘being.’”<sup>77</sup> But Milbank thinks that Marion shies away from the “obvious inference” that follows from this diagnosis of modernity’s ills. In particular, Milbank holds that Marion shies away from the

---

<sup>75</sup> Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, 36.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

superior insights of Thomas Aquinas in that “if Christian theology prior to Scotus avoided onto-theology (metaphysics), then this was because it was able to elucidate the hidden manifestness of God in terms of the hidden manifestness of Being in beings.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, it was the power of *analogy* that allowed the Christian tradition to see that the hidden manifestness of Being in beings was only comprehensible in so far as Being *participated* as the *ens commune* in the pure *esse* of the Triune God as its source. Far from covering over the ontological difference between Being and beings, Christian theology (prior to Scotus, of course) managed to take stock of this difference with rigor.

In what sense then can *only* theology overcome metaphysics? Here we come upon one of Milbank’s most controversial claims, both as an interpreter of Thomas Aquinas and as a theological proposition, namely, that theology *evacuates* metaphysics. By “evacuates” Milbank means that theology enters into the conversation about philosophy’s supposed proper object and takes that object away such that nothing remains “inside” philosophy’s purview, so to speak. In other words, theology, if conceived of properly, abolishes the supposed independence of metaphysics. Nothing remains for metaphysics to analyze or to claim as subject to its standards of inquiry alone. Metaphysics is emptied, hence, “evacuated.”

How does Milbank establish this thesis? Tellingly for our comparison, he does so primarily through the work of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>79</sup> I want to briefly rehearse this reading here for

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>79</sup> Milbank does not explicitly couch this interpretation as a response to any interlocutor in particular, but both Hemming and DeHart have rightly noted that this reading of Aquinas is a response to the trenchant critique by Nicholas Lash of Milbank’s earlier interpretations of the doctor. For a lucid and, frankly, dramatic narration of this controversy see Paul DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2011), 37-49. Much like Horan’s reading of Milbank on Scotus, DeHart and Hemming have leveled devastating critiques on Milbank as an interpreter of Aquinas, not to mention Nicholas Lash’s aforementioned essay on the subject that opens: “In this short paper, I am going to be rude about John Milbank.” I take

several reasons. The first is that it reveals the significance that interpreting Aquinas' theological-philosophical framework has on both Chauvet's and Milbank's later accounts of the Eucharist. Second, it shows the vast importance of the break between Chauvet and Milbank for a theological ontology—an account of the real as real that is situated in theological rather than merely philosophical presuppositions. Both thinkers share this argumentative structure but reach dramatically opposed conclusions. Finally, it is vital to retell Milbank's initial read of Thomas' system because it establishes the framework through which Milbank will read the importance of the Incarnation for both the ontological and political scandals of the Eucharist.

In the “most usual” interpretation, Aquinas is often thought of as the champion for the value of philosophy as an independent inquiry into the truths of the world, while maintaining that the proper purview of theology was rational reflection on and through revelation.<sup>80</sup> Philosophy could not learn the truth of revelation on its own—i.e., by the power of reason alone—but it could, so Aquinas argued, lead one up to the truth of God's existence as creator of the world.<sup>81</sup> Aquinas seems, based on a relatively simple attempt at exegesis, to advocate just as strongly for the independence of philosophy as Scotus, despite Milbank's harangue of the latter. Yet, Milbank has little trust in this “exegesis” and, instead, offers an “interpretation” of Aquinas that

---

the import of the following section to be much the same as my retelling of Milbank on Scotus—one must understand how Milbank uses Thomas to accomplish his theoretical aims. Hence, my positive telling of Milbank's interpretation of Aquinas should not be seen as an uncritical endorsing of his reading. See DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*; Lawrence Paul Hemming, “*Quod Impossible Est!* Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Lawrence Paul Hemming (London: Routledge, 2000) 76-98; and Nicholas Lash, “Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Us?: Questions on Milbank's Aquinas” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (1999): 433-44.

<sup>80</sup> John Milbank & Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 19. This is quite the simplification by Milbank of a very complex question for interpreters of Aquinas. For an introduction to this interpretive problem see Mark D. Jordan, “Theology and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232-51.

<sup>81</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2.

will attempt to show this reading of the Thomist system as false.<sup>82</sup> Milbank's alternative reading of Aquinas attempts to show just the opposite, namely, that Aquinas grants philosophy *no* independence as a science from the discourse of revealed theology, even that revealed theology *evacuates* metaphysics of any claim to truth without reference to the truth of theology.

Milbank's strong reading of Aquinas begins with the metaphysical distinction I've already mentioned above. The proper object of metaphysics as a science is not the pure act of Being that God just is but rather the *ens commune*, or the common finite being that creatures share. Now, perhaps to offer a helpful contrast to what is about to come, several rival Cambridge theologians, most notably Nicolas Lash, held that what ontology and metaphysics now must mean, given Aquinas's framework, is a sort of grammar that would keep theological predication from beginning in a state of absolute non-sense.<sup>83</sup> Ontology, from this perspective, is something like the rules of what it means to make sense when speaking in the finite plane and of finite things.<sup>84</sup> Milbank rejects this perspective for reasons we have already articulated above. Any sort of "grammar," he argues, is just another prior schematization that usurps the true authority of theology to narrate both the conditions of finite meaning-making and the makeup of the social as such. To consent to such an arrangement is to cede authority to a neutral, univocal ontology from the outset.

---

<sup>82</sup> Milbank & Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 20.

<sup>83</sup> Milbank has in mind, here, the work of Lash but also of David Burrell. See most notably, Nicholas Lash "Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy" in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 95-119; David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>84</sup> Lash quotes Peter Geach in this regard, "Certain concepts, like *existence* and *truth* and *thing* and *property*, are used, and cannot but be used, in all rational discourse whatsoever; and ontology is an attempt to scrutinize our use of them." Peter Geach, "Symposium: On What There is," in *Freedom, Language, and Reality*, Aristotle Society Supplementary Volume 25 (London: Harrison, 1951), 134; quoted by Lash in "Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy?" 434.



Hence, Thomas must mean something different. Milbank, thus, points out that creatures share the *ens commune* because it is “entirely secondary and created.”<sup>85</sup> It does not, in other words, have to do with the natures and essences of creatures nor does it concern the causes of Being or the causes of creatures since those cannot adhere in matter. When this newly restricted metaphysics seeks to inquire, as any science would, into the cause of its object, however, it is left bereft of resources to answer this question apart from the higher science of *sacra doctrina* as Aquinas himself states in the opening question of the *Summa Theologica*. To make matters even more difficult, Milbank’s Aquinas holds that all sciences, apart from *sacra doctrina*, are limited solely to argumentation through genus and species. Revealed theology, however, is “transgeneric,” in that it transcends the typical categories of philosophical argumentation. Not only does it do this, however, it *subsumes* them under itself, in that it uniquely can “judge the conclusions of all subordinate sciences.”<sup>86</sup> It occupies this “transgeneric” place of authority precisely because its object is beyond the *ens commune*, which is the purview of all other sciences. The object of the science of *sacra doctrina* is the divine *esse*, itself the ultimate “transgeneric,” that, through its transcending of typical categories of finitude, “can in principle further illuminate being in all its instantiations.”<sup>87</sup>

Put a bit more plainly, Milbank seems to read Aquinas as saying that there is no way of comprehending finite being without reference to that in which being participates, that through which it is. Our knowledge of finitude, gained solely as participants in the infinite Being of God, requires “an inchoate presupposition of the divine archetype of being” in order to get off the

---

<sup>85</sup> Milbank & Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 25.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

ground in the first place.<sup>88</sup> Hence, metaphysics possesses in itself the tendency to “evacuate” itself, almost as a structure of its own possibility as a science. This is not something theology imposes upon metaphysics by fiat. Rather, metaphysics functions as a discourse only by being first grasped by the infinite as the horizon for the comprehension of finitude, and knowledge of the infinite, as Aquinas would surely agree, requires *divine initiative*, since knowledge of the infinite is fundamentally a *revealed* knowledge. Metaphysics thus collapses in on itself, as it is incapable of getting its project going without recourse to something gained only through submission to theology, and, even once this is given, metaphysics can only operate properly by reference to a presupposition that undermines its independence from theology. To bring things back to Chauvet, the insistence that the theology of the Cross is homologous in attitude with overcoming metaphysics is to turn the theology of the Cross into something chimerical, Milbank would argue. To say that theology shares an attitude with a particular metaphysical project, even as *anti*-metaphysical as Heidegger’s project is, would be nonsensical for Milbank. There is no legitimate object for the project of overcoming metaphysics to claim that is not always already under theology’s purview to the extent that the former dissolves into the latter. Milbank’s project thus orients itself in a way utterly opposed to Chauvet’s initial vision for the relationship between theology and philosophy.

### *Milbank on Language*

What remains, therefore, is to apply Milbank’s conception of the relationship between theology and philosophy to the vital categories of language and gift so as to lay the foundation for Milbank’s later use of these categories in his theology of the Eucharist. We saw above the

---

<sup>88</sup> DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*, 65.

way in which Chauvet's homology of attitude between the project of overcoming metaphysics and Chauvet's fundamental theology of sacramentality stemmed from a particular view of language and symbol. We also saw the way such homology of attitude helped Chauvet to link the particular gift-giving relation between God and human beings as communicating sacramental grace to the more general anthropological principle of symbolic exchange. I turn now, therefore, to Milbank's unique account of language and the gift, with an eye both to the ways in which such novelties will shape Milbank's account of the Eucharist but also to the way in which such conceptions of language and gift differ strikingly from those we have already seen in Chauvet.

The reader will recall from Chapter One that postmodern critiques of theology centered on the linguistic nature of the human being. Heidegger's turn to language as the house of Being and Derrida's turn to *writing* as the inescapable mediation at the heart of all human meaning posed urgent questions with regards to fundamental claims of theology. Chauvet, the reader will also recall, saw these critiques as a grand opportunity for Christian theology to appropriate these critiques as unique resources for theology's aid. If all truth is *written* truth, i.e. signs ever supplemented by embodied mediation that guards any access to the original "presence" behind them, then embracing that is the key not only to remaining relevant in a postmodern world but also to understanding the very truth of the Gospel. Christian theology, it turns out, does not collapse but thrive once it embraces the radically linguistic nature of human meaning-making.

Milbank's account of language bears a striking similarity to Chauvet's, and the two can be read as advocating the same basic understanding of the importance of language for Christian theology. In short, both believe, as Milbank puts it, that "Christianity can become 'internally' postmodern in a way that may not be possible for every religion or ideology."<sup>89</sup> Milbank might

---

<sup>89</sup> John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," 339.

agree with Chauvet, in other words, that there is a deep affinity between orthodoxy and the linguistic turn in philosophy. His thesis is not that these projects share an attitude but rather that the supposedly novel conclusions to which poststructuralists arrive through language were actually already to be found in currents of thought within Christian orthodoxy: “the post-modern embracing of a radical linguisticity, far from being a ‘problem’ for traditional Christianity, has always been secretly promoted by it.”<sup>90</sup> Much like the evacuation of metaphysics, Milbank intends to show that the linguistic turn experiences something like an analogous evacuation—when properly seen in the light of theology, the linguistic turn has very little to say that is not, in the end, something already proffered by theology and rightly under its purview.

Securing the legitimacy of the claim that Christian orthodoxy secretly promoted the linguistic turn since the Church Fathers requires, just as for Milbank’s Aquinas, subtle “interpretation” rather than full-bore exegesis. Milbank largely relies on reading certain argumentative moves as aligning with a later spirit of thought that would guide the linguistic turn to its apex. Christian thought moves, over a time, from “a ‘rationalist’ to a more and more ‘mystical’ conception of language,” and these maneuvers “accompany the first ‘linguistic turn’ in modern thought.” For example, while the early Church Fathers seem to have embraced a purely instrumental view of the nature of language, Milbank notes that they used such a conception of language as a rebuff to pagan conceptions of language, which saw language as having divine rather than human origins. The Church Fathers may have mistakenly read language as instrumental, Milbank says, but they *did* succeed in reading language as a properly human phenomenon, a vital part of the *factum* to which, as we have already seen, Vico would devote considerable attention.

---

<sup>90</sup> Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, 85.

Milbank's short encyclopedia of this theological-linguistic turn runs from thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa to Augustine, Vico to Berkeley, Hamann to Herder, showing the ways in which Christian thought slowly inched closer and closer to an account of language as constitutive for thought and a disintegration of the *res/signum* distinction. Yet, even in its earliest beginnings, these theologians were haunted by the possibility of radical skepticism, in that their initial aim was to assert the human origin of language. For the motivation behind giving language a divine rather than human origin was the accompanying boon of a secure foundation for theological claims. If all language, at its root, was nothing other than human creation, then it could be argued (Hobbes, yet again, is Milbank's favorite example of this) that religious language is nothing more than a catachresis of root words that express only the most basic sensory phenomena. Through the exponential increase of figures of speech, the purely sensory object of those root words is forgotten and spiritual excesses accrue that have no real grounding in language. One way to combat this, therefore, was to suppose that God gave to Adam language, thus securing the legitimacy of those spiritual excesses in language that a purely materialist perspective would see as defections.

Yet, Milbank begs us consider the merits of an alternative and, indeed, "impossible reflection," namely, "is it somehow the case that polysemy, irreducible semiotic difference, the necessity of language for thought, which carry such "relativizing implications, are *themselves* relative to a particular, ultimately religious culture?"<sup>91</sup> Milbank balks at claiming this fully—these currents of thought are objective on their own, apart from Christian culture. But Milbank does note, vitally, that these cultural realities that now define our current moment as postmodern are not "accepted in a vacuum." In other words, Christian thought irrevocably shaped the cultural

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 110.

milieu in which the linguistic turn came to be possible in the first place. Here Chauvet and Milbank strike, yet again, a seemingly harmonious accord: Christian thought and the turn to language do, in fact, travel along adjacent if not “homologous” trajectories.

Yet, Milbank’s conciliatory tone does not last for long. For what this turn to language within theology reveals is a similarity to structuralism: “Just as, for structuralists, a novel is ultimately ‘about’ its self-constitution as a novel, so theology has only ever really been ‘about’ its own possibility as theology, as ‘divine language.’”<sup>92</sup> The turn to language in theology, thus, is not an attempt to correlate questions *unique* to culture with theological answers. Rather, there is something *inherent to theology* that gives rise to these questions. “[I]f it is true that Trinitarian thought has intermittently found it possible to think the truth of polysemy and the original ‘totemic’ apprehension of being, then this is only because it is also a ‘metasemiotic’ concerned to think the possibility of polysemy, and the real character of differential substitution.”<sup>93</sup> Christian tradition reveals that far from begrudgingly admitting the validity of the suspicion of a metaphysics of substance, Trinitarian thought as a “metaphysics/metasemiotics of relation” forces theology to confront the necessity of language for thought and the differential flux inherent in an ontology oriented around a collapse of the distinction between sign and thing.<sup>94</sup>

The seeming adjacency, therefore, between Trinitarian thought and postmodern semiotics turn out to be the very terms of a conflict, not a homology. Rather than reading their side-by-side trajectories as complementary, Milbank reads them as indicating a fundamental *separation* between the terms upon which those trajectories travel. Their similarity is undeniable in that “Christian theology has been able, like skeptical postmodernism, to think unlimited semiosis,”

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

but their ultimate conflict lies at the level of meta-semiosis, or the conditions that make semiosis possible in the first place. As we saw above with regards to ontological violence, postmodern thought sees unlimited semiosis “in terms of a necessary suppression, betrayal, or subversion” inherent in the presence of “signified absence.”<sup>95</sup> Christian thought, as we have seen, must, out of faithfulness to its own view of reality, flatly deny such a vision of semiosis.

For theology, and theology alone, difference remains real difference since it is not subordinate to immanent univocal process or the fate of a necessary suppression. Instead, the very possibility of substitutive transference is here held to be a peaceful affirmation of the other, consummated in a transcendent infinity. And the seeming arbitrariness of the ‘next step’ in this process of referral is held to be governed by an aesthetic rule which transcends the polarity of the same-and-determined over against the contingent-and-heterogeneous. Otherwise both chance and determination, or *difference* hypostasized, still present us with the antique aspect of substance, our always ‘understood’ futility.<sup>96</sup>

Theology alone is able to think the social as a realm in which true harmony is possible because it brings to the table (no pun intended) ontological presuppositions that do not rule out such unity-in-difference from the start. The same principle applies to semiosis, wherein theology alone is able to embrace the infinite play of signifiers, the dissemination of sense, and the deferral of the sign without giving away all possibility of meaning or transcendence. On this, both Chauvet and Milbank are in agreement.

Yet, a vital contrast has emerged here between Milbank and Chauvet. For Chauvet, the decision to embrace the alterity and absence of postmodern semiosis was rooted in what he saw as an inability to think adequately the theological implications of the Cross. Starting theology at the Pasch of Christ, with the divine life made actual in a human life subject to death, revealed the fundamental homology between postmodern theories of radical linguisticity and the Christian attempt to think the implications of Jesus’ cry of dereliction. God’s presence, as both postmodern

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

semiosis and a theology of the Cross would tell us, must be experienced as the presence of absence. In stark contrast to this, Milbank holds that the point of origin for Christian thought must be the primordially creative *perichoresis* that is the divine *esse*, in which all being participates and from which is derived the possibility of all truth.<sup>97</sup> Postmodern theories of language are no threat to Christian thought because Christian thought, uniquely, is able to think an ontology of difference that is not subject to interminable conflict and inscrutable absence. Instead, the deferral of the sign into an infinite play that is itself transcendent is precisely what one should *expect* from a world that only exists by participating in the divine life that is itself the infinite deflection of desire, as Rowan Williams has put it.<sup>98</sup> Postmodern theories of language, in other words, have only discovered that which Christian orthodoxy has already (though, in a seemingly secret sense) promoted through its first principles. Milbank and Chauvet both see Christianity as uniquely able to cope with the dramatic epistemic challenges of postmodernity, but only Milbank believes Christianity is able to think beyond them.

### *Milbank on Gift*

At this point, I might characterize the portion of Milbank's position that I have thus far presented as follows: Secular politics are based in a problematic ontology that sees conflict as ontologically interminable and, thus, only manageable by force. This ontology also extends into accounts of language that would see the radically linguistic nature of human existence not as something that constitutes the subject but rather as something that renders the subject entirely

---

<sup>97</sup> The Eucharist will play a vital role in securing this latter point. More on that in Chapter Five below.

<sup>98</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology and Trinitarian Discourse," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 115-135.



diffuse. Categories like the subject, meaning, or truth can subsequently only be thought in reference to the same interminable flux of conflict through which “the political” itself was conceived. Hence, postmodern theories of language also emphasize interminable semiotic conflict, but these same theories see the end result not as a sovereign management of force but rather as an inherent violence in all attempts at meaning making. Rather than granting such presuppositions from the start, the task of theology, and a task theology must undertake in order to gain its independence from such discourses, is to reject the legitimacy of this ontological outlook from the outset. Language and the political must be rethought in terms of participation and analogy such that the flux and difference that postmodern thought has rightly brought to the forefront are not conceived of as necessarily and absolutely violent, thereby rendering a theology of Creation, Incarnation, or Resurrection invalid before it can even be proffered. In short, a theological ontology of peace rather than a secular ontology of violence would not only scandalize secular conceptions of the political but also postmodern accounts of radical semiosis.

Milbank now adds a third object to the purview of theology, just as Chauvet did, by bringing forward the problem of the gift. As we will see below, the debate surrounding the possibility of gift is also beset by the same ontological and political morass as ontology and language were. The gift stands as both a way of viewing reality—reality as *gift* rather than as *given*—and as a way of transforming politics—an economics based in gift-exchange over an economics based in accumulation of capital, for example. Hence, Milbank will attempt a similar maneuver with regards to the problematic of gift as he has thus far with his genealogy of the secular and his riposte to postmodern accounts of language—namely, to show how Christian theology is able uniquely to think the problematic of the gift without its resting in the irresolution it seems to entail. Christian theology can not only think the aporia of the gift, but also think

beyond it. Christian theology, therefore, can offer a “purified” gift-exchange that allows for gift to once again come to the fore as an ontological and political category. Ultimately, this will render possible a reading of the Eucharist as both an ontological and political scandal (more on this in Chapter Five).

The reader will recall from Chapter One that the gift came to serve as a problematic for postmodern thought precisely because of the remarkable confluence between language, being, and the gift. This confluence was predominantly located around the notion of “the present” or “presence” which occupied the thought of Heidegger and Derrida to a great extent. Heidegger’s turn to language as that through which Being gives its truth to beings revealed the fundamental connection for later postmodern thought of language and donation (*es gibt*). The present moment turns out to be, if we would but turn our attention back to the “nearest of the nearest,” the place in which Being’s truth *presents* itself to us as gift.

Derrida, the reader will also recall, challenged the very coherence of gift-giving from a phenomenological perspective. The gift was the impossible, and it was the impossible precisely because the gift *could not appear*. Once the receiver recognized the gift as a gift, the purely disinterested nature of its reception was canceled. They now owed a debt to the giver. More importantly, this aporia imbued the intentions of the giver as well. Unless the giver was entirely disinterested and gave without reserve, then the gift was only a covert form of a contract. The gift, therefore, came to function as a site of unmeaning upon which all of our subsequent meaning was generated. The gift becomes, for Derrida, something like a Kantian limit on our knowledge—a limit that even in being thought as limit places us beyond the limit. The gift cannot appear as gift, but the structure of the gift as impossible is analogous to the structure of Being as *differance* or *arche-writing*. In its very attempt to show itself it is covered over or

canceled, just as the present moment is irretrievably lost to the past as soon as it appears. The impossibility of the gift, therefore, is essential to Derrida's deconstructive enterprise.<sup>99</sup>

We have already seen the reasons why such ontologies of difference are unsatisfactory for Milbank, and so his task at present will be to show how a Christian ontology alone can recover gift-exchange in the here and now as more than just an impossibility. For if the only gift actually given, as Derrida suggests, is the passage of time, then despite his constant appeals to infinite hospitality the only thing that can be given is *nothing*, since Being as present ultimately *is not*.<sup>100</sup> Hence, Milbank can call Derrida's account of the gift a "nihilistic agape."<sup>101</sup> Derrida might advocate for an infinite charity towards the Other, but, in the end, if nothing can be given to the other and no giver with a definitive intent to give can appear without eradicating the gift, then the ethical command to hospitality turns out to be based in *nothing*. Hence, Milbank wants to move beyond the quest for a "pure gift" defined by absolute disinterest or a unilateral gift that is entirely self-sacrificial.

Milbank wants to find instead a way to purify *gift-exchange*, not the gift itself, since purified gift-exchange "and *not* 'pure gift' is what Christian *agape* claims to be."<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, "purified gift-exchange, unlike the pure gift, remains within the bounds of the ontological, which is to say the metaphysical."<sup>103</sup> Metaphysical here is used in the good sense, in an appropriately Christian sense, which is to say a metaphysics entirely dependent upon the *sacra doctrina* of theology as its foundation. Like Chauvet, therefore, Milbank focuses on the process of exchange, not the abstract nature of the gift itself, but unlike Chauvet, Milbank explicitly seeks to recover

---

<sup>99</sup> See Chapter One above.

<sup>100</sup> John Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to Any Future Trinitarian Metaphysic" in *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 131.

<sup>101</sup> Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?" 133.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

the nature of gift in and through his recovery of a purified form of exchange. As we saw with metaphysics and semiosis above, the ontological challenges of the gift will not be answered by Christianity if it couches itself as a rival to an otherwise legitimate discourse. Rather, Christian theology “utterly appropriates to itself the ontological task” in its reclamation of the gift.<sup>104</sup> This will mean, tellingly, ridding gift-exchange of its “archaic *agonistic* elements.”<sup>105</sup> An account of purified gift-exchange is much like a Christian account of the political or of language—such an account relies upon a counter-ontology that expressly denies the ontological violence that will otherwise rule the day.

Milbank begins his recovery of gift-exchange by establishing the two unique qualities that distinguish the gift from the bare fulfillment of a contract. They are *delay* and *non-identical repetition*.<sup>106</sup> Despite their seemingly abstract nature, both of these aspects are relatively intuitive. First, a gift seems to require a delay of some kind, particularly in the return-gift. If my wife and I make dinner for a friend, for example, the last thing we want is a return-gift without delay, for “to have people back to dinner the very same night implies a *lack* of gratitude, a desire to discharge a *debt* as soon as possible.”<sup>107</sup> A gift also seems to require that the return-gift not be the same thing, i.e. that the gift is repeated but not identically—thus, non-identical repetition. The return-gift must not be the same thing; otherwise a clear insult is implied. The gift is not only canceled but seemingly denigrated if, for example, the friend invited for dinner invites the givers for dinner the next night and begrudgingly cooks the very same dish. There is thus implied in gift-exchange a “*logos* or measure of a necessary *delay* (whose term is indeterminate, though

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>106</sup> Milbank borrows these from one of his critical interlocutors on the gift, Pierre Bourdieu, found in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 98-111.

<sup>107</sup> Milbank, “Can a Gift be Given?” 125.

not infinite) and of *non-identical repetition* between gift and counter-gift.”<sup>108</sup> The gift is given back after a time and according to the logic of “non-exact *mimesis*” wherein the receiver performs a “more genuinely exact” mimicry of the first gesture (more genuinely exact on account of its *inexactitude*) in “unpredictably different circumstances, at unpredictable times and to unpredictably various recipients.”<sup>109</sup> If Milbank is to purify gift-exchange it will be through a recovery of authentic delay and non-identical repetition.

The task before Milbank, therefore, is to detail how it is that Christian agape accomplishes purified gift-exchange by displaying both authentic delay and non-identical repetition, rather than being a seemingly Pharisaic covering over of contractual obligation. Defending agape against the unilateral gift that Derrida (rightly) called impossible, means showing the ways in which agapic gift-exchange differs from the supposedly “pure” gift. This means explicating just what it is about purified gift-exchange—complete with its delay and non-identical repetition—that would set it apart from the absolute and disinterested gift of self-sacrifice. Milbank believes that there are two distinct aspects of purified gift-exchange that secures its legitimacy. True gift-giving, Milbank contends, involves, first, a certain “suitability,” and, second, “self-expression in generosity.” The presence of these characteristics in proper gift-exchange, governed by delay and non-identical repetition, saves the gift by establishing the possibility of true gift-exchange in Christian agape.

In establishing the necessity for these two aspects of the gift—suitability and self-expression in generosity—a familiar opponent returns for Milbank, namely, Jean-Luc Marion. Marion’s arguments on the gift, found in *God Without Being* and elsewhere, are the foils through which Milbank establishes the need for the two aspects of gift-exchange already mentioned. As

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

with his attempt to think God beyond or without Being in response to the work of Heidegger, Marion attempts a similar rescue of the gift in response to the critiques of Derrida. What Marion pushed most forcefully in *God Without Being* was that for the gift to remain a gift the “distance” between the other and the one who receives the other must not be transgressed.<sup>110</sup> One could not, obviously, claim ownership over the other and still expect the legitimacy of a gift given by the other to endure. The distance between giver and receiver has collapsed in this case and the gift is thus obliterated along with it. Marion, importantly, thus links the gift with the passage of time. For the gift, like time, can only be received, so to speak, in its passing.

Yet, Milbank worries that despite Marion’s explicit linking of temporality, the gift, and the Eucharist, the same sort of abyss that renders Derrida’s account of the gift nihilistic will also consume Marion’s. His worry, so it seems, is that a gift cannot be a gift unless something is actually given. More importantly, a gift cannot be a gift unless it is received as such. While he speaks approvingly of Marion’s emphasis on distance, Milbank is adamant that limiting the gift simply to distance itself means that the gift will never be received and that the gift of distance alone is no gift at all. Hence, Marion has seemingly fallen into the traps of the unilateral gift already described above. If the gift can never arrive or be received, since an empty distance is all the gift actually is, then such a gift seems to cancel itself even in attempting to protect its status as gift. This shows that “reciprocity is as much a condition for the gift as gift is for reciprocity.”

By “suitability” I believe Milbank is linking his thought on the gift explicitly to some of his earlier work on Aquinas already discussed above. In particular, the suitability of the gift seems to fit well with the notion that judgment of truth is just as much a measure of accuracy as it is of the aesthetic *fittingness* of a proposition. That is, given the fact that we have our being

---

<sup>110</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 104.

only by participating in the plenitude of the life of the Triune God, the true gift will not only display conformity with the principle of delay and non-identical repetition but, even in so doing, will display a suitability to the context, a proper and aesthetically pleasing “fit” within the intersubjective context that makes the gift possible in the first place. We need, in other words, far more than just the bare distance between subject and Other that Marion stresses in his unilateral conception of the pure gift. Rather, we need the intersubjective reciprocity that renders things into gifts based on their suitability, which means that true gift exchange must have an aesthetic component to it. In this case, however, the aesthetic judgment is not one of conformity with the beauty of the *perichoresis* but rather with the unique context of human relationships within which the gift is given in the first place. This is why Milbank is not shy about saying that gift-exchange is not entirely devoid of self-interest. The suitability of gift exchange is truly *intersubjective* and *equilateral* meaning there is a pleasing quality of the gift for both the one who gives and the one who receives. In short, the ontological primacy of relationality, derived from the Trinitarian thought central to the counter-ontology of Christian orthodoxy, reveals that the true gift is suitable to the situation in which it is given and pleasing to both parties. Hence, the unilateral and disinterested gift is further eschewed.

The latter aspect, of equilateral rather than unilateral giving, makes way for a defense of the second aspect of agape that Milbank finds critical to establishing the legitimacy of the gift. Self-expression in gratitude was, for Marion, something that violated the neutrality and distance between subject and other that the gift was meant to preserve. The two participating in the exchange cannot give themselves to each other, as even Chauvet would have it, because this would violate the critical distance that preserves the presence of the other as Other. Yet, under Milbank’s participatory ontology, the matter becomes more complicated, precisely because there

just is no neutral space that could separate the gift of God from the creatures to which God seeks to give it. What sort of space would that be, if all things only have their Being as beings by participating in the overflow of the divine *esse*? Hence, it must not only be the case that there is a suitable *content* to the gift but also that the true gift—the gift of God that might also make possible our gift-giving to one another—must involve some form of transformation of the giver and receiver. There must be some collapse of the distance between giver and receiver, some sense in which the gift is not *only* distance, but is rather an encounter with a gift that contains the *self-expression* of the giver and whose reception is also the *self-expression* of the receiver.

The ground Milbank is hoping to gain in establishing these two unique aspects of true gift-exchange is the deep alignment between an ontology of Creation and Incarnation with the logic of gift-exchange. In short, a deep examination of true gift-exchange *requires* a certain way of understanding the basic conditions of Being, a certain vision of created reality as *gift* that makes possible gift-exchange amongst creatures. Yet, in the same way, it is only by encountering one another in and through gift-exchange that we come to see that gift is a transcendental convertible with Being. In other words, the experience of purified gift-exchange bolsters an account of finite reality as created, and vice versa. Thus, the need for a truly Christian ontology as a critical counter to the ontological violence of secularity is further confirmed in and supported by a Christian account of gift-exchange as *agape*. Furthermore, sacramentality as the basic hermeneutic principle of how Christians understand the world is established by this very ontology of gift. For without it, the world collapses, yet again, into the status of a mere given. Whereas a sacramental vision of the world, grounded in a theology that is unapologetically philosophical in that it is unapologetically theological, restores to the world its status as a sign that participates in that which it signifies.



### *Conclusion: A Trinitarian Ontology*

What has emerged from our tracing of the place of gift and language is the need for an ontology and a polity that is inherently *Trinitarian*. In this way, Chauvet and Milbank share a central tendency but carry out such a tendency in divergent ways. Their tendency is to understand the constitutive role of language for thought and the centrality of gift-exchange in proper expressions of agape as rooted in the eternal relations that characterize the life of the Triune God. Strong readings of gift and language seem to support and be undergirded by Trinitarian dogma for both figures. Yet, Chauvet's and Milbank's understanding of the place of the Trinity within such an argument is utterly divergent. We see in them an echo of the divide between Schleiermacher and Barth over the proper place of the Trinity in Christian theology. For Chauvet, the doctrine of the Trinity is taken predominantly as that into which postmodern accounts of gift and language flow, and this is most forcefully seen in radical theologies of the Cross and their emphasis on the absence of God. Conversely, Christian theology can seemingly never start at all without the foundations of participation and analogy that Milbank holds are only established in the life of the Trinity, centrally in the *esse* that most appropriately names the Father. The *verum-factum* that allows for Christian orthodoxy to become more properly postmodern than even postmodernity itself—to embrace the infinite play of difference and flux without reserve—is established in the generation of the Son. The purity of gift-exchange as *agape* is revealed most fully in the *donum* that names the Holy Spirit. With Chauvet, therefore, we saw a Trinitarian *meontology*, an account of the Trinity that fundamentally undermined discourses of Being and presence. What the Trinity most fully reveals is the centrality of absence and alterity. With Milbank, what is revealed is a Trinitarian *ontology*, not a refusal of absence

and alterity but rather an insistence that they properly occur solely within the purview of revealed theology.

CHAPTER FIVE  
MILBANK ON THE EUCHARIST:  
SOCIALISM MADE STRANGE

*Introduction*

My account of Chauvet on the Eucharist turned on Chauvet's unique understanding of the doctrine of transubstantiation, or rather, his attempt at securing the fullness of Christ's Eucharistic presence without invoking the traditional categories of substance and accident, thus, supposedly, going beyond the doctrine itself. With Milbank, however, it must be noted that there exists no engagement with the doctrine of transubstantiation or even with sacramental theology that matches the length and breadth of Chauvet's. That is, an engagement of similar length does not exist that was written by Milbank himself. There does exist, however, a controversial account of transubstantiation written under Milbank and quoted regularly by him with approbation—namely, Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing*. This is not to say that Milbank himself does not stake out certain positions with regards to the nature of the sacraments, the nature of Eucharistic presence, or the political and ontological import of the practices most central to the maintenance of Christian identity. He certainly does contribute to these conversations. Yet, I begin this chapter in this manner only to say that it must be acknowledged that there is a lacuna in Milbank's writing with regards to direct engagement with the doctrine of the Eucharist, particularly the doctrine of Eucharistic presence.

To compensate for this lacuna and complete my picture of Milbank's project as an instantiation of the model of the Eucharist as the gift of political language, I shall draw in large part from Pickstock's work on Derrida and transubstantiation. Yet, this chapter shall not be

limited entirely to that work. In fact, Pickstock will only serve as laying the groundwork for recognizing the pivotal link in Milbank's work between the Eucharistic presence on the one hand and the contemporary political recommendations found in Milbank's latest work on the other. All in all, what we will see is that Milbank's account of the Eucharistic presence is, like Chauvet's, an ontological scandal that secures the possibility of the political scandal of the Church. Put in Milbank's terms, the gift-exchange within language that is the Eucharist necessitates a properly Christian ontology and a properly Christian politics.

Milbank and Pickstock, however, place a great deal of emphasis on a new thematic with regards to the ontological and political implications of the Eucharist—one that we saw take a peripheral role in the chapter previous, but one which takes center stage in Milbank and Pickstock's work on the Eucharist. The two of them collectively emphasize *the aesthetic* when speaking of the link between the performance of the Eucharist and the political implications of that act for the community that it forms. Hence, the ontological scandal of the Eucharist will, I shall show, lead into the political scandal of the Eucharist as a politics of *culture*. The *verum-factum*, it turns out, is still the skeleton key to systematizing Milbank's often overlapping reflections on ontology and politics. The Eucharist, I shall show, further bolsters the *verum-factum* and, consequently, compels a political scandal in the form of truthful making, i.e. a culture. This culture, however, Milbank never elaborated with absolute consistency, and so the chapter will conclude by tracing the lines of two perhaps conflicting attempts at articulating the political scandal of the Eucharist. As before, Chauvet will serve as a foil by which to understand better Milbank's obtuse argumentation.

## *The Ontological Scandal of the Eucharist*

### *Introduction*

We have already seen in Chapter Three how Chauvet gives an account of Eucharistic presence beyond the traditional notions of transubstantiation. What Chauvet offers is something like transubstantiation without substance, in keeping with his emphasis on the presence of God as the presence of absence. The impetus for this change was Chauvet's prior theological commitments, namely, his commitment to a Trinitarian Christology grounded in a radical theology of the Cross and an unwavering insistence that primacy must be given to the Pasch of Christ in sacramental theology, not just to the Hypostatic Union. Such an emphasis on the Pasch of Christ—the whole of Jesus' story, not just the Incarnation alone—leads Chauvet to characterize the Eucharist as an “anti-sacrifice” or a “sacrifice-in-sacrament” meant to turn the Girardian notion of sacrifice on its head. The ontological scandal of the Eucharist, in other words, was a kenotic presence “in the mode of being open” best seen in the figure of the *broken* bread. It is in the absence of the breach, symbolically presented to us in the embodied elements of the broken bread and poured wine, that the presence of Christ is communicated to us. Sacramental grace, he argues, is communicated to us through this very openness in an act of symbolic exchange—an exchange of *gifts* in and through *language*.

Milbank will turn every element of Chauvet's system on its head. In what is to come, I shall show that Milbank attempts the following: first, Milbank relies solely upon the Hypostatic Union not only for the ontological but also for the *political* scandal of the Eucharist. The gift-exchange that is the Eucharist is made possible by the first gift of the Incarnation, and this greatest gift of the Hypostatic Union gives to humanity the possibility of genuine forgiveness. Second, Milbank, through Pickstock, insists that transubstantiation is the only adequate way of

conceiving of the Eucharistic presence. Plus, through Pickstock's work in particular, Milbank attaches a foundational importance to the moment of consecration. Transubstantiation establishes not only the possibility of the truth of the Church but also the possibility of *any truth whatsoever*. The ontological scandal of the transubstantiated elements is the hermeneutic key for the seeming impossibility of locating any meaning beyond the interminable flux of semiosis that characterizes several of Milbank's poststructuralist interlocutors. Rather than teaching us to consent to the radical absence made present in the broken bread, the Eucharist is the sole path back to the recovery of the presence of truth. That truth, we shall see, will not be present via logical necessity but by *aesthetic convenience*. Rather than compelling a particular ethic, the beauty of truth is to be made present to the world via a *culture*, politically mediated to the world through a socialist system. Whereas Chauvet was reticent to give specific political pronouncements, Milbank is so bold as to proclaim with precision just how the political scandal of the Eucharist is to be enacted in the world.

### *Transubstantiation & Signification: The Case of Catherine Pickstock*

I begin my examination of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist with Pickstock's doctoral dissertation, completed under the direction of John Milbank and which he often cites glowingly as well. In doing so, I shall establish the fundamental points on how, according to Pickstock, Christ is present in the bread and wine in the Eucharist. Critically, Pickstock offers a similar starting point to her account of the scandal as Chauvet did. Whatever impossibility faith reveals to us in the consecration of the elements, it is an impossibility that occurs *in language*. For Chauvet, this meant an introduction into the language-game of faith through symbolic exchange. For Pickstock, the liturgy of the Mass is the instantiation of a linguistic impossibility,

“For liturgy is at once a gift *from* God and a sacrifice *to* God, a reciprocal exchange which shatters all ordinary positions of agency and reception...”<sup>1</sup> Now, by “liturgy” Pickstock, in keeping with Milbank’s pugilistic instincts towards modernity, means *only* the pre-Vatican II Mass. Indeed, this further makes sense of her emphasis on the scandal of the Eucharist being linguistic in character because she deems the grave error of the liturgical reformers of that time to have been an inability to see the way in which the culture of modernity had become “anti-ritual” in nature. In short, the only way the Vatican-authorized reformers of the Mass could have succeeded was to overthrow modern culture itself. Admittedly, however, that was not a task they were able to manage. What they ought to have done then—and what I believe is ultimately at the heart of Pickstock and Milbank’s insistence on the scandalous nature of ritual language—was to force us to submit to a shockingly *unfamiliar* form of language and ritual. The point of the ritual is not its presenting Christ to us in a relevant context but in performing the conceptual and linguistic upheaval that an encounter with God ought to entail. A proper liturgical reform then would have had as its goals “to challenge us through the shock of a *defamiliarizing* language, to live only to worship, and to be in community only as recipients of the gift of the body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Pickstock attempts to trace the similarities between the structures of liturgical language and the principle opponent of the linguistic encounter presented in the liturgy, none other than our familiar foe, Jacques Derrida. She compares the structures of the Roman Mass to the structures present within Derrida’s account of language, attempting to show the ways in which the Mass does not merely offer an apology against Derrida’s radical semiosis, but possesses

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 176-177. Unless otherwise indicated, all italics are original to the text quoted.

<sup>2</sup> Pickstock, *After Writing*, 176.

those very structures. The Mass, in other words, inhabits the structures of Derridean semiosis without succumbing to their tendency towards utter deconstruction. The “supplementations and deferrals” inherent in Derridean *differance* are not eschewed by the Mass but embraced by it.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the critical difference, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, between Chauvet’s perspective and this one, is that the Mass exhibits these structures as a pedagogy against our will to know. The rite of the Eucharist, under such a paradigm, teaches us to submit to the presence of an absence without resentment. Yet, for Pickstock, the peculiar nature of liturgical language allows for the securing of presence *beyond* absence, in and through the very structures that were thought to force absence upon us. In this way, and as a critical harkening back to Milbank’s account of the gift, the supplementations and deferrals of meaning inherent in the Roman Rite “constitute the possibility of liturgy as simultaneously ‘impossible.’”<sup>4</sup>

Pickstock thus embarks upon a line-by-line reading of the (pre-Vatican II) Roman Rite to show the ways in which the language of the Mass displaces us in much the same way that Derridean grammatology does.<sup>5</sup> What she seizes on, in particular, are what she calls “stammers” in the liturgy, that is, moments in which the language of the liturgy is suspended between passivity and activity—taking up what she calls a “middle voice.”<sup>6</sup> This suspension between reception and action—the continual deferral of liturgical language away from either a true beginning or true ending—is not evidence of a void but rather of a plenitude. Thus, language “stammers” in its continual re-starting and re-expressing the same thing. Liturgical language,

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 177

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>5</sup> See Ibid., 178-192. The reader ought to note here as well that this is a different Roman Rite than the Mass to which Chauvet devoted such considerable analysis in *Symbol & Sacrament*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 178, 244-246.



importantly, exhibits *non-identical repetition*.<sup>7</sup> Liturgy relies on repetition, but the time, place, and context of this repetition makes it such that each repetition of the rite is never the same as the previous one. Pickstock links, therefore, Milbank's purified gift-exchange to the "stammer" inherent in liturgical language.

Further, an emphasis on the stammer protects the liturgy from the Derridean charge of its embracing a metaphysics of presence. The invocation of the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" and recitation of Psalm 42 does this by casting the liturgy itself as a narrated journey, immediately displacing the self-assured identity of the speaker and hearer.<sup>8</sup> This displacement occurs, Pickstock argues, because the ultimate location of the goal of the journey is also ambiguous. We journey towards the altar of God but, after all, the altar of God is "ever-receding" from us.<sup>9</sup> The presence of the altar is never entirely fixed or graspable by us. This further means that the self is essentially located before it is identified. It is "thrown" as Heidegger would say, into a place prior to its being told who exactly it is.<sup>10</sup> Where I am precedes who I am in liturgical space, which underscores, so Pickstock argues, the vital importance of *embodiment* in liturgical space.<sup>11</sup> Invoking a notion very similar to Chauvet, Pickstock argues that these dynamics force upon us the ambiguity that the journey of the liturgy and our arrival in liturgical space are themselves the goal. We begin our journey by arriving and the ultimate destination of our journey is the quest itself.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>10</sup> One pertinent example: "Dasein has been thrown *into existence*. It exists as a being that has to be as it is and can be." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 265.

<sup>11</sup> Pickstock, *After Writing*, 184.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 185.

The displacement of identity is exacerbated even further by the liturgy because of an additional ambiguity: Who takes the initiative in the liturgy? Our journey to God, it seems, only occurs because God moves towards us. Yet, must we who participate in the liturgy not also move towards the altar?

Whereas previously in the text, liturgical impossibility seemed to betoken a bad infinite according to which sinful man in time could never arrive because he could never start out, now it seems that to be in the time of sin is nonetheless to dwell in a kenotic space in which we have always already unknowingly arrived. Thus the prior inversions—arriving is beginning, the goal is the journey—are now themselves inverted: to begin is to arrive, the way is the goal. And one can only ever have begun; there is no other way to be than to be on the way.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, we request purification in the moment of congregational confession, but in the request we realize that the eternal present in which Christ exists means we are *already* purified. Yet, we are faced with the perpetual task of putting on, in the here and now, this “garment” that we have already received.<sup>14</sup> We must prepare ourselves to be purified even though we already are washed white as snow. The task before us is interminable, such that the goal is already accomplished but must be continually taken up anew. Such are the paradoxes that confront us, Pickstock avers, in the displacement we undergo as subjects in and through liturgical language.

Yet, does this continual displacement of identity and meaning not risk the collapse of both into the flux of supplementation and difference? Pickstock avoids this by attempting, again, an argumentative move similar to one of Chauvet’s—namely, Pickstock puts forward an account of transubstantiation “beyond presence and absence.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike Chauvet, however, she is intent upon dissolving the *opposition* between presence and absence, not urging the recognition of such alterity as a pedagogical tool. In direct contradiction to Chauvet, she argues that the Eucharist

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 189

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 253.

can “outwit” this distinction precisely because it is *not* a symbol.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Pickstock insists that the “mystical” and the “real” must coincide in the Eucharist, otherwise the rite succumbs to two problematic tendencies.<sup>17</sup> First, without the coincidence of the mystical and the real the Eucharist can become nothing more than an extrinsic miracle with no actual attachment to the world of signs.<sup>18</sup> This occurs, one imagines, if the Eucharist slips too far towards the mystical and away from the real. Based on what we saw from Chauvet in Chapter Two, I believe Chauvet would agree wholeheartedly with this claim. Yet, if we allow the Eucharist to slip too far towards the real and away from the mystical, then the Eucharist becomes nothing more than an illustrative symbol.<sup>19</sup> Again, while the term “symbol” carries a great deal of weight for Chauvet, I think he would surely agree with Pickstock’s general sentiment, especially since Chauvet’s account of the symbol insists that a symbol is anything but merely illustrative. Hence, Pickstock proves to have a purpose homologous to Chauvet’s, namely, to stress that the Eucharist is more than just an extrinsic presence and that the Eucharist is an action that only has meaning in the ecclesial and relational context in which it occurs.

However, Pickstock believes it is perfectly compatible to insist on these two prerequisites only to then go on and defend the Eucharistic presence through an account of transubstantiation.<sup>20</sup> Pickstock centers her account of transubstantiation by asserting that the rite of the Eucharist is best described as an “action,” and that analyzing it under a more dynamic modality renders the full weight of transubstantiation more apparent. We call the Eucharist an action, she argues, because in doing so “the (mystical) unknown,” perhaps an analogue to

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 255.

Chauvet’s “presence of absence,” is not “reductively confined to a negative nothing.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, when we privilege the status of the Eucharistic sign as an action we can then account for the Eucharist as a sign by which the mystical unknown is “traversed as a genuinely open mystery which, by being partially imparted through the sign, and therefore recognizable as mystery, has a positive—but not fetishizable—content.”<sup>22</sup> Invoking a dynamic notion like traversal guards against an attempt to know the truth of the Eucharistic presence in which knowledge of that presence would mean “appropriation.”<sup>23</sup> The particular nature of the *mystery* of the Eucharist prevents this form of knowing from being an accessible mode to those who are placed, so to speak, by the liturgical language of the Mass. Here, because of the echoes of Chauvet, Pickstock is worth quoting at length:

This positive account of the mysterious—which implies also a positive account of the sign, as that which is not simply “left behind” but participates in the hidden mystery it signifies—accords with the patristic negotiations of the word *mysterion* in terms of both *mysterium* and *sacramentum*... [T]hese terms assimilate a variety of related meanings in the Eucharistic context, which together communicate a coincidence of presence and absence... Even when the sacramental mystery is revealed, it remains obscure and hidden. But the latency of mystery in the sign does not make it equal to nothing, or incompatible with human understanding: *plena mysterii, plena rationis*. Thus, as regards the Eucharist, which realizes the maximum possible of mystery, sacrality, and signification, human rationality becomes less an attempt to make logically consistent, and more a recognition of

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Adding further to the connections between Milbank/Pickstock and Chauvet is their shared affinity for de Lubac. Pickstock’s reference to “traversal” here is an allusion to a key passage from de Lubac’s *Corpus Mysticum* that reads: “*Tout le sensible était pour elle un sacrament, il demandait moins à être organisé ou fondé qu’il ne s’offrait à être traversé.*” Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L’Euchariste et L’Eglise au Moyen-Age*, (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1949), 264. This passage is found in the previously cited English translation on de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 235. Strangely, the translators have chosen to translate “*traversé*” as “open to being transcended” rather than “to be traversed.” I believe Pickstock’s more literal interpretation of the passage captures better de Lubac’s emphasis on *anagogy* and the ascending path to the “invisible things of God” that proper contemplation of created reality might lead. For further analysis of Pickstock’s similarities to Chauvet see Glenn Ambrose, “Chauvet and Pickstock: Two Compatible Visions?” *Questions Liturgiques* 82 (2001): 69-79.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 254.

an intimation of secret intelligibility, or luminous invitation, stimulating a contact of desire, will, and memory, which casts the act of knowing as more a “traversal” than an appropriation. This traversal takes place within the community in which the utterance ‘This is my body’ is spoken, and which is founded *by* and *as* that utterance. For the Church is properly the essence and the repetition, as both sign and secret, of that body, both in its perpetual and temporally ecstatic realization of the historical sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, representing that ‘absent’ body in and through its consecrating ritual, and also in its own mystical and literal synactic configuration of the Body which it both receives and disperses as gift.<sup>24</sup>

The core claims of this account of mystery and the Eucharist seem almost entirely in line with Chauvet. There is little in this passage that does not accord, in principle, with Chauvet’s Heideggerian analogy that the Eucharist is the way that sets the disciple on his or her way. The goal of the Eucharist is not the appropriation of the Eucharistic presence but rather the *traversing* of the mystical unknown. The Eucharist, as an action, is not an appropriation of a pure presence but is rather an encounter with the positive presence of a mystery that we traverse without making the unknown fully known.

Chauvet thought that the transitive nature of our encounter with the presence of the absence of God was precisely why we needed to move beyond the categories of substance and accident. Pickstock and Milbank break decisively with him, therefore, by insisting that transubstantiation is the only path forward, even given these epistemological changes. Pickstock defends the doctrine of transubstantiation not by insisting that an extra-linguistic event occurs, but rather by insisting that *nothing* of the event of the Eucharist “occurs without or outside of language.”<sup>25</sup> Hence, rather than attempting to go beyond transubstantiation while also still holding to an account of Eucharistic presence as an extra-linguistic event (as Chauvet did), Pickstock attempts the opposite—a strong reading of transubstantiation as giving full account of the Eucharistic presence while remaining entirely within language.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 256.

She attempts this bold maneuver by engaging in what she terms a “more positive account of the sign” that is itself “based on the structure of the *secret*.”<sup>26</sup> Why the “secret”? Pickstock here is, yet again, quite Heideggerian. A secret, she argues, does not indicate something that is entirely unknown. For how could we even give a term to such a thing? An entirely unknown is something that is utterly and entirely absent to us. We cannot even begin to speak of something entirely unknown. So a secret must refer to something that is in some way known, just as, for Heidegger, we never ask a question without in some way knowing a bit about the answer.<sup>27</sup>

This notion of secrecy aids our understanding of transubstantiation in that it allows us to conceptualize a mode of presence in which presence and absence can coincide without presence ultimately succumbing to absence or vice versa. As she puts it, “Secrecy, therefore, as a particular mode of presence which is that of partial imparting, and this medial position between known and unknown, continuous and discontinuous, and present and absent, is where I should like to locate the sign in general, and the Eucharistic signs in particular.”<sup>28</sup> One can, therefore, see the implication of what is to come in Pickstock’s account of transubstantiation, ultimately in keeping with the various “counters” that Milbank suggested were necessary at the conclusion of *Theology and Social Theory*. The implication is that whatsoever occurs in the event of transubstantiation will have a vast effect on the nature and potency of *all signs* since the event of transubstantiation occurs within the order of signs and, in a sense, *for* the order of signs. Since the sign in general is also located to a certain extent, for Pickstock, within the order of the secret between presence and absence, the central event of such presence and absence will seemingly define what can and cannot be said about signs in general thereafter.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1-13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 257.

The particular moment to which Pickstock then points is Christ's words of consecration at the Lord's Supper. She argues that the seeming impossibility of these words implies that all signs, as language, possess a "doxological" quality.<sup>29</sup> What she means by this is quite controversial. Pickstock is suggesting that the moment of consecration at the Lord's Supper in which Christ truthfully says "This is my Body" when referring to bread and "This is my blood" when referring to wine reveals the true nature of language. It renders language, as in the Mass, almost at a loss to communicate declarative meaning and left only with the mode of praise or *doxology*. So to say that the words of consecration, as signs, reveal the doxological nature of all language is to say that signs most clearly communicate meaning not when they convey factual information but when they point ecstatically beyond themselves, towards the holy plenitude from which their meaning derives.<sup>30</sup> Language, in other words, finds its truest meaning when it transcends itself, beyond either presence or absence, into a sort of holy *askesis*. The secrecy of the words of consecration, therefore, point back to a sort of "*epistemological nihilism* which approaches everything in an *optative* stance of open expectation, and which says that substance is what it is only through its participation in divine being."<sup>31</sup>

The Eucharistic signs efface themselves in order to point to something else, yet they do so without canceling themselves in the process. This ecstatic celebration is only made possible by the signs' participation in eternity (their secret!), and yet they pull all other signs into this celebration.<sup>32</sup> Thus, transubstantiation for Pickstock is more than just a novel occurrence in matter of bread and wine—something more than an ontological scandal with only private, spiritual implications for those who receive it. Transubstantiation is, in no uncertain terms, an

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

event that rescues *the sign itself* from the epistemic nihilism and political absolutism in which postmodernity, on her reading, appears to have ensnared it. The Eucharist, in other words, is the condition for the possibility of any meaning whatsoever.<sup>33</sup>

How can this be? How can the Eucharist, one rite among others, be the very foundation of the possibility of meaningful signification? Pickstock believes this claim to be feasible because the Eucharist is a sign that purports to flow from eternity but not give itself priority over eternity.<sup>34</sup> It is, in other words, an accident that points back to a true substance but without ever canceling out its nature as accident. Hence, Pickstock's notion of transubstantiation entails that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, even that transubstantiation depends upon a heightened intensity of their *accidental* status in order for Christ to be present therein. Much like Chauvet, we are dealing with an account of transubstantiation that sees the Eucharistic bread as becoming *true* bread, *more* bread than before, or *essential* bread. The materiality of bread intensifies in the moment of its becoming something more than material—an ecstatic moment of participating in that which it signifies.<sup>35</sup>

The “sign” here, however, is not merely the bread on the altar and the wine in the chalice after the moment of consecration. The sign is, instead, the bread *being eaten* and the wine *being drunk* that is the sign, a more active rather than static notion of what encompasses the true Eucharistic signs. In this way, therefore, Pickstock will claim that in the moment of partaking of the elements, wherein the Eucharistic signs are participated in, the bread and wine become *pure* accidentals.<sup>36</sup> The bread and wine, in other words, approach the status of “substance” only in and through their purely accidental status. Indeed, this approach to the pure accidental—a notion that

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 262-263.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 258-259.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 260. “...the appearances of bread and wine become accidents without remainder...”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



Pickstock admits pushes Thomistic categories to their breaking point—becomes the horizon for all material things. “And indeed, all bread is on its way to figuring the Body of Christ to this condition of ‘pure’ accidental. And yet the substantiality of the bread is not so much destroyed as more utterly constituted by being taken up into God, who is more truly ‘substance’ insofar as He is more truly self-sufficient.”<sup>37</sup> In sum, rather than couching the enduring presence of the accidents of the bread as a pedagogical tool by which we submit to the presence of absence, the enduring presence of the accidents of the bread is an indicator of God’s participation as eternal substance in the pure accidents of true bread and true wine.

The Eucharist, thus, becomes the paragon of the inbreaking of substance into accidents via their ascent into the status of pure accidental. The separation of thing from sign collapses, such that bread as thing or wine as thing comes to be equivalent to bread as sign or wine as sign. In this way, “the Eucharist situates us more inside language than ever” since the bread is only “given in the mode of sign.”<sup>38</sup> Materiality is changed for us by submitting to the linguistic displacement of this sign, for in partaking of the elements “we allow things to exceed their appearance, for things are never here in terms of an enclosed, exhaustive arrival.”<sup>39</sup> All that Derrida claimed with regards to language—with its infinite play, its continual deferral, and constant supplementation—turns out to be true, indeed it is *particularly* true within the Eucharist. Yet, the Eucharist does not rest in this infinite postponement or allow it to endure. Instead, by “carrying the secrecy, uncertainty, and discontinuity which characterize every sign to an extreme (no body appears in the bread), [the Eucharist] also delivers a final disclosure, certainty, and continuity (the bread is the Body) which alone makes it possible now to trust every

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 261.

sign.”<sup>40</sup> The Eucharist secures the possibility of truth through the excess of secrecy. As Pickstock puts it, “The words of consecration ‘This is my body’ therefore, far from being problematic in their meaning, *are the only words which certainly have meaning, and lend this meaning to all other words.*”<sup>41</sup>

The accidents of transubstantiation are thus given greater ontological import since it is through an intensification of the accidental that substance comes into view, just as it is through an intensification of the sign that substantial meaning comes into view. In this way, Pickstock can make the claim for which we saw her, and to a certain extent Chauvet, criticized above: namely, that “all bread is on its way to figuring the Body of Christ.”<sup>42</sup> Critically, Pickstock further bolsters this notion by turning to the ontological priority of the gift: “This [bread/Body] amalgam is a ‘thing’ not a sign, yet becomes a sign in being given to us, given as a promise or sign of future givings, and so given as the turning of all things into gift, which means also into sign, since a gift is a gift only in its signifying promise of renewed gift to come.”<sup>43</sup> Pickstock, ultimately, connects Milbank’s strongly Trinitarian readings of *verbum* and *donum* to the Eucharistic presence. The Eucharist situates us in language, reveals all material creation to be caught up in the Eucharistic arrival as gift, and carries profound practical consequences in its reception.

### *Transubstantiated Touch*

Milbank lends further credence to the notion that Pickstock’s account is very nearly a mirror of his own by co-authoring a book in which they take on together several of the questions

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 263, italics original.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 263

to which Pickstock was offering only her voice. That book, *Truth in Aquinas*, contains four essays—two written by Pickstock, one written by Milbank, and one jointly authored by the pair. The argument of the jointly authored essay is telling for two reasons: firstly, because it even more explicitly links Milbank’s work on the gift to Pickstock’s work on the Eucharist, and secondly, because it reveals a hidden connection between Milbank’s earlier work on the *verum-factum* and the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Incarnation of the eternal Word that occurs according to the aesthetic necessity of *convenience*—the ultimate thesis of their argument on “touch”—ultimately follows the same logic as Pickstock’s account of transubstantiation. This shows that Milbank’s theological system and Pickstock’s account of transubstantiation are largely in sync, further clarifying what Milbank sees as the ontological scandal of the Eucharist.

In “Truth and Touch,” Milbank and Pickstock (hereafter, “M&P”) collectively argue that the Incarnation is for Aquinas the “sole ground for the restoration of our participation in the divine understanding.”<sup>44</sup> Put more strongly, they argue that, for Thomas, our access to any truth at all is contingent upon the Incarnation. Now this can seem, on the surface, to undermine Pickstock’s earlier and grandiose claim that the moment of transubstantiation is the condition of the possibility of all truth. This modification is perhaps to be expected since *After Writing* was Pickstock’s doctoral dissertation. One would assume her thinking evolved since the completion and revision of that document. Yet, while the claim from *Truth in Aquinas* is perhaps a softening of Pickstock’s previous singular focus on the rite of the Eucharist, the claim is not a softening of the insistence that the moment of transubstantiation is constitutive of all future sign-making. In other words, M&P retain this strong reading of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist in and

---

<sup>44</sup> John Milbank & Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2004), 60. I should note that the critiques associated with “Milbank’s Aquinas” certainly are not canceled by the addition of Pickstock as a co-author. For those critiques and my caveats to how I present Milbank (and now Pickstock) on Aquinas see Chapter Four above.

through their interpretation of Aquinas' doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation strengthens rather than blunts the scandal of the Eucharist; for it is on the basis of the Incarnation that the sacramental grace of the Eucharist is able to be communicated to human beings through the Eucharistic signs. Ultimately, to say that the Incarnation is the sole guarantor of our access to truth is tantamount to saying the same for the Eucharist, since the Eucharist is, ultimately, the mediation of that access to the Church.

M&P note from the outset that an intriguing aspect of Aquinas' account of the Incarnation is that Thomas holds that God could have canceled human sin via divine *fiat*. There is, in other words, no logically necessary relation between the nature of human sin and the salve for sin that was to be the Incarnation. Salvation could have been accomplished by another means. Yet, importantly, the Incarnation does possess a sense of *fittingness*, an aesthetic *convenience* that makes the Incarnation the "right" way and the "only" way to accomplish the salvation of human beings. The two place a great deal of ontological import on this notion of convenience, going so far as to call it convertible with being. All beings occur, they aver, in a fitting way as creation. Hence, the only proper way to save such fitting beings from sin was through the supreme instance of aesthetic convenience, by which a human hypostasis and the divine hypostasis were joined together.

Two things, then, remain to be shown: first, that the same logic from Pickstock's account of transubstantiation attains in M&P's account of the Incarnation and, second, that the Incarnation turns out simply to be the foundation for an account of transubstantiation practically identical to Pickstock's laid out above. To the first, we can see the same logic at work in M&P's interpretation of the Thomistic account of the Incarnation when they speak of the aesthetic compulsion that now makes plausible a sense of divine necessity. They note three implications of

the fact that for Thomas the Incarnation is sole source of our access to Truth. First, such a reading of the Incarnation means that it is appropriate to think of the *Logos* as “the eminent realization of beautiful *proportio*.”<sup>45</sup> God is freely compelled by the fittingness of the Incarnation in keeping with a novel account of divine necessity as based in an aesthetic rather than logical or moral compulsion. Second, the truth displayed in the Incarnation is not merely displayed through a convenient means but is rather *convenience itself*. The Incarnation, thereby, can restore the analogical ascent of truth from creaturely truth to divine truth since the convenience that persists in creaturely truth is there solely because creaturely truth participates in divine truth and pure convenience. Third, and most importantly, the fact that the Incarnation absolutely coincides with divine *convenientia* means that an ontological reversal comes about—the very fusion of a creature’s hypostasis with the divine hypostasis—which causes a new mode of being in the world. The Incarnation makes possible, they argue, “a mode of divine self-sharing more absolute than the most absolute giving of the infinite to the finite according to its capacity for reception.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, the Incarnation is the “utter fusion of the finite with the infinite (though not the other way around)” because the infinite, as infinite, cannot change.

These reflections thus lead to a claim that sounds quite similar to Chauvet’s continual emphasis on the humanity of God, namely, M&P insist that Christ’s humanity *in its very humanity* shows the entirety of Christ’s divine nature.

“This includes his body, his physical actions, and especially his transmission of the substance of his body to the Eucharistic elements. Because, for Aquinas, all our knowledge is first in our senses, this means that we first encounter Christ in reported word and image concerning his physical manifestation, and yet more directly in our partaking of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist.”<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

This remarkable reversal of the typical emphasis of the hypostatic union also reverses the means by which our intellects are instructed in the truth. Rather than implying that the body needs to be instructed by the intellect, this ontological reversal dictates that the *senses* are now the avenue by which our intellects are instructed. In short, just as the intensification of the accidents of the bread and wine is the avenue for a revelation of substance, so M&P's Aquinas seems to assert that our intellect's ascent to the spiritual heights must occur through its *descent* into that which is most sensual. Divine *kenosis* then has an "unsuspected depth," revealed only by the Incarnation, namely that, "God is able to suffuse with his presence the material depths, in order to instruct the spiritual heights."<sup>48</sup> The materially individuated, rather than being alienated from universal truth through its particularity, can now coincide with the absolute *verum* because a chain of singular events—the life of Jesus of Nazareth—has been elevated to "absolute coincidence with the eternal being as such."<sup>49</sup> Hence, "the ontological implication of the hypostatic union is that the equal presence of Being in each single being, or of the ontological in every ontic reality, is now absolutized to the degree that one being, while remaining one being, so inheres in, or discloses Being as such, as to coincide with it."<sup>50</sup> This inaugurates what M&P dub a new "sacramentality of the cosmos" whose "sole ground" is the hypostatic union.<sup>51</sup>

The Eucharist is said by M&P to accomplish a similar ontological reversal for us. "Normally food and drink are to nourish the body, which is to sustain the mind. But here the mind is not only to attend to what it eats and drinks, which can alone instruct it in truth; it is even—after Augustine—to *become* this food and drink, which makes present the truth

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 64.

incarnate.”<sup>52</sup> We ascend to the heights of truth by descending into utter materiality through one particular sense, namely, touch, here as the particular mode of taste. M&P are worth quoting at length here:

Thus another ontological revision has been effected. In the Eucharist, touch as taste ceases to be restrictive in its exclusivity. Instead, from now on, if we wish to see the universal, to see God, we must aspire to touch and shape in truth, along with all other people, every last finite particular as included within and disclosing the body of Christ. Henceforward, the journey to God is equally the journey to the God-Man, and so equally to all creatures, and no longer away from them. Now, to see God is also to make the future.<sup>53</sup>

The new “sacramentality of the cosmos” as inaugurated by the hypostatic union and communicated to human beings through the Eucharist is an ontological scandal, in language, that communicates a political vision.

M&P subsequently reject the notion that the sacraments are “pedagogic means” of restoring the rule of the mind over the body that was lost in the Fall. This sort of thinking betrays an “instrumentalist” view of the sacraments that is further based in an instrumentalist view of the Incarnation. Just as the Incarnation is not accidental to God—for it persists after the work of Redemption is accomplished—so also Christ’s becoming present in bread and wine persists after the act of the Eucharist. The elements, in other words, can serve no temporary use as pedagogical tools. They must, in their very materiality, be rather ontological reversals imbued into our bodies through our most intimate of senses in order to transform our highest modes of intellection.

The connection to the *verum-factum* as Vico’s first truth comes to light in M&P’s discussion of just how it is that such a hyper-finitude, hyper-concreteness, or pure accidental can be rationally attached to the divine life. How is it, in other words, that God can *become the subject* of some *new* ontological development? They appeal yet again to the aesthetic dimension

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 84.

of the Incarnation's necessity in order to get out of this conundrum. They claim that *Logos* is also *Ars* such that the assumption of a human nature belongs to the *Logos* in an "aesthetically convenient" way. The human nature of Jesus is added to the *Logos* in an existential way, but this is not the mere putting on of that human hypostasis as a temporal convenience. The existential "is" of the Eucharistic "This is my Body" also applies here, in that the existential link between the *Logos* and Jesus is the same as saying a true and substantial union persists between the human hypostasis and the divine hypostasis, only with the true change coming from the finite side of things. This doesn't add anything to the *Logos*, however, since it is merely the fitting expression of what the *Logos* is.

The important revelation here is that God is not primarily defined by a capacity for intellection but rather by *touch*. God, in other words, just is the molding and shaping relationship that God has with creation. As M&P put it, "God is disclosed in the Incarnation...as somehow, in his very intelligence, this eternal touch, he is also eminently that moulding or shaping through which subjects communicate with each other, and together modify their shared objective medium to produce history."<sup>54</sup> God is especially disclosed as touch through subjecting Godself to human death. Since human intelligence is only operable through its vulnerability to touch, so the divine truth of the *Logos* is properly revealed in time through its vulnerability to death. Finally,

[S]ince God is now revealed as touch, the new ontological exaltation of the sensory over the intellectual is no mere pedagogic means, but an appropriate new disclosure of the ultimately real....Now in order to understand anything of divine truth (and so truth *per se*), we must touch divine physical manifestations, and we must elicit these through our crafting of liturgical enactments.<sup>55</sup>

The ontological scandal of the Eucharist, in other words, is identical to the ontological exaltation of the sensory that is embedded within Trinitarian theology. The path to the truth of divine

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



intellecion is nothing other than the liturgical enactments wherein God is encountered in and as touch, i.e. eating and drinking the material elements become the Body and Blood of Christ.

This further links the ontological scandal of the Eucharist to two aspects of Milbank's theology we have seen in the previous chapter. First, the exaltation of the sensory through aesthetic fittingness means that the truth disclosed in the Incarnation, in the liturgical enactment of the Eucharist wherein the reality of the Incarnation is imbibed, and in the new sacramentality of the cosmos, is the very same truth of the *verum-factum*. God is in Godself eternally creative. God's *Logos* is also *Ars*. God's truth is the molding and shaping touch of the artisan that shapes the *factum* of the world into that which is fitting, aesthetically speaking, with the eternal *Verum*. The Incarnation and the moment of transubstantiation made possible by it, reveal the convertibility of the truth with the made.

The second link is to the ontology of the gift that Milbank argues is thoroughly and necessarily Trinitarian. We saw in the previous chapter that part of what secured the unique nature of proper gift-exchange was a sort of suitability or fittingness of the gift that was given. There was therein a sort of *aesthetic judgment* that allowed for genuine gift-exchange. Asymmetrical reciprocity and non-identical repetition required that true gift-exchange, as opposed to the impossible true gift, stemmed from a prior relationality that allowed for the gift given to be judged as proper or not. The aesthetic fittingness that secured the necessity of the Incarnation in other words, seems also to be present in any account of true gift-exchange. The gift can be obligatory and yet still generous based not in a sort of mercenary logic of fetishized sacrifice. Rather, the gift is compelled under the same logic that compelled God to become human, an aesthetic fittingness that is proper to the God who reveals Godself in the transubstantiated elements as *touch*. The ontological scandal of the Eucharist, in other words, lies

behind those theological innovations that are unique to Milbank's *oeuvre*: a Trinitarian ontology, a radical critique of secular ontologies of violence, an account of language as constitutive for thought and subjectivity, and an account of reality that gives priority to the gift.

Milbank's entire body of work, therefore, seems to turn on the notion that ontology becomes praxis or, as he has recently put it, "Ideas about being coincide with ideas about human action."<sup>56</sup> The ontological scandal of the Eucharist thus necessarily opens into the political scandal of the Eucharist since a change in our ideas about Being, particularly those communicated through as intimate a venue as touch, irrevocably shape our ideas about human action. The introduction of aesthetic fittingness as the driving force behind the Incarnation and transubstantiation thus introduces a novel thematic that will come to define the parameters of Milbank's Eucharistic politics. If the ontological scandal of the Eucharist is the convertibility of the true with the made, in accordance with the aesthetic *convenientia* of the Incarnation, then the political scandal will be a scandal beyond the quotidian matters we typically associate with "the political." The political scandal of the Eucharist will not, in other words, be concerned simply with the proper arrangements of power. The ontological scandal of the Eucharist will open into something more than that—it will disclose the political scandal of a counter-politics that is itself a *culture*, a fitting and incarnational shaping of the world. How such a conception of politics stems from the notions of gift and language that we saw in the previous chapter must now be articulated.

---

<sup>56</sup> John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of People* (London: Blackwell, 2013) 3.

## *The Political Scandal of the Eucharist*

### *Introduction*

Of all the moments in which Milbank mentions the Eucharist, the vast majority of said instances are in regards to the political. Hence, while references to Milbank's account of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist might have been scant, Milbank's references to the political scandal of the Eucharist, though still often opaque, now become more numerous by comparison. The ontological scandal of the Eucharist, as we have just seen, occurs for Milbank and Pickstock entirely within language. Indeed, it was the event of encounter of the eternal *Verbum* made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, whose Body was now joined with Bread as "thing" become "sign." This event of the "pure accidental," wherein Bread became that to which it was always on the way—namely, the Body of Christ—inaugurated a new sacramentality of the cosmos and is the condition for the possibility of truthful signification. Transubstantiation rescues meaningful signification not by an ascent into intellection but rather by a descent into materiality, an intensification of the experience of materiality such that intellection comes to the fore. Yet, the implication of these bold claims is that such a revolution in the conditions that govern the possibility of signification result in political changes. To participate in the rite of the Eucharist, in other words, is to participate in an effort to shape the world.

Thus, the question of the political scandal of the Eucharist now presents itself to us, front and center. In contrast to Chauvet's reticence to comment on matters related to political specifics, Milbank here shows the fruits of the *verum-factum* yet again, particularly the vital aspect discussed in the previous chapter, that is, that the convertibility of the true with the made makes the Christian counter-polity an accomplishable project in the present political moment. Milbank is, therefore, driven well beyond Chauvet into recommending specific political

arrangements as in line with the purified gift-exchange of the agapic community. There exists within the history of these recommendations, however, a dramatic turn for Milbank. In what follows, we shall see that in attempting to articulate the political scandal of the Eucharist Milbank moves from a vision of Christian socialism towards a vision of mixed constitutional government that combines Christian socialism with a monarchist or papist tendency. The precise political “gift” that the Eucharist gives turns, in other words, from the true form of socialism in Milbank’s earlier work to the “gift of rule” in Milbank’s later work. I shall argue below that this trend can be explained only in reference to the Eucharist. Such changes are not, as I see it, merely in response to the current political moment but are, in fact, a result of the emphasis on the Incarnation that we have just chronicled.

This section, therefore, proceeds as follows. It begins with an examination of the “first iteration” of Milbank’s Eucharistic politics as articulated in the final chapter of *Theology and Social Theory* and, most importantly, in the whole of *Being Reconciled*. The latter of these two works will receive the bulk of our attention since *Being Reconciled* was, at the time, the fullest statement to date of the political consequences of Milbank’s anti-secular theology. The sequence on the political scandal of the Eucharist then turns, however, to Milbank’s later work. This “second iteration” of the political scandal of the Eucharist is very much like the first. The emphasis is still upon the political consequences of ontological upheavals, the necessity of gift-exchange in any future politics, and the legacy of Christian socialism as an untapped resource for political theology. But something becomes markedly different in Milbank’s most recent works *Beyond Secular Order* and *The Politics of Virtue*. A full-throated endorsement of Christendom now comes to the fore and so it shall be the goal of this section to explain how Milbank’s theology of the Eucharist explains this turn. Chauvet thus returns as one who has already

sounded the alarm on precisely this tendency within Eucharistic theologies that over-emphasize the Incarnation.

*First Iteration: Sacramental Socialism*

As we saw in the previous chapter, Milbank's primary political concern in *Theology and Social Theory* is also an ontological one, namely, the ontological violence presumed in the secular invention of the "political" as a sphere of pure power. Ontologies that assume from the outset the interminability of conflict inevitably come to embrace notions of sovereignty by the exception and the management of such unending conflict by violent coercion. Hence, for secular ontologies, whether from the Enlightenment era or the Postmodern, there can be no ultimate political peace since all of reality itself is agonistic in nature. Changing this ontological imaginary, therefore, will necessarily have a political correlate. Milbank, as we saw in the previous chapter, devoted himself to precisely this critical project in his earliest and most famous work, articulating a Christian counter-ontology that both stemmed from and undergirded the sacred *polis*, the Other City.

That counter-ontology is, oddly enough, in the same spirit as Chauvet's in that it is a *Trinitarian* ontology. For Chauvet, Trinitarian Christology inevitably led to a "symbolic *meontology*," an ontology of absence. This ontology of absence was something to which we had to submit ourselves, little by little, through the sacraments as the "symbolic figures of God's effacement."<sup>57</sup> For Milbank, however, the turn to the ontological ramification of Trinitarian doctrine will turn out quite differently. His turn to the counter-ontology of Christian orthodoxy

---

<sup>57</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont and Patrick Madigan, S.J. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) 499 & 490.

will see Trinitarian theology suggest not an ontology of absence but a *true* ontology of difference. In other words, Trinitarian ontology is the only ontological imaginary that can allow for the emergence of genuine difference without such difference leading to our placing violence and conflict as original to Being itself. A Trinitarian ontology is the only ontology that can undergird a politics not doomed both to interminable violence and the perpetual management of conflict by force.

This counter-ontology becomes a counter-politics in Milbank's later work *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. Milbank begins this work by articulating the ultimate political problem with which secular ontologies are inflicted, namely, that interminable violence is not only interminable but also precludes any sort of reconciliation within human communities. Cast in ontological terms, the political goal of communities based in an ontology of gift is the presence of *forgiveness*, a positive presence of reconciliation rather than the mere lack of bad blood.<sup>58</sup> Yet, Milbank notes that the reality of forgiveness is haunted by five *aporias* that must be resolved in order for forgiveness to become possible. The systematic project that takes shape is thus an attempt to resolve these *aporias* through the gift of forgiveness (Incarnation & Atonement), to articulate the type of power present in the community formed by the gift of forgiveness (Ecclesiology), and to give shape to the relation of that community to the world (Culture). In short, the ontological scandal of the Eucharist—an ontological scandal of both language and gift—becomes a political scandal through the making possible of true reconciliation and its consequent effects.

Forgiveness brings to the fore questions that might have been floating about the edges of our earlier discussions. How, for instance, does the Being of God as Triune and primordially

---

<sup>58</sup> John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 44.

creative affect the way in which we ought to form communities in the world? How can such ideas be relevant to such seemingly non-theological matters? Finally, if we proceed as if such ideas are in fact constitutive of modes of human belonging (i.e., political in nature), then how do we adjudicate the extent of their influence? Forgiveness is the beginning, for Milbank, of taking his “ideas about Being” and showing how they “coincide with ideas about human action.”<sup>59</sup> More importantly, for our purposes, an attempt to give an account of the possibility of forgiveness is, for reasons that will be made clear momentarily, an attempt to show just what sort of gift is given in the language made possible by the Eucharistic presence.

We must first, however, say just why forgiveness is such a torturous topic for Milbank. Forgiveness, according to Milbank, is riddled with five aporias, on top of the fact that there already exists a great deal of bad theology about what forgiveness is in the first place. Forgiveness is not, he says, a pure negative that blots out a present evil leaving behind only an empty neutrality. Forgiveness must instead be a *positive reality*, which, instead of de-creating the evil that is present rather creates out of evil something new.<sup>60</sup> Yet, attempting to say just what sort of positive reality forgiveness would create brings to light five aporias that seem to make forgiveness impossible within the human milieu, not to mention making forgiveness very complicated on the divine level.<sup>61</sup>

The first aporia has to do with determining who is to forgive. The difficulty is with determining who the proper victim of evil really is, since the consequences of an evil deed

---

<sup>59</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 44-46.

<sup>61</sup> Like Milbank’s argument on gift-exchange, his attempt to defend the genuine possibility of forgiveness is very much related to the work of Derrida on the topic. For Derrida’s argument on the subject see Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001).

inevitably spread beyond the parties involved.<sup>62</sup> More importantly, the difficulty of locating the victim seems to confine the problem only to evils in which the victims are still living and able to forgive. The dead cannot dictate the terms of reconciliation, and since the deed sprawls beyond even living victims, allowing the most immediate victim of the deed to possess the *exclusive* right to dictate the terms of reconciliation is problematic. This seems to call for a sovereign power to bear the burden of creating the terms of reconciliation, but the sovereign representative cannot adequately forgive because the offloading of responsibility onto the sovereign denies the victim the right to dictate their agreement with the terms.<sup>63</sup> For how can a crime truly be forgiven if the victim still hates the perpetrator? Justice might have been done, but forgiveness has not occurred in that scenario.

The second aporia has to do with how time affects the possibility of forgiveness. The real horror of the wrong committed, Milbank argues, is that there is no way to reverse the contingent instance of that wrong *within time*.<sup>64</sup> We all too often equate a problem in time with a problem in space. Like a barrier in our way, once we remove the spatial impediment then the way forward is restored. But wrongs committed in time do not work this way because there just is no removing that moment from time. There was some good from which we were kept in a single moment. The wrong done in time seems to take on an absolute status, and the victim becomes the one who threatens the possibility of reconciliation absolutely, since they will inevitably hate the perpetrator with cause due to the ineradicable nature of the particular and temporal wrong done to them.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 50.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



Matters become more complicated in the third aporia when the question of forgiving and forgetting comes to the fore. On the one hand, a purely “immanentist” perspective seems to require that the memory of the wrong done be wiped away.<sup>66</sup> After all, so long as I remember the wrong done I seem to still be trapped in the past hatred and cannot adequately forgive. Hence, I seem to need to forget the evil entirely. Once I have done that, however, there seems to be no need for forgiveness anymore. Under what Milbank pejoratively calls the immanentist perspective, there can be little more for forgiveness to require since such perspectives cannot give an account of forgiveness as anything more than a blotting out of past evils. If the wrong is forgotten then there is no more need of forgiveness, but this seems to cancel forgiveness from the outset since all that was required is forgetting not forgiving for a wrong to be erased.<sup>67</sup>

If forgiveness had not already called to mind the question of the pure gift, Milbank turns next to address that directly in the fourth aporia. Forgiveness, he notes, seems to be haunted by economic logics that turn forgiveness into something less than genuine reconciliation and more into self-interested contract. Are we not seeking forgiveness not for the sake of forgiveness itself but for our own sake? If this is the case, if we seek forgiveness because we want it and not because it is a moral obligation, then do we not annul forgiveness before it can even arrive?<sup>68</sup> Forgiveness is thereby struck by much the same difficulty that afflicted the notion of the pure gift: true forgiveness, as the negation of a past wrong, must be done solely for its own sake, otherwise it is not forgiveness. Yet, forgiveness, at least so long as it is seen as a pure negative, can only ever be done for our own sakes. A pure and univocal gesture of forgiveness is just as

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 57.

impossible as the pure and univocal gift.<sup>69</sup> The ultimate upshot of such a perspective is the false put-on that one has not actually been offended at all. This avoids the more difficult reality of taking responsibility for wrongs committed and enduring the emotional labor required by the process of genuine reconciliation.

Lastly, forgiveness seems beset by utter interminability. The problem, Milbank argues, is that a purely negative account of forgiveness presents us with the great difficulty of reaching any sense of final closure. For if the only way to reach absolute finality is to utterly forget the past wrong—since, again, forgiveness here is thought of as a removal of the wrong and the hatred that came along with it—then victims risk blinding themselves to the risk of future evil. Utterly forgetting the wrong done seems to require a chosen ignorance that only puts victims at further risk of wrong being done to them.<sup>70</sup> More importantly, however, if the only thing victims need is to forget the wrong done to them then one can legitimately ask why we fret over the possibility of forgiveness at all.<sup>71</sup> Thus, negative forgiveness seems to reveal the utter insecurity of human relationships. For on this account, forgiveness seems to be the only thing that can guarantee the unshakable depth of a relationship since the wrong is absolutely obliterated through forgetting it. Yet, this finality is ultimately chimerical since it is a consent to the absence of real reconciliation.<sup>72</sup> A cursory investigation into the nature of forgiveness seems to reveal its impossibility.

I have been adding in bits of Milbank's pejoratives on "immanentist" and "purely negative" visions of forgiveness and, as a result, one might imagine that the pivot to come here from Milbank is offering up ways in which the positive vision of forgiveness might resolve these

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 60.

aporias. There are instances, admittedly, in his analysis where he does offer smatterings of this.<sup>73</sup> Yet, the aporias of forgiveness haunt even Milbank's positive account of reconciliation, and these aporias become intensified when the question of forgiveness is raised to the divine level. The difficulties still lie in much the same location, namely, in identifying who can forgive and how. How is it that God can give forgiveness if the victim has never been adequately identified? How can God even be offended if God is beyond all temporality and victimhood? Reconciliation amongst humans remains just as intractable, but the added difficulties of enacting forgiveness on the divine level make the issue even more fraught. In short, the political scandal of the Eucharist as the gift of forgiveness appears impossible from the outset.

Just as the Incarnation was the means of securing the legitimacy of transubstantiation and, along with it, the possibility of all meaningful signification, so the Incarnation will now be Milbank's avenue into resolving the aporia of pardon. The Incarnation does this by making possible what Milbank calls the "sovereign victim."<sup>74</sup> The God-Man alone is able to inaugurate genuine forgiveness "for here was not a single instantiation of human nature, victimized like all humans by other humans, but rather a human victim suffering the maximum possible victimage, by virtue of its personification by the divine *Logos*, all-wise and all-innocent and therefore able to let the human nature plumb the full depths and implications of suffering, capable of representing all suffering and of forgiving on behalf of all victims."<sup>75</sup> Jesus Christ, as sovereign victim, bridges the gap we saw above between allowing only victims to forgive and the need for a sovereign power to intercede on behalf of victims and offer a single universal forgiveness. The God-Man alone is able to occupy both roles—a representative of universal victimage that can

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 61.

execute the forgiveness that seemed only possible for the sovereign while being justified in doing so on behalf of *all* victims, even those unknown or deceased.<sup>76</sup>

Christ forgives at the original instance of hurt because the suffering undergone by him is “paradoxically undergone in a wholly accepting, actively receptive fashion, in such a way that this undergoing is itself offered as a *gift*.”<sup>77</sup> But forgiveness offered to *whom* and *by whom*? This is an important question given the manner in which even Milbank’s positive vision of forgiveness ended in seeming aporia. Milbank claims that the gift offered in Christ’s suffering is *not* the offer of forgiveness for human beings *from* God. This is so because God cannot be offended by our refusal of the initial divine gift. God continues to give to us in an unbroken chain without resentment.<sup>78</sup> Instead, Christ’s gift is not of forgiveness from God but is rather the gift of the possibility of forgiveness among human beings. This gift is the continuance of the “unbroken continued giving of the divine gift as also the offering of a suffering actively undergone,” passed to Christ from the Holy Trinity and then continued on earth through the presence of the Holy Spirit as “the very bond of exchange and mutual giving within the Trinity.”<sup>79</sup> Such is the ultimate political scandal of Milbank’s Trinitarian ontology, a passage of the original gift-giving relations in the immanent trinity given as impossible possibilities amongst a human community formed and held together by the Holy Spirit, the Church.

Yet, is this political scandal in any way related to the scandal of the Eucharist we have above been examining? Milbank’s answer is telling: “As participators through the Sacraments and membership of the body of Christ in the divine humanity, we now also begin to be capable

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 62.

of forgiveness on sufficient authority and without taint of rancor.”<sup>80</sup> The Sacraments, in other words, and chiefly the Eucharist, are the means by which God inculcates within us a mode of human belonging that, by rights, ought to be impossible. Forgiveness, riddled by aporias that seem to declare its impossibility, is fittingly inaugurated through the great gift of the Incarnation and the extension of that gift to a single human community through the Eucharist. The political scandal of the Eucharist is ultimately the gift of the “positive possibility of intrahuman reconciliation,” despite the ontological barriers that seem to portend an utter interminability of violence.<sup>81</sup> This positive possibility is, more importantly, the perfection of gift-exchange and points to the ultimate melding together of gift and language that characterizes Milbank’s account of the Eucharist:

Forgiveness, therefore, perfects gift-exchange as *fusion*. If gift exchange retains free gift as non-identical repetition and asymmetrical reciprocity, then forgiveness exceeds this to the measure that in perfected exchange every surprise is anticipated by the other, since the surprise she offers is also the surprise he arrives at in that very instant, as requiring a perfectly improvised and yet absolutely consensual dance. But since, as we have seen, forgiveness is only inaugurated by the sovereign victim, this perfection of exchange as fusion is first granted to us in the idiomatic characterizing a victim as sovereign, sovereign as victim. It is their relation, their dance, that first and alone reconciles.<sup>82</sup>

It might, however, still remain a question for the reader as to just how intrahuman reconciliation can be called a “political scandal.” In what sense does such a possibility restructure or scandalize the *public sphere* that variegated human communities forge and share with one another? In other words, the upshot of reconciliation for the makeup of a particular community is quite clear—conflict within such a community is no longer interminable and makes possible the governing of that community via the norms of forgiveness—but it is not clear

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 70.

what the result is (or even if there is one) for the public realm that forms things we would call states, nations, or even international communities when forgiveness is shown to be possible in and through the Eucharist.

Milbank addresses this topic by introducing a new aspect of forgiveness, what he calls “cruciformity.”<sup>83</sup> It is not separate from forgiveness *per se*, rather it aims at supplementing the overcoming of evil via forgiveness with the overcoming of violence (which is always a *public* event) with the public aspect of forgiveness, namely atonement. In short, Milbank wants to know the public import of the gift of the particular life of Jesus—i.e., its public aspects and, most importantly, its publicly violent end. Supplementing forgiveness with a sense of “cruciformity,” is thus a means of defining the public and political aspect of the advent of the sovereign victim.<sup>84</sup> To say precisely what this political aspect of sovereign victimhood is, will be, for our purposes, precisely the same as stating the political scandal of the Eucharist. For, after all, the Eucharist is nothing more than the central point of access for human beings into the chain of giving that begins in the Incarnation and culminates in the ethical possibility of forgiveness and the political possibility of cruciformity.

What, then, is cruciformity? Milbank means by this term the manner in which Christ does more than merely overcome evil to restore the Good through forgiveness. Cruciformity is his attempt at stating how it is that Jesus restores *peace* via the overcoming of violence, both of which are, for Milbank, visible and thereby political realities.<sup>85</sup> Milbank takes his inspiration from the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who sought to plumb the depths of the

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>85</sup> It is important to note that to overcome evil is also to overcome violence, but the distinction Milbank is making here is a heuristic one for the sake of plumbing the depths of Jesus Christ’s human life, i.e. to speak to the “immanent” moment of the Incarnation and the “economic” moment of Atonement.

contradictions and paradoxes that beset political sovereignty through an analysis of the ancient Roman practice of *homo sacer*.<sup>86</sup> Much like the scapegoat of Rene Girard, *homo sacer* was a single person cast out of the community, and this person bore the community's transgressions within their status as outcast. The difference between *homo sacer* and the scapegoat, of course, was that *homo sacer* was cast out or killed on the basis of popular vote. This, for Agamben and Milbank, reveals the "aporetic structure of sovereignty" in that, the entirety of Roman Law is founded upon a moment of exception to the rule of law, a moment in which a person can be killed without reprisal because he or she has been reduced to pure, bare life.<sup>87</sup> *Homo sacer* becomes a type of sub-humanity despite their humanity, and it is this de-humanizing process upon which sovereign rule of law founds itself—i.e., sovereignty only functions by "including only what is simultaneously excluded."<sup>88</sup>

Jesus Christ was not an instance of *homo sacer*, but the death Christ died, Milbank argues, was a death of pure sub-humanity. While he was not subject to the practice of *homo sacer* he died the death of *homo sacer*, and in so doing, Christ lends "divine height" to just this sort of death.<sup>89</sup> Hence, "upon the basis of the rejected one, a new sort of community is built."<sup>90</sup> This new sort of community, however, is not based entirely on a positive reading of abandonment. Importantly, Milbank argues that this cannot be the case because Jesus was not ontologically deserted by the Father on the Cross, contrary to an interpretation of the Crucifixion that was absolutely critical for Chauvet.<sup>91</sup> For what the death of Jesus must do is scandalize the

---

<sup>86</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>87</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 91.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 490-503.

problematic reading of Being inherent in logics of sovereignty. It must be that political government can no longer legitimize itself through inclusion-via-exclusion or legality-via-exception. These are the politics characteristic of modernity and, therefore, the politics that the Eucharist must scandalize on Milbank's reading.

These aporias of sovereignty are overcome, fittingly, through *gift-exchange*. Christ is excluded in the moment of Crucifixion, but Christ seems to condemn violence in this moment by refusing it. He condemns violence, as Milbank argues, by a "counter-violent violence," in which through "utter self-giving" the life of Christ is immediately returned as resurrection and, therefore, "also gift-exchange."<sup>92</sup> Thus, in the moment when humanity "most abandon[s] the divine donation, it surpasses itself, and appears more than ever, raising us up into the eternal gift-exchange of the Trinity."<sup>93</sup> In this way, gift-exchange overcomes the aporetic nature of sovereignty, and creates the possibility of a community outside of the interminable violence such rule by the exception inevitably promotes. Christ's life is returned, Christ is risen after the moment of most exclusion, which implies that the community formed on the basis of his death moves beyond the problem of an inclusion that excludes at the same time.

Christ as purely excluded is risen: therefore the life he is risen to is the possibility of life after exclusion from life, of a life beyond inclusion versus exclusion. If Christ is supremely exceptional, this is because he is the exception even to the law of the exception: after Christ there is no more of that oscillation between norm and exception which paradoxically establishes the sphere of the norm.<sup>94</sup>

Christ's will is not alienated in an executive power that will inevitably betray it, but is rather emptied out in order that it be "non-identically repeated by another."<sup>95</sup> A community shaped by the "cruciformity" of Christ's life, therefore, will be a community beyond the aporias of

---

<sup>92</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



sovereignty, beyond the rule of the exception, and beyond, most importantly, the interminability of violence.

In short, Christ's blood *makes* peace, and the resonance with Vico's *verum-factum* should not be missed here. For the public shape of Christ's life accomplishes this making not via an arbitrary series of commandments delivered from on high, but rather through a sense of *aesthetic necessity*, such that Christ's utterly exceptional nature just *has to be* the shape the Church takes. The cruciform shape of Christ's life is aesthetically necessary in the same sense that the Incarnation was the most fitting means of saving human beings. This aesthetic necessity makes possible the harmony of difference that does not require the exceptional sacrifice of a scapegoat or a *homo sacer* in order to establish the conditions of the normalcy. "In Christ, there is no longer the inclusion/exclusion logic of race, nor of economics, nor of gender...But this inclusion of differences does not mean their exclusion! No, they remain, as pure relations, pure passage of harmonious will."<sup>96</sup> Hierarchy, perhaps counter-intuitively, remains as well. Not the "specific hierarchies of gender and slavery which Paul within his limited historical perspective" eventually endorsed, but rather "the necessary 'educative' and architectonic hierarchies of the transmission of harmonious life which no culture can ever truly dispense with."<sup>97</sup>

The key to keeping arbitrary hierarchies of power or avarice from ruling the day is nothing other than the *aesthetic* example of Christ's specificity. "For if there can be more to social life and hierarchy than arbitrariness, if there can indeed be 'harmony' or a passing of events in the 'right' way like music, then this suggests that there is a real 'affinity' to be constantly produced, discovered, and enacted" between Christ and the cruciform community.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

“[W]e are to imitate Christ and to live ecstatically through exchange, losing our lives in order to gain them,” knowing that in so doing we are ruled “not by a sovereign source which includes yet excludes us, but by *blood flowing from the past which we imbibe*, so that the outside is also the inside.”<sup>99</sup> The cruciformity of Christ’s atoning life, therefore, overcomes the visibility of violence through a public community formed by the Eucharist or, as Milbank puts, through “the brotherhood and sisterhood of the Grail: of those ceaselessly questing for the Eucharist...”<sup>100</sup>

What Milbank has arrived at, thus far, is a political scandal that is rooted in ontological realities deeper than the Eucharist itself, but we encounter those realities most fully in the reception of the Eucharistic signs of the Body and Blood of Christ. Ontology here does not eschew embodiment, signification, and mediation, as Chauvet often pejoratively said it would, but rather embraces them in order to establish the *theoria* by which any *praxis* is made possible. Thus, Milbank can programmatically state: “The Incarnation and the hypostatic descent of the Spirit inaugurated on earth a counter-polity exercising a counter-sovereignty, *nourished* by sovereign victimhood.”<sup>101</sup> The Church has a double foundation in the Triune Life of the Godhead in that the Church is “established both as the truth of the *Logos*, which is revealed by the good of the Holy Spirit, and as the gift of the Spirit which is peace, the intermingling and co-ordination of all the Spirit’s specific gifts, which are human talents.”<sup>102</sup> It would appear, in so many words, that the Church has *Verbum* and *Donum*, Language and Gift, as its foundations, which lead to the Church’s corresponding political scandals of *Truth* and *Peace*. The founding moment of the

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 103-104.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 105. This is another allusion to Pickstock’s work on the Eucharist, particularly an earlier essay entitled “Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist.” A revised version of this essay appears in *Truth in Aquinas* as “Truth and Language.” See Catherine Pickstock “Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 2 (1999): 159-179; Milbank & Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 76-95.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 106.

Church, the Eucharist, is therefore the gift of a particular type of language that is itself a community shaped by the truth of that language, or, as Milbank puts it, “if truth is peace and peace truth, then *theoremata* and *pragmata* are also convertible and co-incident aspects.”<sup>103</sup> The quest of the Church is not only the quest for truth and peace but also a quest for its own identity as the community given the gift of truth and peace in the embodied ritual that founds it—the Eucharist.

Milbank, however, does not leave his account of the political scandal of the Eucharist here. Indeed, unlike Chauvet, who was content to speak in broad strokes about the genuine ethics that would define the members of the Eucharistic community, Milbank wants to ask specifically, “How is the peace of the Church mediated to and established in the entire human community?”<sup>104</sup> Rather than name a sacrament or a specific ecclesial hierarchy, Milbank goes further and proffers that the answer to this question is *socialism*.<sup>105</sup> Milbank thus endorses what I am here calling “sacramental socialism.” I say “socialism,” obviously, because Milbank is so bold as to name the specific political system through which the peace of the Church might be mediated to the public realm of human affairs. I say “sacramental” because it is precisely on the basis of the ontology mediated through the Eucharist and the “hierarchy of the Eucharistic and ecclesial *corpus mysticum*” that Milbank’s peculiar version of socialism justified.

Milbank’s “first iteration” of the political scandal of the Eucharist—what I am calling, again, “sacramental socialism”—is one that flirts with but never fully endorses a sort of “mixed constitution” that would seek to blend together rule by the Many and rule by the Few or the One as the optimum arrangement for the public realm. This is the great controversy, so it seems to

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

me, of what I will later call the “second iteration” of the political scandal of the Eucharist. In the first iteration, however, Milbank does seek to give an apology for the worth of “educative” hierarchies within an ecclesial context. He turns to socialism as a means of showing how the democratic political impulse might be satisfied but in a *counter*-Enlightenment form, as the earliest articulations of socialism supposedly were.<sup>106</sup> The Church, for its part, has a “simultaneous hierarchy and democracy,” and, “contrary to all the assumptions of secular sovereignty, [the Church] is all the more democratic the more it is genuinely hierarchical.”<sup>107</sup> The Church is the community wherein the aristocratic insight into Truth and the democratic impulse towards Peace can coincide. Yet, for Milbank, this union must in some way be mediated to the broader public realm through a political system. Milbank’s choice is socialism, and it is the goal of this final portion of my account of the “first iteration” of the political scandal of the Eucharist to say why.

The goal of Milbank’s political ruminations is obviously a sort of genuine community, but here he points towards an important first principle that is in keeping with his earlier critiques of ontologies of difference. There is a false sense of community proffered in political theory that views community as an organic whole, utterly cohesive in its unity. But this form of community, Milbank argues, is secretly a totality, an erasure of genuine difference for the sake of the singular whole. To value community truly, however, “is to value encounter, and the meeting with the other and different” such that the cohesion involved is not an erasure of difference but rather a

---

<sup>106</sup> This refers to Milbank’s claim that socialism in France was originally proffered by a series of Catholic thinkers. See John Milbank, “Were the ‘Christian Socialists’ Socialists?” *Papers of the Nineteenth Century Theology Working Group*, American Academy of Religion, vol. 14 (1989): 86-95.

<sup>107</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 108.

“harmonious sharing and blending.”<sup>108</sup> The postmodern political order, Milbank contends, is haunted by precisely this sort of false universality that seeks to establish a true pluralism but can only succeed in sowing the seeds of perpetual conflict unless difference is collapsed into identity. Both Capitalistic and Communitarian systems, therefore, will only collapse back into a bleak form of individualism that precludes community, particularly the genuine community that is founded on the gift of forgiveness and the gift-exchange of agape.

Between capitalism and communitarianism, Milbank sees a system of free-association that is itself nothing more than the “*universal gift*.”<sup>109</sup> In this mode of free-association, gift-exchange is made possible not by an utter cohesion within society but by the presence of the stranger or the other. The relational communion that Milbank envisions within this mode of human being-with is remarkably similar to Chauvet’s. Such free-association would be “a universal practice of offering, a universal offering in the expectation or at least hope of receiving back not a price due us, but *others themselves* in their counter gifts, because we aim for reciprocity, for community, and not for a barren and sterile self sacrifice...”<sup>110</sup> This gift-exchange is itself a sort of *mythos*, a story that defines the common good of the social itself. The unique nature of this *mythos* is to be found in its correspondence to that which made gift-exchange possible, namely, asymmetrical reciprocity and non-identical repetition. Capitalist and communitarian accounts of political order will “try and hold onto identity in spatial form, in order to define it and store it, thereby desacralizing it, subordinating it to a self-preservation which is ultimately self-canceling.”<sup>111</sup> The universal *mythos* that is also the universal gift, however, implies “a different *logos* to the *logos* of reason.” There is, in other words, a different

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 169. Emphasis mine.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 170.

*language* within which the manner of being-with of the community grounded by gift-exchange is formed. A language made possible by the gift of the possibility of reconciliation.

At this point, Milbank makes an important assertion: namely, that what makes forms of political order that privilege the ontological primacy of the social over the individual (like socialism) better than those which do otherwise, is that the universal is reached not by a flattening out of difference and locality. Rather, the universal is disclosed in and through particular and local dispensations, which is not to say that there are many cultural pathways to one absolute and inscrutable transcendence, all of which are equally valid.<sup>112</sup> Milbank instead envisions the goods revealed by free-associations to be a sort of pilgrimage through the *logos* established by the ontology of gift.

[I]f one is to say that an open pathway, or many open pathways, are disclosive of transcendence in some degree, this implies that, constantly and dynamically, one is on pilgrimage from sacred site to sacred site, weaving them together along a coherent line or spiral, and thereby out of smaller sites constantly tracing the margins of greater sites, and then returning to locate within the greater realm each specific place once again.<sup>113</sup>

The particular and the ineffable thus have a balance to each other, wherein the ineffable cannot proscribe any characterization of a good for all, while the particular cannot be overemphasized to the point of privileging one dispensation of the ineffable within a given locality over any other.

This theoretical excursus has a critical political payout. Such an account of the universal “holds more promise of a distributive justice enacted through consent, rather than through terror or forced purchase. Yet the precondition for such agreed distribution remains...some mode of universal religious attachment, some kind of collective totem.”<sup>114</sup> Milbank then emphatically links his account of a socialism grounded in collective devotion to Pickstock’s account of

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

transubstantiation. The Eucharist, he argues, uniquely allows for precisely this sort of universal devotion coupled with local variation. Indeed, he joins Pickstock in claiming, perhaps problematically, that the foundation of all European collectivity was the citizen's "sense of being literally part of the body of Christ, an extension of divine humanity."<sup>115</sup> Thus, the socialism for which Milbank is arguing relies explicitly on an account of the ontological scandal of the Eucharist, a transubstantiation through which difference can be integrated into the social in all of its local variances without violently being assimilated into a false universality. "Does this not suggest," he argues, "that the notion of the 'body of Christ' involves something much more politically complex than the usual notions of 'democracy,' 'civil society,' 'human rights,' and so forth?"<sup>116</sup>

The reader will recall that the ontological import of prioritizing the arrival of reality as gift as opposed to a collection of bare givens that were just "there," was a renewed sense of the significance of time and contingency. "Contingency," as Milbank puts it, "now partakes of ultimate and not subordinated significance" since the temporal now "may disclose or remind us of more of that which is eternal beyond both time and space."<sup>117</sup> Milbank's sacramental socialism thereby implies what he calls the "politics of time."<sup>118</sup> The politics of time creates a sort of "liturgical rule" grounded in the notion that only an orientation to transcendence or the eternal—i.e., an orientation that views reality as arriving gift—is able to interpret the "intrinsic nothingness of things in time as their existing by participation, as their subsisting always and primordially as gifts which declare to us ever-renewed and freely granted human

---

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 177.

possibilities.”<sup>119</sup> Hence, a collective devotion rooted in the ontological scandal of the Eucharist will necessarily empty out into a political scandal that is sacramental socialism, a form of political order that avoids the absolutization of pure autonomy.

I noted, however, at the outset of this section that the political scandal of the Eucharist will come to be seen as a *culture*, a sort of aesthetically fitting shape given to a particular mode of human belonging that will come to define the ecclesial makeup of the Church and, albeit imperfectly, the ordering of society at large. This culture is mediated by the liturgical order of the politics of time. There are three aspects to this mediation worth discussing as they stem from Milbank’s sacramental socialism as just articulated. First, the culture that is the political scandal of the Eucharist is rooted in *festival*. The social itself is seen as founded on an ontology of time that is “fully received from the outset” and yet “shared without restraint.” Doxology and charity, or in my terms “language” and “gift,” are consummated in the shared festival that holds society itself together. To split the two is either to “obliterate oneself as recipient,” which is just to “blaspheme the transcendent giver,” or it is to “refuse the return-gift of gratitude,” which is only an attempt to “celebrate one’s will to give rather than the miraculous and unpredictable arrival of achieved affinity and surprising reciprocity.”<sup>120</sup> Importantly, this means that making and exchange are foundational for all of social life. Indeed, they share much the same ontological priority that gift-exchange does for Milbank, and this is not surprising considering Milbank’s unceasing devotion to the metaphysical first truth of the *verum-factum*. Something produced is produced so that it may be but then lost, expanded, and offered. Creation, making, and production thus exhibit the “specific lineaments of the benefit of participation, of further

---

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 181.



received gift.”<sup>121</sup> The social is, therefore, that which is made and in being made is celebrated, and this is nothing other than its truth.

The second aspect of the liturgical order is *education*. Here we see again Milbank’s emphasis on the educative nature of hierarchy coming to play a decisive role. For Milbank education lies “very much within a liturgical economy” because all of life is ultimately nothing other than education, in that it is a reception of the arriving gift and an attempt to learn from that reception.<sup>122</sup> Education is thus coterminous with the political in that it is just one facet within a life seen as pedagogic reception. Yet, this further undermines the appeal of purely democratic politics since education requires submission to the wisdom of a tradition. Otherwise, education becomes, as it has under capitalistic systems, an instrumental mechanism for the creation of adequate workers. Education as a fundamental aspect of a sacramental socialism is thus hierarchical but not rigidly so. The vision of education here proffered is one of vertical ascent beyond the standing of a pupil. Education seeks to indicate the good life for those who submit to it, thus shaping the common good for which the society strives, but this common good is always open to revision via education and the vertical ascent of pupils into teachers in their own right. This revision makes that which education is attempting to inculcate semi-ineffable. Education, thus, obeys a “liturgical rhythm” since it seeks “almost impossibly” to “discover and transmit this semi-ineffability” to the community as a whole.<sup>123</sup>

The final aspect of the liturgical order is that of *profession*. The proper vision of profession according to Milbank is tied inextricably to the vision of gift that founds the ontological scandal of the Eucharist. The aim of a profession is not merely the accumulation of

---

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 183.

wealth (or perhaps better, it *was*) but rather a certain mode of giving that society then makes possible through compensation.<sup>124</sup> Those admitted into professions were taught a series of right patterns, shown in examples, and repeated (in non-identical ways, mind you) that turned to skills. Ultimately, this is what makes the *polis* liturgical for Milbank, that is, society's good is to be found in a series of examples and repeatable patterns that are non-identically repeated through innovative skill yet still within a common tradition. This vision of profession therefore transforms the purpose of exchange for society. Instead of exchanging for the sake of accumulating capital, professionals would see the purpose of work as "inheriting, developing, and passing on a particular strange skill requiring certain 'gifts' for its best exercise; gifts themselves offered for the wider manifestation of human *charisma*."<sup>125</sup> Milbank, importantly, admits that this vision of work, exchange, and the market is ultimately idealistic, but he is unceasing in his assertion that even partial successes are successes for which we could rightly fight. Even more importantly, the impulse to fight for such partial successes is the collective devotion to the revealed truth of the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist, ultimately, that discloses the ontological priority of gift and imposes upon us the vision of reality as arriving gift. As such, the politics of time that follows upon this ontological scandal is nothing other than a politics of the Eucharist. Milbank's sacramental socialism, therefore, is one attempt at articulating the necessary practical corollary to the ontological scandal of the Eucharist.

The ultimate result of such sacramental socialism is a "culture of affinity," or what Milbank describes as "the absolutely non-theorizable...the almost ineffable...the *mysterium*."<sup>126</sup> But what does Milbank mean by "affinity," and why would the end result of such a well known

---

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

political system be anything verging on the ineffable? Milbank's account of affinity is, I take it, an attempt to head off at the pass an oncoming objection to his appeal to Christian socialism. The objection, I think, is over the *verum-factum* and its compatibility with Milbank's appeal to the orthodoxy of one political system over another. Essentially, the question one must ask of Milbank is how it is that the radically constructed nature of truth and the appeal to a single political choice among many others are reconcilable with one another? Milbank has already shown that the dynamism of the *verum-factum* leads to treating the political scandal of the Eucharist as a *culture*, a creative human endeavor to shape the world according to an aesthetically rather than logically necessary truth. Yet, why then endorse *one particular* political option? Milbank's argument for "affinity" holds the answer to this objection.

The *verum-factum* and Milbank's insistence on the aesthetic dimension of truth and gift-exchange reveal an account of human nature as ever expanding through new, creative activity.<sup>127</sup> Human beings, in short, are meant to change up until the *eschaton*, with these changes being judged via analogy to the Good. Milbank is thus arguing for a sort of primordial *poiesis* at the root of the human being as human, but Milbank is also arguing that Christian must embrace the "revisability of the world" as such. This, as I see it, is the real import of Vico's hylozoic metaphysical system for Milbank's theological work. Christianity is the religion that bursts boundaries, but it is not the religion that reveals that boundaries do not exist. Again, the only way Milbank can seem to make sense of such a paradox is to speak in terms of gift-exchange. Categories like "nature" and "essence" are not immovable and fixed, but they remain tenable categories because they arrive as "valuable abiding gift with and through time, rather than

---

<sup>127</sup> This assertion, I take it, is entirely in keeping with one of most important aspects of Milbank's recent work: namely, "trans-organicity." For more on that see the section on the "Second Iteration" below.

despite it.”<sup>128</sup> More importantly, an essence can persist over time precisely because it is *non-identically repeated* through time. The truth of such an essence—like, say, the essence of a political community—is thereby an ever-changing yet ever-abiding phenomenon. Art “further reveals *natura*.”<sup>129</sup>

Communities are, thereby, just another instance of *poesis*, a creative work of human artifice that must be judged according to what Milbank calls “creative discrimination.”<sup>130</sup> The goal of a politics that is based in the Eucharist, however, is to create a community that is united or identified with the Incarnate One. This means creating a community that is joined to Jesus through an *affinity* of character. So “affinity” comes to mean more than just a mere similarity, instead affinity suggests something like an analogical union of natures. Milbank’s favored analogy is, fittingly, the Incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth, according to Milbank, held such an affinity to the second person of the Trinity “as to constitute identity; but an identity between humanity and divinity, not of substantial nature, but of character, *hypostasis*, or *persona*.”<sup>131</sup> Jesus, therefore, communicates this *character* to the disciples “where they were to repeat *differently*, so constituting a community of affinity with Jesus.” The Eucharistic community is thus not a community of nature (a family, for instance) or a community founded by coercion (the State) but is rather “a community of difference in identity...an identity diffused through the non-identical repetition of character, or of affinity.”<sup>132</sup>

The difficulty, obviously, is to adjudicate the proper instantiations of this affinity within the time before the *eschaton*. How are we to practice “creative discrimination” such that we

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

choose the proper means of non-identically repeating the character of Christ, thereby *gifting* to the world a community of identity in difference? One can see why Milbank would call affinity “the absolutely non-theorizable,” for how can one theorize or delineate the way to repeat absolutely the *character* communicated by the life of Jesus? Despite the seeming specificity of Milbank’s proposal—a sacramental socialism, mind you—the notion of affinity seems to undermine the assuredness of any one political system’s supposed affinity with the character of Jesus.

Milbank, thus, seems to end his appeal to socialism in a manner much like Chauvet ended his engagement with the project of overcoming metaphysics. While the two seem mostly compatible, what cannot be denied is that the way forward is neither a set of clearly definable theoretical principles nor a vapid appeal to the “messiness” of practice. Rather, the way forward is just that, *a way*. Whatever “affinity” is, it cannot be something discoverable in the order of things as “merely a *given* impersonal bond.”<sup>133</sup> Again, the only language Milbank can find to speak of it is that of gift. Affinity, as expressed through a sort of Christian socialism, must rather be “the arriving *gift* of something that we must partially discover in patient quest, active shaping and faithful pursuing.”<sup>134</sup> Milbank seems to end his appeal to sacramental socialism, therefore, in an ecstatic mode. Socialism, it would seem, is the closest thing we have got to an affinity with Christ, but even it must be transcended as we faithfully seek to non-identically repeat the character of the Incarnate One in our shaping of the world.

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

*Second Iteration: A Return to Christendom?*

I could have well stopped at the first iteration almost as an *apologia* on behalf of what I see as the core of Milbank's theological work. However, Milbank himself did not stop there, and has couched his newest works *Beyond Secular Order* and *The Politics of Virtue* as advances upon his previous theological constructions. What is most notable about both of these works is an assured bent towards a return of Christendom. That is, Milbank seems to give a theological justification as to how it is that the Church is theologically justified to assert a sort of monarchical or aristocratic political authority within the world. The *sacred polis* of the Church, therefore, does not merely have Christ as its head or have need of an educative series of hierarchies. The Church, so Milbank argues, requires some form of sovereign *rule* within its political order in order to keep faith with the ontological scandal of the Eucharist. This, it seems to me, is the crux of Milbank's arguments in the latter half of *Beyond Secular Order*, fittingly titled as the sequence on "Political Ontology." I also take this move to be a radical departure from the apophatic discipline that Milbank's appeal to affinity placed upon his prior work. Hence, I shall briefly detail how this new maneuver threatens to undermine much of what Milbank accomplished in his earlier works.

I have already written about the first half of *Beyond Secular Order* above, particularly the way that Milbank's genealogy of the secular found in this work coincides with much of what Milbank wrote in *Theology and Social Theory* and *Being Reconciled*. Beyond these familiar themes, Milbank extends the argument of those two core works in *Beyond Secular Order* by putting forward the original notion of "trans-organicity." I want to highlight this at the start because if there is a way in which the "second iteration," as I'm calling it, is in keeping with the first it is through this concept of trans-organicity. In the second sequence of *Beyond Secular*

*Order*, Milbank avers that pre-modern politics was focused around a quadruple anthropology. This anthropology is best defined by four pillars—pillars that, one assumes, are meant to be antidotes to the four pillars of modern ontology we have already discussed above.<sup>135</sup> These anthropological pillars are: 1.) humanity as the rational animal 2.) humanity as the social animal 3.) humanity as the fabricating animal and 4.) humanity as naturally ordered to the supernatural.<sup>136</sup> However, the *way* in which human beings inhabit these traditional concepts is where Milbank takes an original tack. Human beings are an “*integral hybrid*” in that none of these pillars can be taken away without the rest collapsing, but, more than that, the way in which human beings are rational, social, fabricating, and ordered to the supernatural is *transgressive*.<sup>137</sup>

The rational animal’ is only animal as rational, and yet the mode taken by animality here is essential to reason. The social animal is only animal as social, yet this sociality is an entirely natural phenomenon. Homo Faber is only human through making things and ‘making things up’ yet this artificial character which belongs to the individual through artefacting is an aspect of that individual’s integral nature. Finally, human nature paradoxically is that which exceeds itself in receiving the gift of the supernatural end; yet this ‘deification’ is only possible as the fulfillment of human created nature, and not as its destruction.<sup>138</sup>

Each pillar seems to carry within it a sort of ecstatic fulfillment in that the human being is only one thing by being that thing’s other at the same time. Milbank thus describes human beings as “grotesque,” here referring more to the aesthetic sense of grotesque than the common usage of the word. Human beings are “oddly-ruptured” and yet held together.<sup>139</sup> They are *trans-organism*, an instance of animality that can exceed itself as animal precisely in and through its organic nature. They are an organic unity that exceeds itself. Thus, trans-organicity seems to be a vital expansion of his prior emphasis on dynamism and poesis as fundamental to human beings.

---

<sup>135</sup> See Chapter Four above.

<sup>136</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 135.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Trans-organicity also plays a vital role in further expanding Milbank's insistence that the social and the ontological are inextricably linked, thus further linking the ontological scandal of the Eucharist with the political scandal of the Eucharist as well. The trans-organic character of human creatures means that there is an "architectonic dimension of human association."<sup>140</sup> It is a part of our very nature as animals to be social. There just is no such thing as an asocial or apolitical human being. Again, this is not in spite of our animality but directly on account of it. For our animality, so Milbank argues, is "an animality inclined to social artifice from the very depths of its animality."<sup>141</sup> Milbank has thus applied his earlier work on the *verum-factum* to the biological nature of animal life—artifice, as it were, is part of what it means *biologically* to exist as a human being.

This new insistence on the primordial creative nature of human beings in their natural states as animals would be a notably helpful expansion on Milbank's prior sacramental socialism. It would be helpful in that it shows the deeply sacramental structure essential to much of human association. Directly linking, in other words, the sacramentality of the cosmos with the ontological priority of the social would provide greater heft for Milbank's insistence that socialism is the form that the sacramental community would take. Yet, Milbank's work here takes an unexpected turn. He argues that pre-modern politics, the politics that centered around the four pillars of theological anthropology listed above, maintained a place for the rule of the One, the Few, and the Many, meaning that pre-modern politics had no difficulty reconciling the presence of some form of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy in its politics. It was able to do this, Milbank seems to imply, precisely because the contingent sort of truth natural to human art was held in higher regard. There was no need, in other words, to determine the single right form

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 155.



of government that would grant full flourishing to any human association. Forms of government were treated as the result of contingent historical circumstances, exemplifying a form of pragmatism that Milbank seems not only to admire but to link to the theological corrective that pre-modern politics would offer us today.<sup>142</sup>

While an endorsement of rule by the Many shouldn't shock us coming from a socialist, the appeal to the inherent need for a recovery of political rule by the One and the Few is a difficult thing to reconcile. Milbank's point is, if I might coin a phrase, an onto-political one, meaning it is a point about the political correlate of a thoroughly modern ontological shift. Nominalist metaphysics calls into question universal essences, and this critical doubt then subsequently undermines the appeal to a universal common good. The only legitimate political justification becomes the claim of rights that then, consequently, does away with the use of the Few as proprietors of public virtue (the purpose for which Milbank thinks rule by the Few ought to be preserved). What Milbank wants to argue for, however, is not just the return of the One or the Few but rather that the place of sovereignty must be the *interplay* between the One, the Few, and the Many.<sup>143</sup> This, he argues, is in keeping with traditional metaphysics and is surely somewhat analogous to Milbank's Trinitarian ontology. The difference is that a stripping of power away from the sovereign state and returning it to intermediary associations that bind the many, are regulated by the Few, and are given dignity by the One seems a far cry from the socialism that sought to enact a culture of affinity within the public sphere.<sup>144</sup>

Milbank's defense of the return of rule by the One and the Few is couched as fundamentally in keeping with his prior work on poesis and creativity. Furthermore, Milbank,

---

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 160-161.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 173-74.

again, links the Eucharistic presence with primordial creativity in the section that he uses to begin his defense of some contemporary form of Christendom, a section fittingly titled “Eucharistic Creativity and Political Power.” Milbank’s argument stems from earlier reflections on the relationship between aesthetics and sovereignty. Following an essay by historian Ernst Kantorowicz, Milbank confirms his assent to something I only hinted at above, namely, that contingent political configurations must be looked at as “a process of creative fictioning.”<sup>145</sup> Our ability to create social orders in this manner is not just an imitation of God “as creator” but also “God as Trinitarian—the implication being that human verbal art as an internally generated or ‘made’ product is as indispensable to human cognition as is the generation of the Son/Word to divine cognition,” further confirming the continuing influence of the *verum-factum* on Milbank’s recent work.<sup>146</sup>

The earthly power that Milbank sees as exercising this power of creating legal fictions is the Papacy, who inherits it from the first true creative artist, Jesus Christ, as the full instantiation of *homo faber*. The Pope inherits such power from Christ, according to Kantorowicz, and thereby shares in gifting of God’s power of *creation ex nihilo* to the human person of Jesus within the papal act of overriding existing law or inventing new law altogether. But since the power stems from Christ it is not merely something interesting or novel, rather the Papal decrees it would seem are an utterly *new* creation amongst human legal artifice. This is possible only in so far as the Pope participates in the gifting of divine creativity to humanity through Jesus, seemingly acting as the Vicar of the second person of the Trinity by operating on earth as the *Logos* does in the divine economy. The sort of creativity that the papacy rightly exercises is

---

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 195. The essay from which Milbank draws is Ernst Kantorowicz, “The Sovereignty of the Artist: A Note on Legal Maxims and Renaissance Theories of Art” in *Selected Studies* (Locust Valley: J.J. Augustin, 1965), 352-365.

<sup>146</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 194.

analogous to the first act of *creatio ex nihilo* and, critically, to the moment of transubstantiation. Hence, Milbank writes, “It was the Pope, initially, who had the power of drastic creative innovation, because he mediated first of all liturgically, but then legislatively, the trans-creation of Christ himself, Christ’s deployment of fictions, Christ’s institution of the new birth at baptism, and finally Christ’s act of transubstantiation on Maundy Thursday.”<sup>147</sup>

The seeming paradox of the “fictional” nature of legal artifice causes Milbank, yet again, to resort to talk of gift and language in order to explain it. Created fiction is, like language, “necessary for the adumbration of a certain truth,” and thus becomes “a paradoxically essential ‘supplement’ in a somewhat Derridean sense.”<sup>148</sup> Fiction “discloses a new universality,” but new only in a historic sense, for the universality here described is not new for Milbank. Indeed, it is the very same sense of Eucharistic universality that was first put forward in Pickstock’s account of transubstantiation. Fiction discloses a new universality, he argues, “only through the re-narration of a concrete instance,” meaning, in other words, that the legal fictions we create can disclose universality in their concrete particulars without exhausting the breadth of the universal as such. “[U]niversal norms of equity are constructed by us through language, yet the ‘artificiality of the universal need not mean that it does not disclose a true universality.’”<sup>149</sup> Yet, talk of language soon necessitates talk of the gift, for the sort of creativity we are speaking of here is just as much a discovery as it is a crafting of truth. Fiction seems, therefore to *arrive as a gift* even in our crafting it from prior givens. “[I]f fiction is inspired or discloses a truth to us,”

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 206-207.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 207.

Milbank argues, “then it is as much *received* as produced, as much *granted* as engendered...”<sup>150</sup>  
Politics as legal fiction, therefore, is *theurgic*.

A Trinitarian ontology that sees God as primordially creative prior to the act of Creation has the political correlate of a politics based on a vision of the human being as, among the three other pillars, *homo faber*. Politics are theurgic and, in being theurgic, they are also trans-organic or trans-natural—they exceed the natural sociality of human beings in and through the animality of human beings. Yet, Milbank insists that this creation of social orders as fundamental to human beings in their tran-organicism also necessitates a return of the Few and a justification of the One in any Christian politics of supernatural charity. Kingship and aristocracy are not done away with in the *polis* ordered by grace but are rather, so Milbank seems to argue, required for the proper dispersion of that grace on every level of such a society. More importantly, this is not merely a suggestion for the makeup of ecclesial hierarchy and a clear disavowal of such hierarchy’s application in the public sphere. Far from it, in fact. The politics of theurgy that Milbank is proffering leads to the bombastic claim that “the idea of Christianity without Christendom is a self-deluding and superficial illusion.”<sup>151</sup>

I should make clear here that what Milbank is arguing for is not necessarily a return to monarchy or aristocracy as the proper form of government. His claim is more that the One, the Few, and the Many are present in all human societies, regardless of whether or not we think of ourselves as having eliminated one of the three once and for all. This is not a claim, so it seems to me, that is all that controversial. The suggestion that Christendom and Christianity are not separable phenomena, however, is quite controversial. Importantly, Milbank’s attempt to defend this claim relies upon his prior work on gift-exchange. Milbank argues that charity is a

---

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., my italics.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 233.

supernatural virtue that is “superadded” to us.<sup>152</sup> Charity, in other words, is not something we grow within ourselves but something we receive as supernatural gift. Yet the addition of this gift is not something alien to us. Like other aspects of the trans-organicity for which Milbank argues, the addition of charity to us as gift is something added to us that somehow completes our nature—an analogue to Milbank’s prior work on aesthetic fittingness.

The Church’s relationship to society is a parallel to the gift of charity. Since “love occurs entirely as the gift of God” there cannot be any presence of this gift “outside the community of love,” i.e., the Church.<sup>153</sup> The Church attempts to inaugurate something like a “trans-community,” where the Church is something utterly alien to the natural state of human community in a fallen world, yet the Church is a “supplement” to that nature which fittingly completes it in a natural way.

[T]his means that the thesis that human trans-organicism is only completed and sealed by the further supplement of charity is also the thesis that the society of the Church alone completes and seals the integration of natural familial and economic ‘society’ with political law and government. The Church is emphatically not, on a theological conception, a kind of ‘extra’ religious organization which some people happen to belong to; it is, rather, the *sine qua non* for the existence of human society as such, and so for the existence of humanity as such: *nulla humanitas extra ecclesiam*.<sup>154</sup>

The Church is to society what grace is to the human soul, a supernatural gift that seems to naturally complete the one who receives it.

The second iteration of the political scandal of the Eucharist is, for Milbank, best described as “a new ‘politics of integral trans-organicity’ which fuses Christian socialism with a new sense of what is valid in the ‘conservative’ critique of modernity.”<sup>155</sup> The new politics of

---

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 268.

integral trans-organicity is socialist because it imagines society as “the work of human personhood manifest as free labour” and because it believes that “the most important human goods are in principle achievable by all.”<sup>156</sup> Yet, it seems decidedly not socialist in its insistence on recovering the role of the One and the Few as symbolic representatives of honor and virtue, particularly in the insistence that such public virtue is a necessary part of fusing natural justice and supernatural charity.<sup>157</sup> Socialism of the materialist variety, Milbank avers, gave up on the persistence of genuine virtue and instead opted to achieve the most important human goods solely through redistribution. The politics of trans-organicity, however, cannot abide this due to the integral theological anthropology that is at its heart. The most important human goods to be achieved in this new politics are more than just economic equality. They are what Milbank calls the “democratization of exaltation,” the deification of society through the Church that mirrors our soul’s deification through Christ.<sup>158</sup>

Milbank’s sudden turn towards the good of monarchical rule and the direct endorsement of society’s need for a global Christendom is striking. Though I have not directly treated the arguments of Milbank’s most recent collaboration with political theorist Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, the fusion of Christian socialism with a particularly British conservatism continues in that work as well.<sup>159</sup> There are many ways to explain such turns, but I believe Milbank’s theology of the Eucharist can offer at least one explanation as to why Milbank’s interpretation of the political scandal of the Eucharist has trended towards a socialism fused with

---

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 263-264.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> In that work, Milbank and Pabst explicitly endorse a Mixed Constitution for Britain and are remarkably favorable towards the need and good of the Crown. As Oliver O’Donovan put it in a recent review, “Claims for the virtue of the Crown are pitched at a level unheard of for several generations.” Oliver O’Donovan, “Review of ‘The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future’” *Modern Theology* 33, no. 3 (2017): 485.

constitutional monarchy. The insight comes, in fact, from Chauvet. In his analysis of the Scholastics' interpretation of Thomas, Chauvet noted what he thought was a pernicious overemphasis on the hypostatic union as the source of sacramental grace to the detriment of pneumatology. This creates, Chauvet believes, not a necessary fall into but more a logical tendency towards an ecclesiology of a "strongly institutional kind."<sup>160</sup> One cannot help but notice, Chauvet argues, in the Scholastic tradition "a transition from a strongly pneumatological and "sacramental" ecclesiology to a *more institutional and juridical ecclesiology*, a transition theologically fostered by the growing infringement on the Holy Spirit by the holy humanity of Christ and rendered, if not necessary, at least possible by the *filioque*."<sup>161</sup> An overemphasis on the hypostatic union within sacramental theology leads to a detriment of the Holy Spirit in ecclesiology such that a more stringent notion of Christendom can come to the fore with papal power occupying the role of Christ, endowed with sovereign power.

Milbank's work bears, just as Chauvet says of later Scholastic theology, a "family resemblance" to this sort of theology. After all, even in *Being Reconciled*, the political scandal of the Eucharist is based in the continuation of a chain of gift-exchange that is only made possible by the Incarnation as the highest of all gifts. The Spirit plays a role, to be sure, but this seems to leave the Spirit as merely an instrument of a gift-exchange grounded in Christ alone. In the end, Milbank uses his account of gift-exchange as the justification to proffer ecclesial hierarchy as a necessary good, advocate on behalf of an increase in papal power, and, lastly, argue for the inseparability of ecclesiology and Christendom. This fact has the potential to call the integrity of his theological project into question. For if "ideas about being" truly coincide with "ideas about human action" then it would seem that the Spirit ought to be more than just the presence of

---

<sup>160</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 468.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

individual *charismata* within the broader community. The Spirit ought, so it seems to me, be the means by which the *trans* of the trans-community is secured.

At the very beginning of his career Milbank published a remarkable essay on pneumatology entitled “The Second Difference.” In the introduction to that essay he stated the following:

If theology is properly the elucidation of the Godhead of the Son, then it is not surprising that pneumatology should find expression only as an echo, an after-thought. Yet if we are to believe Origen it is precisely in the distinguished knowledge of the *Pneuma*, that the distinction of Christianity most lies. Perhaps theology still awaits its complementation by a 'theopneumatics'.<sup>162</sup>

The second iteration of Milbank’s account of the political scandal of the Eucharist begs the question of whether or not his theological project still requires complementation by a theopneumatics. I have already noted the many places that Milbank sought to bring the Spirit to the fore in his prior work on the secular, on the ontological scandal of the Eucharist, and even on the political scandal of the Eucharist as well. It is possible to read his most recent political work as a sort of “Trinitarianism without reserve” when he calls for locating sovereign power within the interplay of the One, the Few, and the Many. Yet, it is also possible, and I think the more likely option, to read Milbank’s turn towards a recovery of monarchic and aristocratic forms of rule as a neglect of the Trinitarian logic that turned upon the place of the Spirit as the “second difference.” Ultimately, Milbank’s account of the political scandal of the Eucharist, particularly the second iteration I have just described, could have benefited from less of an allergy to the sort of absence that Chauvet sought to preserve in his sacramental theology, precisely for the sake of avoiding an overemphasis on the *plenitudo potestatis* of the Papacy and the necessity of Christendom.

---

<sup>162</sup> John Milbank, “The Second Difference: For a Trinitarianism Without Reserve,” *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986): 213.



## *Conclusion*

Milbank serves as a fitting complement to Chauvet because his work has helped to reveal several key horizons for any future attempt at giving account of the ontological and political scandal of the Eucharist. Both thinkers are intent upon preserving the necessity of both presence and absence in their account of Eucharistic change. Moreover, both seem to seek to go beyond the confines of presence and absence, either pushing the Eucharistic presence beyond the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation (Chauvet) or noting the ways that even the traditional doctrine itself pushes the dichotomy of presence and absence to the breaking point (Pickstock/Milbank). Chauvet seemed to use Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian resources to reconfigure notions of presence, whereas Milbank and Pickstock emphatically asserted that Christian ontology always already thwarted the supposed opposition between presence and absence in the first place.

Secondly, reading Milbank in light of Chauvet shows the ontological and political implications of differing accounts of gift-exchange. For Chauvet the near-mercenary obligation of Mauss' account of the gift was transformed into the more language-centered notion of "symbolic exchange." Gift and language fuse for Chauvet such that the gift of the Eucharistic presence is nothing less than the gift of a language-game to the Church. For Milbank the emphasis must also be on *exchange* rather than purely on gift, so as to avoid the univocal and unilateral pure gift of absolute disinterest, something that Derrida showed effectively to be self-defeating. Gift-exchange, however, can be "purified" such that the gift may reappear in the genuine gift-exchange of agapic community. The Eucharistic presence on this account imitates the impossibility of the pure gift, it is a linguistic impossibility that comes to be the condition for the possibility of any truth whatsoever.

Finally, however, the dialogue between Milbank and Chauvet begs the question of just how it is that the *sacramentum* that carries with it vast implications for a properly Christian ontology and a properly Christian politics is related to the category of *mysterium*, from which it originated. Put in more contemporary categories, how is it that the sacramentality that stems from accounts of the Eucharist transforms our vision of reality, and therefore compels a particular mode of being-with in the world that is inherently a political theology? How is such a vision of sacramentality to be disciplined by the apophaticism that has guided Christian theology since its inception? Chauvet takes a more decidedly Protestant tack, treating unknowability of the God made present in the Eucharist as a lasting vestige of ontotheology. The God of Scripture is not unknowable but is rather the *deus absconditus*, the God who is mystery through God's sovereign choice to hide Godself.<sup>163</sup> Milbank's work on this relationship is arguably one that goes against the merits of the apophatic discipline as it is utilized in postmodern thought. Milbank will not abide, obviously, a postmodern apophatics like that of, say, John Caputo, which resists any claim to assured theological knowledge.<sup>164</sup> The ontological scandal of the Eucharist is not a covering-over of ontology but rather the revelation of a *Trinitarian* ontology, a Trinitarian ontology that cannot abide by the politics of ontological violence inherent in most postmodern apophaticism. Yet, what exactly is left after Milbank's stringent denial is difficult to tell, and his work is not an *oeuvre* that lends itself to moments of admitted inadequacy or indeterminacy. Milbank's fleeting references to apophaticism in relation either to the Eucharistic presence or to a Eucharistic politics are often covered over by Milbank's remarkably self-assured tone and overwhelming erudition. This final horizon, however, shows the greatest promise of charting a

---

<sup>163</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 75.

<sup>164</sup> See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

middle way between the two perspectives. For a stronger reading of apophaticism in relation to the Eucharist might help to transform Chauvet's notion of absence into something more positive and, on the other hand, this stronger reading of apophaticism might also rein in Milbank's political walkabouts.

## CHAPTER SIX

### EUCCHARIST AS THE GIFT OF POLITICAL LANGUAGE

#### *Introduction*

My concern in this essay has been adumbrating the importance of *sacramentality* for postmodern theology. Sacramentality offers both a series of benefits and a series of dangers for theology in the wake of postmodernity. The primary benefit sacramentality can offer to theology, as I have sought to detail it through the works of Chauvet and Milbank, is as a node that brings together theories of gift-exchange, language, and post-ontotheological theology. Sacramentality is by no means a panacea for the problems facing theologians trying to serve the Church for the common good, but it does offer theology a vision of the cosmos, of the human person, of history, and of the Triune God that seems able to draw together the insights of postmodern theory with the Christian Tradition. In sum, sacramentality, when taken as the hermeneutic principle or the first-truth of theology, insists that theology can be neither purely theoretical nor purely practice, any theology done from the perspective of sacramentality is always already theoretical and practical, philosophical and political. The Eucharist could, thus, be thought of as the gift of political language—a fusion of embodied ritual that arrives as gift, and the gift that arrives to us is the gift of language as a mode of human being-with.

As we have seen, however, theologies rooted in sacramentality are beset by a series of dangers, and the rival visions of Chauvet and Milbank demonstrated dangers unique to their respective positions on sacramentality and its import for theology. For Chauvet the danger was joining his fundamental theology of sacramentality to Maussian gift-exchange and Heidegger's project of overcoming metaphysics. While Chauvet's recovery of the anthropological as the site

of the theological through radical theologies of the Cross is an important insight, joining the Eucharist too closely to the anthropological principle of symbolic exchange risks instrumentalizing sacramentality along with the Eucharist. Milbank on the other hand is right to insist that sacramentality has a political correlate. Ideas about being do, in some way, coincide with ideas about human action and the proper shape that it ought to take. There is, in other words, something to the idea of a “sacramental imaginary” that ought to influence the Church’s public life. Yet, Milbank runs afoul of the apophatic discipline on Trinitarian discourse, and since his thoughts about Being are not adequately reined in by incomprehensibility, the political correlate of his Trinitarian ontology has of late veered dangerously close to idolatry. Thus, it seems that Chauvet needs more specific and specifically Christian content added to his fundamental theology of sacramentality, while Milbank seems to require a chastening of his ontology so as to limit the specificity of his political recommendations to the Church.

I want now to defend the notion of the Eucharist as the gift of political language as a middle way between these rival visions of sacramentality. Before doing so, and as a vital preliminary for making my case, I want to assert something with regards to Chauvet’s and Milbank’s theological systems, something that has already been asserted by William Franke in a different context. I want to claim that behind both theologians’ distinctive systems is a “not fully acknowledged apophaticism.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, despite both Chauvet and Milbank’s attempts to distance their theological systems from negative theology, their approaches are constituted by “implicit apophatic underpinnings.” I concur further with Franke that this intimacy with the apophatic is part of what makes their assertions so protean within the particular moment in which theology currently finds itself.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2014), 274.

They share in common a radical insight into the structural negativity of human experience—and of all its expressions in language—as turned toward and dependent on an Other, on something that or someone who the human mind cannot comprehend or say. Apophasis, furthermore, lies at the source of their common concern with elucidating how religion is vitally relevant to our self-understanding in a post-modern age. Religion is always deeply concerned with what cannot be adequately stated, and any discourse that attempts to speak for it or out of its concerns cannot but falter, unless it acknowledges and embraces a dimension of unsayability at its core.<sup>2</sup>

In short, both theologians rely on a core intimacy with the unsayable that give their theologies much of their argumentative force.

In what follows, I am arguing that making explicit and even intensifying their apophatic foundations could improve these productive aspects of Chauvet and Milbank's theologies, productive both pastorally and philosophically. My account of the Eucharist as the gift of political language turns, therefore, on an insistence that apophasis must explicitly shape fundamental theologies of sacramentality, which will lead to a new way of conceiving the ontological and political scandals of the Eucharist. Rather than giving an inch to ontotheological presuppositions, apophatic theology will help to mitigate some of the difficulties of Chauvet's account brought on by his attempt to correlate Eucharistic theology with the project of overcoming metaphysics. On the other hand, intensifying the apophatic discipline within my theology of the Eucharist will serve to temper some of the more extreme political suggestions of Milbank. A theology of the Eucharist subject to apophatic discipline places the unsayable at the center of accounts of sacramentality and transubstantiation, which consequently puts the unsayable at the heart of any political theology bound to the sacraments.

---

<sup>2</sup> Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 274. Admittedly, the comparison Franke is making here is between radical orthodoxy and radically secular theologies (like the work of John Caputo or Mark C. Taylor, for example). Franke actually lumps Chauvet in with theologians influenced by *nouvelle théologie*, which in turn shapes Radical Orthodoxy particularly through the work of de Lubac.

I would like then to discuss briefly this concept of the “unsayable,” why I take it to be essential for interpreting the Eucharist, and what this might mean for defending my titular thesis. Let me begin by speaking about the word “mystery.” The word “sacrament” has its etymological roots in the Greek *mysterion*. As Depoortere describes it, *mysterion* referred not just to a bland mysteriousness or hiddenness but specifically to the eternal plan of God for our salvation that was revealed at last in the person of Christ, and in which we participate via the sensible *mysteria* of Baptism, Eucharist, and other ritual acts.<sup>3</sup> The *mysteria* certainly have an aspect of mysteriousness to them, but calling them by an etymological derivation of *mysterion* is first and foremost meant to secure their relationship to a particular economy of salvation rather than a particular notion of incomprehensibility. The translation of *mysterion* into the Latin *sacramentum* had the odd effect of equating such transcendently oriented rites with the martial loyalty oaths of Roman soldiers. Yet, the equivalence also made a great deal of sense in that “common to both meanings is the idea of guaranteed engagement realized procedurally through a number of sensible acts.”<sup>4</sup> Depoortere rightly wonders if this did not, however, lose the connection between the inscrutable workings of the Triune God and the sensible acts that guarantee our embodied engagement with the divine life.

I share that worry, and particularly so in this context, where two rival visions of sacramentality both seem to eschew any connection between negative theology, with its meticulously documented penchant for mystery, and the sacraments, whose roots lie in engagement with the inscrutable yet redemptive purposes of the Triune God. The anxiety over

---

<sup>3</sup> Kristaan Depoortere, “From Sacraments to Sacramentality and Vice-Versa” found in *Contemporary Sacramental Contours of a God Incarnate*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Lambert Leijssen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 52. See also Bruce T. Morrill, *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: The Paschal Mystery in People, Word, and Sacrament* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Depoortere, “From Sacraments to Sacramentality,” 53.

ontotheological presuppositions is what led Chauvet to eschew Thomas's doctrine of divine simplicity with its implied incomprehensibility and to turn instead to a more Reformed doctrine of the *deus absconditus*. Franke has documented well Milbank's similar anxiety about negative theology, given postmodern philosophy's embrace of the category. In the darkness and negation and suspicion of negative theology Milbank worries that "God" all too easily elides into "nothing," enabling subtle forms of nihilism to become wolves in sheep's clothing.<sup>5</sup> Both thinkers, in sum, share a suspicion of the influence of a certain strand of negative theology that either bolsters ontotheology or, in attempting to overcome ontotheology, only sneaks ontological violence in through the back door.

In the sections to follow I am going to elaborate just how I see Christian apophaticism as this unspoken mean between Chauvet and Milbank but, even more importantly, how it is that a properly apophatic, Trinitarian, and political theology can arise from an account of the Eucharist as the gift of political language. I should like to make clear my position first, however, with regards to apophaticism, so that the reader may have some idea of where exactly I am headed. I shall be elaborating in what follows the ways in which Chauvet and Milbank's notions of gift and language, as these relate to the Eucharist need to be strongly disciplined by apophaticism. That will mean predominantly speaking of the ways in which uniquely Christian accounts of incomprehensibility or the unsayable impose themselves upon us when we try and speak of the Eucharist. More accurately, if I am going to argue that the Eucharist is the gift of political language in contradistinction to the manner in which Chauvet and Milbank have attempted to do so, then the way in which my account shall distinguish itself from theirs is in insisting that the

---

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Franke's fifth chapter, "Radical Orthodoxy's Critique of Transcendental Philosophy and its Mistaken Mistrust of Negative Theology," in *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 203-270.



categories of gift and language, when elaborated from a Christian perspective, are both imbued with darkness and mystery. The apophatic discipline refines our speech of gift and language precisely through *Trinitarian* theology since *Logos* and *donum* themselves draw us into the saving plan of the economic Trinity. This will in turn reorient the ways in which the ontological and political scandals of the Eucharist can be spoken of by theologians since, as Chauvet shows us, such transformations in the doctrine of God must cause us to reconsider precisely how it is that God gives Godself to us in the Eucharist. Hence, in this final chapter I wish to challenge their conclusions (both ontological and political) through subjecting discussions of the Eucharist as Gift and the Eucharist as Language to the apophatic discipline.

I thus deem it necessary to move piece-by-piece through the syntagm that forms this work's title, elaborating for each section how this new emphasis on the apophatic discipline transforms the ontological and political scandal of the Eucharist. Therefore, I shall speak first about the Eucharist as *gift*. Second, I shall speak of the Eucharist as the gift *of* something, that is, the Eucharist as the gift of *language*. Finally, I shall examine the character of that particular gift by speaking of the Eucharist as the gift of *political* language. In so doing I hope to show that the Eucharist is indeed an ontological and political scandal simultaneously, as Chauvet and Milbank both argue. Yet, I want to argue emphatically that the ontology and the politics of the community formed by the Eucharist is not a definite set of applicable, ontological principles (Milbank) or a pedagogical means by which the will-to-know of the modern subject can be overcome (Chauvet). If any sort of practicable politics emerges from the *bricolage* of Chauvet and Milbank I am about to attempt it is a politics that stands in judgment of most forms of human belonging and a politics

oriented first to a vision of the Church as constituted by its share in the incomprehensibility of the Godhead.<sup>6</sup>

### *Eucharist as the Gift*

What I have just argued with regards to the Eucharist and unsayability begs the question of how such a relationship bears upon the thesis I am seeking to defend, namely, that the Eucharist is the gift of political language. I am beginning my defense of that thesis by examining only the first major thematic of the syntagm—how is it that the Eucharist is a gift? Given what I have said about unsayability, another question necessarily arises: Rather than counter Derrida's claim that the gift is the impossible, as Milbank does, ought we not to *expect* such an impossibility to underlie any account of the Eucharist as gift? In other words, rather than attempting to purify our conception of gift-exchange through either Milbank's or Chauvet's preferred methods, might we not rather clarify just what sort of impossibility the Eucharist possesses as a gift? I want to defend in this section the notion that the Eucharist is the impossible Gift, and that its impossibility appears when we examine the giver, the content of the gift, and the one who is to receive the gift. As Chauvet and Milbank have shown us, however, modifying the terms of gift will inevitably modify the terms upon which fundamental theologies of sacramentality function, since these theologies are based on the arrival of reality itself as gift.

---

<sup>6</sup> While I attempt this from a decidedly Anglican perspective, I should note here that Eastern Orthodox theologians have attempted to join the insights of a strong mystical or apophatic element present in most Orthodox theologians and the outcomes such insights ought to have for the makeup of human communities. While Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas are perhaps the most well-known, the most pertinent recent work is the recently translated work of Nikolaos Loudovikos. See Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity*, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010); and Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Church in the Making: An Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality*, trans. Norman Russell (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Press, 2015).

Thus, in clarifying the conception of the Eucharist as the impossible gift I establish a preliminary vision of sacramentality as undergirded by the same impossibility.

The question that haunted all gift-exchange for Derrida, as we saw in Chapter One, was how the gift could appear. For in appearing, the gift created an obligation of some kind, whether or reprisal or of gratitude, but hidden in that obligation was the economic logic of contract. Theologies of the Eucharist, however, are beset by an even more difficult question. The question of the Eucharist is not simply how a gift can appear but how the gift *of God* can appear. Now this is not the same as asking how God can be present in two different places at once—how Christ can be both present at God’s right hand and in the Eucharistic elements, for example. The onus of this question has little to do with the problems of transubstantiation at all and, indeed, the problems of transubstantiation are transformed by asking a more basic question of Eucharistic doctrine: How is it that the God who is utterly *incomprehensible* can be given to us in a gift that appears? In short, how must the apophatic discipline govern our speech on the Eucharist as Gift?

Chauvet and Milbank are somewhat in agreement that the “marvelous exchange” that is the Eucharist is the gift of God’s very self in some form. It is either the gift of God’s self through symbolic exchange or it is the gift of entrance into the aesthetic shaping that is not a mere interpretation of the life of Jesus but is rather substantial entrance into the Triune life. For each, despite their differences, what is given in the Eucharist is some form of connection with the Triune God and the gift-giving patterns that find their origin within the divine *perichoresis*. One way to combine their respective insights is to say that the gift of the sacraments is the *entrance* into the giving relations that constitute the divine life.<sup>7</sup> Since our identities are constituted, as

---

<sup>7</sup> Although I will take up part of her reading of the Gift below, I should note here that this is how Kimberly Hope Belcher characterizes the effect of baptism. See Kimberly Hope Belcher,

Chauvet and Milbank would agree, by the various “others” in our life, an entrance into a series of relations is the gift of an *identity*, and so the gift of the Eucharist must be not the gift of God as an object but the self gift of God as the entrance into the relations that just *are* what and who God is. This emphasis on the gift of identity grounded their respective moves toward and away from transubstantiation. Furthermore, this emphasis on self-gift in their respective theologies of the Eucharist also drove them to turn to language to try and get across how it is that a sign might be able to become a gift of self. In short, Chauvet’s and Milbank’s Trinitarian theologies, whether a Trinitarian Christology focused on the cry of dereliction or Milbank’s aesthetic Trinitarianism based in the *verum-factum*, drove them to conceive of the Eucharist as gift in the form of a sign.

Given our reflections on Franke’s notion of the unsayable above, I think a temptation facing the believer is to assume that, while a practice like contemplative prayer might be an encounter with the darkness or hiddenness of the incomprehensible God, practices like the Eucharist and Baptism are a more “kataphatic” sort of practice, precisely because they involve entrance into specifically narrated relations within the economy of salvation. In other words, I might be tempted to assume that we all “know what we’re doing,” so to speak, when we witness a baptism or partake of the Eucharist.

Yet, here I am going to engage two theologians who cut against that sort of thinking. First, Rowan Williams, who has shown that it is precisely those intra-divine relations revealed in the economy of salvation that are themselves the mystery, not solely the hidden being of the Father. So to encounter those relations in the sacraments and, what is more, to *enter into them through the sacraments*, is just as riddled with the darkness and hiddenness of God as, say, the

---

*Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), particularly 128-181.

mystic experience of the contemplative. As I have put it elsewhere, Williams bids us to change the presumed *target* of an apophatic grammar, to redefine just what it is that apophaticism is *for* in the first place.<sup>8</sup> What Williams found in the apophatic yet thoroughly Trinitarian theology of St. John of the Cross was “a negative theology of the Trinitarian life that derives its negative character not from general and programmatic principles about the ineffability of the divine nature, but from the character of the relations enacted in the story of Jesus and thus also in the lives and life-patterns of believers.”<sup>9</sup> Such a paradigm does not rule out, obviously, the apophatic as a sort of grammatical consideration about “the impossibility of specifying what it is that makes God to be God.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed what St. John of the Cross’s theology most imposed upon Williams was the need for a Trinitarian consideration to modify our speech of divine difference and desire so as to avoid it becoming nothing more than a means of making more vast the abyss between the finite and the infinite. “Trinitarian difference is both the difference of the uncontainable divine as such and the difference of the infinite ‘circulation’ of divine life between and among the three hypostases.”<sup>11</sup> I take this to mean that even in moments of assured encounter with the divine life through the sacraments, even in our encounter with the Great Sacrament of the Eucharist, an apophatic grammar of what cannot be said must ever discipline our speech about what occurs. For the “relations enacted in the story of Jesus” into which we are offered entrance by the sacraments are just as inscrutable a mystery as the nature of the being of the Father.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Jason M. Smith, “Must We Say Anything of the ‘Immanent’ Trinity?: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams on an ‘Abstruse’ and ‘Fruitless’ Doctrine,” *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 3 (2016): 495-512.

<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Discourse” in *Silence and Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 133.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, “Deflections of Desire,” 134.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Second, Kimberly Hope Belcher has recently offered a reading of infant baptism in terms of the gift. Belcher intensifies the problem of treating the Eucharist as Gift in that the Eucharist is not only the self-gift of God to the Church but also the recipient's self-gift back to God. The difficulty here, however, is that "self-giving uniquely and irreversibly changes (not to say risks) the one being given, *the giver never possesses the self he or she offers*."<sup>12</sup> The gift of self only comes to be through the recognition of the one who receives it. However, this moment of recognition "can never quite exist in history but rather in the future." Hence, I offer to you something I do not, strictly speaking, possess. "[T]he self that the Other is (in the process of) making *will be gift* for me; the self that I am *trying to become* is hereby offered to you."<sup>13</sup> To say that the Eucharist is a gift is, then, not to say that no sense whatsoever can be made of the Eucharist—just as we can make some sense of what we mean by God and the "relations enacted in the life of Jesus." It is rather to say that all that we may say of the Eucharist and its effects are as provisional as our affirmations about the divine life. "Gift is, then, an interpretation of a process that always escapes certainty because it is never finalized."<sup>14</sup>

I find myself faced, therefore, with a sort of impossibility before the gift of the Eucharist even appears, before the question of debt or contract come into play at all. The Triune life that is constituted by the perfect exchange of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is complete in itself, yet this completeness seems unavoidably to spill over into the creation and redemption of creatures. God cannot give because what God is—those relations enacted in the story of Jesus

---

<sup>12</sup> Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Belcher is also right to note the absolutely critical insight that this process of gift-exchange, especially when it is intra-human self-giving is not free from the forces of oppression. "The self who offered has been transformed into the self who was accepted. This transformation may be manipulative, coercive, or abusive; in fact, perhaps there is never a human relationship free of the economic cycle."

about which nothing comprehensive can be said—cannot, strictly speaking, be given. Perhaps put better, there is no truly defensible sense in which we can speak of a self-gift of God since God is not any thing that is givable. The gift of the Eucharist seems impossible not only in terms of its content (how can a gift appear at all?), but also in terms of its giver (how can God ever make a self-gift at all?). Furthermore, how might finite human beings receive the self-gift of the One who is infinite? Even more importantly, how could such a self-gift ever be truly reciprocal? The gift seems to be impossible even in terms of its recipient, not in terms of our ability to avoid the pull of debt or contract in gift-exchange, but in terms of our ability to receive the *self* that is offered in the gift. The gift seems to exceed not only our capacity to offer a return-gift but also our very nature as finite beings.

Yet, we begin by the impossible. For God gives Godself in spite of, or in keeping with, this impossibility. Subsequently, such impossibility must also be placed at the heart of our speech about the sociality and creativity that Milbank rightly claims belong originally to the immanent Trinity. It is not only the being of the Triune God and the “relations enacted in the story of Jesus” about which our speech must be disciplined by the apophatic but also the “lives and life-patterns of believers” that must be disciplined by that which cannot be said. The Eucharist is the self-gift of God to us, the gift of the entrance into the relations that constitute the Godhead. The ontological scandal of the Eucharist, therefore, is irrevocably cast as something about which very little can be said with certainty precisely because I can say with certainty that it is a gift.

Hence, I think Marion is correct that the Eucharist must become the “test of every theological systematization” because it “poses the greatest challenge to thought.”<sup>15</sup> That challenge is that one must not impose a prior epistemic frame upon the Eucharist but rather have ourselves framed by the rite as the sacrament which “accomplishes what all the others aim at,” namely, “corporally assimilating us to Christ.”<sup>16</sup> The Eucharist, therefore, bids us ask, “Can the Eucharistic presence of Christ as consecrated bread and wine determine, starting from itself and its self alone, the conditions of its reality, the dimensions of its temporality and the dispositions of its approach?”<sup>17</sup> But to take Marion further, must not *the gathered community as the corpus mysticum* also demand such ontological primacy as the truth of the sacrament? This puts further pressure on Marion’s insistence that the gift given in the Eucharistic presence is the “gift of distance,” a distance that prevents us from turning the God without Being into “an available, permanent, handy, and delimited thing.”<sup>18</sup> I have argued above that there should indeed be a grave sense of distance—distance in terms of our ability to explain or even speak of the mystery enacted—in our speech about the gift of the Eucharist. However, if the mystery of the Eucharist is *both* the consecrated elements *and* the transformation of the gathered community into the Body of Christ, then I think the gift must assert on its own terms a greater sense of content than sheer distance and withdrawal.

Thus, it strikes me that Milbank is quite right to assert that the gift of distance does not go far enough, though charging Marion with an incipient nihilism might be a bridge too far as well. I take Marion to be right, however, that notions of gift help to rethink transubstantiation afresh,

---

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 161.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 164



while I also take him to be correct that notions of the gift push a stronger reading of the Eucharistic presence upon us than those typically proffered by transignification. It may be far too bold to coin yet another neologism with regards to the Eucharistic presence, but I would propose we consider something like *transdonation*. Transdonation because the emphasis remains on the gift rather than on a category like substance or meaning which, when applied to God who is beyond all such categories, tends to lead into theoretical quandaries. Placing the emphasis solely on the gift allows for two helpful dynamics to emerge from our speech about the Eucharist: First, it preserves the intensely apophatic nature of our speech on the holy mysteries. What is made present—if the category of “presence” can even still apply—is the gift-giving relations, the entrance into which defines what it means to be made holy or to be redeemed. These relations are, as Williams has instructed us, shrouded in holy darkness, despite their specific narrations in Scripture and Tradition. I do not believe, in other words, that Christian theology has much of a need to get “beyond” substance and accident or presence and absence. I think, instead, that Christian theology has need to speak of the ways in which the ontological priority of gift, as shown forth in the Trinitarian yet sacramental theologies I have been examining in this work, join with the apophatic tradition in calling the applicability of these categories into question in the first place.

The second benefit of thinking of the Eucharistic presence as something like transdonation is that it recovers a better sense of God’s relation to things. I am much in agreement with Hemming that the wrong implication to draw from the change undergone by the Eucharistic elements is something like Pickstock’s declaration that “all bread is on the way to becoming the Body of Christ.” What is more, I think Chauvet’s claim that the bread-become-Body beyond transubstantiation is now *essential* or *true* bread is also the wrong implication to

draw. Placing the emphasis utterly upon the gift, I would argue, forces us to think of the moment of consecration as a radical inbreaking of the impossible—God’s gift of self appears, somehow, via bread and wine *and* the gathered community. So what changes in the bread and wine is not their status as gift—for all of the material order, as Milbank and Marion would argue, in some sense arrives as gift to our perception. Instead what changes in the Eucharist is the nature of bread and wine *as gift*. They change from the gift that they always already are as part of the created order into God’s self gift of Christ’s body and blood *and* God’s self gift as the social and creative reality of the Church.

Thinking of the bread and wine this way means that it is decidedly not the case that all bread and wine are on their way to becoming the Body of Christ. What changes of the bread and wine is something like a substantial change, if by “substantial” we mean a change to the very stuff that makes bread and wine to be bread and wine in the first place. Nor is there revealed in the Eucharist some sort of “sacramental principle” such that God’s presence is now seen to be lying in wait behind all materiality in light of the Eucharistic change. This change does indeed, I think, recast how it is that we think about materiality itself, but it is not to think of the Eucharistic elements as somehow *true* bread as opposed to bread that is *just* bread or to think of all materiality as now in some sense “sacramental.” I think Williams is again instructive here:

There is, then, in sacramental practice, something that does indeed reflect on how we see matter in general; but it is not, I think, a ‘sacramental principle’ enabling us to recognize divine *presence* in all things. It is more that the divine presence is apprehended by seeing in all things their difference, their particularity, their ‘not-God-ness,’ since we have learned what the divine action is in the renunciation of Christ, his giving himself into inanimate form....The Eucharist hints at the paradox that material things carry their fullest meaning for human minds and bodies—the meaning of God’s grace and of the common life thus formed—when they are the medium of *gift*, not instruments of control or objects for accumulation.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 217.

Admittedly, what changes for the bread and wine in the Eucharist is a change in their “not-God-ness,” since they are the very self-gift of God to the Church. Asserting that the implication of this change, however, is to see all things as on their way to becoming sacraments is to miss the point. Furthermore, I am even leery of a Chauvetian reading of materiality that might see the purpose of creation as testifying to the “presence of the absence of God” in its materiality. For this is again to read things solely in terms of God, whether of God’s secret presence or the lack thereof. Reading the nature of things entirely in relation to God’s presence or absence, so I think Williams instructs us, is always a mistake that will occlude the truth that materiality attempts to tell. Things condition our social imaginary against modes of power that operate by force and dominance precisely in their witness *as things, as decidedly not-God*. The presence of the absence, in other words, still understands materiality in far too *weak* a way. While it might sound a bit sacrilegious, reading the essence of bread as abiding in the elements given during the Eucharist is far too meager a reading of the essence of bread. I worry, therefore, that a similar weakness follows onto our reading of all materiality if we embrace a notion of sacramentality like the one I have been describing. Reading the Eucharist as gift thus acknowledges the value and independence of materiality while also chastening our attempts to say too much of the gift by imposing the unfinished character of gift-exchange on our theology of the Eucharist.

### *Eucharist as the Gift of Language*

If such is what it means for the Eucharist to be spoken of as gift, then what exactly can it mean to speak of the Eucharist as the gift *of language*? I have attempted to show in the chapters previous how thinking of the Eucharist under the paradigm of gift is a great help to theology, particularly theology determined to avoid the quagmire of ontotheology. Yet, the two thinkers I

have been examining above push us to say that what is given in the Eucharist is a particular sort of gift. What is given in the Eucharist is a *sign*. It is a material sign, a *thing* in other words that is given as a sign and, hence, meant to communicate something to us. This is not to say, mind you, that the thing given is “more than” a thing. For this would be to forget what Chauvet and others continually remind us—that all things are always already “more than” their materiality. Material reality arrives as imbued with human signification, and even if it did not, Milbank would rightly insist that material reality arrives not as a mere given but as *gift*. In this sense, to give any material sign at all is already to have entered into language in some way. Yet, faith teaches us that this particular material sign is different. It is different in that it does not just participate in language but rather that it *gives* language, it gives the conditions for the possibility of language, it gives a particular vision of the world and of creatures, all as an irresistible outcome of its reception. The Eucharist thus seems to reveal a fundamental sacramentality at the heart of both materiality and signification.

Hence, I believe an insight to which Chauvet perhaps arrived too late is that insisting on the Eucharist as symbolic exchange while at the same time noting that symbolic exchange is an anthropological phenomenon that characterizes our basic experience of human subjectivity means that the material order can now be read “eucharistically.” What I mean by this is that the possibility and, depending on one’s tradition, the inevitability of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist—Christ’s presence in a *thing given as a symbol or sign*—seems to imply that the way in which we speak about things must change. The ontological scandal of the Eucharist, as I am calling it, sets out a vision of sacramentality, a vision of the entire cosmos to be understood through God’s coming to us as grace in and through material things. I have been articulating above how this is required by speaking of the Eucharist as a gift, but here the sacramental vision

becomes intensified and, perhaps, reaches an impasse. For, on the one hand, seeing the Eucharist as a gift implies that the arrival of all reality as gift can be read as analogous to the Eucharist. What occurs in the Eucharist is something like a *creatio ex nihilo* wherein a gift breaks into the fallen order of things that would preclude the presence of a true gift from the start. The sacramental vision revealed by seeing the Eucharist *purely* as gift would be a vision of sacramentality analogous to the ontology of the gift—God is sacramentally present in things as the giver of Godself.

Yet, the difficulty we come to now is that gift-exchange is also a pattern of symbolic exchange or human signification. Indeed, language is in many ways just another pattern of gift-exchange. Think, for example, of the sheer lack of true communication but plethora of normed exchanges that occur in small talk. To think of the Eucharist as the gift *of language*, therefore, alters our vision of sacramentality. The Eucharist does indeed begin to occupy a space like that of the radical thesis of Milbank and Pickstock as the basis for any true human signification, but note that I say only something “like” this position. To name the Eucharist as the sole point in which the truth made flesh in the Incarnation is accessible to the Church is, I would argue, a clear indication of Milbank’s overemphasis on the Incarnation. The power of the sacraments must be that they are, as Belcher has argued, material signs that give entrance into the *relations* that define the Godhead. Hence, as Williams has put it, what we are gifted through sanctifying grace is not just a standing in the place of the Word within the Trinitarian relations but “the *desire for the desire of the Word*.”<sup>20</sup> Milbank, however, is quite helpful in clarifying just how this gift of the desire of the Word is connected with language. For when we are gifted the desire for the desire of the Word we are being gifted a substantial joining to the primordially communicative

---

<sup>20</sup> Williams, “Deflections of Desire,” 119.

generation that constitutes the essence of the Godhead. Hence, speaking of the Eucharist as the gift of language is not antithetical to what I have claimed above. A gift of language is nothing less than the gift of an identity, a manner of being-with that shapes our relation to the material and cultural order of the world.

Yet, reflecting on the nature of language also presses upon us the fact that language is, in essence, an “unfinishable business.”<sup>21</sup> I bring up the unfinished nature of language to avoid a danger I have already mentioned in the previous section. It would seem, I think, that claiming the Eucharist is the gift of language makes the Eucharist a bit more comprehensible. Language, after all, is something with which we are more familiar than, say, a self-gift of God. So to say, as Herbert McCabe does, that Jesus Christ is present in the bread and wine like meaning is present in a word, feels a bit less off-putting than saying that bread has become Jesus Christ’s body.<sup>22</sup> We are, in other words, more familiar with saying that a word has meaning in it than that bread has a body in it. Yet, it strikes me (and McCabe was surely aware of this as well) that equating the Eucharist with language places the presence and/or absence of God in the rite into a great deal more uncertainty. For language, encompasses both the sayable and the unsayable, signs made and silence where signs fail. Language, as an unfinishable business, always implies that there is more to be said and that what has been said invites saying more. In short, to say that the Eucharist is the gift of language is to further bolster its status as a mystery, beyond the mystery implied when speaking of the Eucharist as gift alone.

In what way, then, does taking the Eucharist as the gift of language cast the rite into further mystery? Though he is not alone in these insights, I believe the work of Williams on

---

<sup>21</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 66.

<sup>22</sup> See Herbert McCabe, “The Eucharist as Language,” in *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Continuum, 2002), 123-138.

language and the sacraments is helpful here. Williams notes that it is quite simply a “brute fact” that “human being is irreducibly bound up with language and culture, and so with ‘transformative action,’ changing the environment.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the broadest way of naming the implications of this fact is something like this:

Each effort to make the world ‘belong’ to us, to make sense, puts a fresh question; each organizing or explanatory strategy becomes itself a new puzzle or code, in need of imaginative ‘reading’ and re-ordering. In a paradoxical yet quite familiar way, human beings are, in one and the same activity, looking for *and* creating meaning: patterns of order, schemes of communication in which the confusing experience of life in the world to which we belong (and to which we did not choose to belong) is drawn into language, into the ever extending web of sharing perception, experience, selfhood itself, that constitutes human being as human.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Edge of Words* Williams extends those insights about the nature of language to their import for theology, particularly “natural theology.” Williams’s analysis here is worth engaging for two reasons: First, talk of “natural theology” for Anglicans is always to speak somehow of sacramentality ever since William Temple’s Gifford Lectures on the subject.<sup>25</sup> Second, because Williams extends his own insights beyond the general picture of language cited above into two specific areas—excessive language and silence. These two additional themes will help clarify precisely how the gift can be thought of as excessive as language, and, even more importantly, Williams’s reflections on silence help clarify how the apophaticism must discipline our speech about the ontological scandal of the Eucharist.

---

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>25</sup> Temple is credited with coining the phrase the “sacramental universe,” that set many proponents of a broader “sacramental principle,” like John Macquarrie on their way. For Temple’s lectures see William Temple, *Nature, Man, and God* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964). For a discussion of Temple’s influence on notions of sacramentality see Lizette Larson-Miller *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 25-29.

Themes familiar to both Chauvet and Milbank emerge in Williams's plumbing of the depths of language for theological insights. First, at the fore of Williams's exegesis of the facets of language is the immersion of both the subject and the material world that the subject encounters within language: "The world we inhabit is already a symbolized world, a world that has been and is being taken up into a process of speaking and making sense together."<sup>26</sup> Second, and even more importantly, that language is fundamentally conditioned by the embodied and material nature of the subject who speaks and of the other whom the subject encounters as fellow speaker:

To accept the notion of the body as the centre of a 'situation' and a set of possible situations. . .and to understand the body's life as continuous with the intelligible input of the environment implies that in any encounter we begin from the trust that we are engaged with another perspective that is part of a whole intelligible environment, and thus something I am likely to need in my own developing intelligent life. It is also to accept that the other remains irreducibly other because I can never simply be where the other is, and because the other's relations cannot be mapped exhaustively on to mine. Every imaginable human encounter has these characteristics; and the foundation of an ethical response to the world we inhabit is bound up with this acknowledgement of the other's body as meaningful—meaningful because it is the point of intersection for a specific set of symbolic transactions.<sup>27</sup>

Human beings are inherently linguistic creatures who encounter the material order as always already symbolized or imbued with signification, and, even more importantly, such beings come to be in and through their encounters with an irreducible other.

Yet, Williams also allows us to lend further clarity to precisely what we mean by language in the first place so as to render less opaque the idea of the Eucharist as the gift of language. Perhaps the starkest example of an "irreducible other" that Williams takes up is an

---

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.



anecdote from Phoebe Caldwell's accounts of communicating with those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Suppose that I have ASD and severe learning disabilities. I cannot make sense of the kaleidoscopic world I live in. My environment swirls round me and noises boom in my ears ... Sometimes I am swept by painful surges from my own nervous system. When these are more than I can bear I try banging my head or lashing out at people/things that overload my senses, to stop the over-stimulation. I retreat to my own world and focus on particular sensory stimulation."<sup>28</sup>

Therapists working with subjects who struggle in this manner work through the coping mechanism their patients have developed in order to establish a means of communicating: "a person expresses their distress by banging the helper's arm, and [the therapist] in response bangs the arm of her chair." This opens the way out of the vicious circle of distress because it says, in effect, "what you are doing is not just yours; it is heard and can be followed."<sup>29</sup> This mirrors, so Williams argues, the formation of language—an utterance is received and responded to, and after reciprocity has been established the utterances can be expanded. This implies, ultimately, that language by nature is not solely "passing on information," but more so an attempt at "establishing a world in common."<sup>30</sup>

This notion of language as the establishment of a shared world makes the occurrences of excessive speech and silence all the more curious. What is the purpose of speech that breaches the boundaries of our shared world or of the failing of language itself in the creation of a shared

---

<sup>28</sup> Phoebe Caldwell, *Finding You Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch with People Whose Severe Learning Disabilities are Combined with Autistic Spectrum Disorder* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), 117 as quoted in Williams, *Edge of Words*, 95. It is important to note that this example is pertinent only in so far as it is a possible objection against the most general considerations of what it means to have language. This portion of the argument is not meant to, as my colleague Peter Capretto has argued, "operationalize" or make useful disability for theology. This only succeeds in marginalizing disability even further. For that argument see Peter Capretto, "On Not Operationalizing Disability in Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 4 (2017): 889-919.

<sup>29</sup> Caldwell, *Finding You Finding Me*, 115; as quoted in Williams, *Edge of Words*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, 99.

world amongst subjects? Williams suggests that the excesses of language are fourfold and help us understand how it is that language always seems to put itself under pressure via its own tendency to expand the boundaries of the shared world that it creates. The enforced patterns of poetry, the “carefully calculated shocks” of paradox, the undermining of surface level meanings in irony, and the unlearning or deconstruction of previous meaning via chaotic language delivers us from the easy or complacent mode of self-knowledge that is ultimately not true. Much like what Pickstock insisted was the great benefit of the Latin Roman Rite, language itself seems to bear the same tendency towards displacing our self-assured identity through defamiliarizing speech. It is language itself in its most general use that suggests this penchant for extreme speech is actually part and parcel of constituting our identities.

Yet, what of silence? Is silence the failure of language such that our shared worlds are shown to be nothing more than castles in the air, or is it something else entirely? Williams suggests that it is something else, and his insight here is a vital qualification on my talk of the Eucharist as in some way “mysterious.” The main insight to glean from Williams’ in-depth treatment of the value of silence for understanding language is that silence does not indicate language’s utter failure. Language itself is not made inadequate by the interminable difficulty facing it, which silence represents here. The example of speech about God is particularly pertinent: “Language is not a screen which hides God from us. On the contrary, the idea of God *in language*...is the idea of a hidden God.” Or as Williams puts it, “it is *language* that presents mystery, language is where mystery occurs.”<sup>31</sup> So to say that something is ever haunted by the unsayable is not the same as saying that there is an irruption of the incomprehensible that renders all attempts at making sense impossible. Silence in this context is rather the attempt to name the

---

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, 163.

unnameable and in gesturing towards that which cannot be said language “moves the ball down the field,” so to speak, by clarifying just what it is that escapes its grasp. So to say that the Eucharist is plunged further into mystery by naming it as the gift of language is not to say that all attempts at making sense must cease in favor of a silent unknowing or encounter, but rather that the sort of speech that will make sense when speaking of the Eucharist is the sort that attempts to name the unnameable so as to gesture, however incompletely, at the not-fully-articulable relations enacted by such a gift.

Let me resume, then, our discussion of the Eucharist by making a direct theological claim: The Eucharist is the gift of language because it is the gift of the Word through the Holy Spirit—the gift of a sharing in that primordial creativity and perfect sociality that defines the life of the Triune God. This highly Trinitarian statement distills an insight I have been tracing circles around since we began, that is: if we say that the Eucharist is the gift of language then this is to claim that we do, as Chauvet would say, encounter God in the most human of places—our continual creation and “going on” of human selfhood through language. Yet, to name the language of the Eucharist as a gift is also to claim, perhaps contra Williams, that what we are describing here is a fundamental *alteration* to that capacity, or that what makes this particular language unique is a gift that arrives *outside* of language, though its content is mediated to us through language, as everything else is. The gift is both a particular story in which the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Word and Gift—are enacted in and through the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the community such relations created.

Hence, there is a sense in which what I am describing can be named as *transignification*, but the transformation taking place is not what the Eucharistic elements themselves signify but rather the way in which the Eucharist is a gift of a new form of signification or a fundamental

alteration to the capacity for signification. Such an alteration is ultimately a gift, and while that gift arrives in language, it is impossible to say that its origin or root is dependent upon language. Rather, this gift must be something “extra-linguistic,” as Chauvet would claim, simply because the life presented in and through this story exceeds the bounds of language. In other words, what is being described in the life of Jesus is a manner of belonging now proleptically made possible but which exceeds the nature and limitations of finitude itself. This is certainly not all that they mean, but it is surely part of what the Gospel writers mean to say when they speak of Jesus’ life as divine. Hence, what arrives to us in the gift of language that is the Eucharist is something that fundamentally *displaces*, even calls into absolute question, all possible manners of belonging made available through the human symbolic capacity.<sup>32</sup> The gift, in other words, is not impossible in itself. The gift is impossible *for language*—for the manner of belonging characteristic of human sociality.

Thus, we should expect there to be a need to “go on” even after the Eucharist, since the gift that is at the heart of the Eucharist cannot be captured by language, even after the radical alteration to language made by the gift’s being given. We should furthermore expect the Eucharist to fail, not utterly but significantly, at achieving the true nature of the gift as a manner of human belonging. For the new manner of belonging that the Eucharist gives to us in and as language is, I would argue, a manner of being-with that is coincident with the Trinitarian relations from which the gift stems. I think, then, we are bound to say that if the Eucharist is the gift of language then the Eucharist is the gift of *a new manner of sharing the world together*. For

---

<sup>32</sup> Plumbing the implications of this claim for specific matters of liberation, such as racial and economic oppression was beyond the scope of this essay. However, for a specific engagement with the implications of dispossession for racial and economic injustice see Amaryah Jones-Armstrong, “The Spirit and the Subprime: Race, Risk, and our Common Disposition,” *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 1 (2016): 51-69.

since language is more than mere speech and is in fact the fundamental human way of belonging together in our shared world, then the ontological scandal of the Eucharist as a scandal in and for language must mean that the gift of the Eucharist is the possibility of a new manner of creating a shared world together. This is just to say that the ontological scandal of the Eucharist must also be a political scandal. Therefore, it is to the final aspect of the syntagm in question—the Eucharist as the gift of *political* language—to which I now turn.

### *Eucharist as the Gift of Political Language*

If the gift of the Eucharist is the inbreaking of a new manner of human belonging, a new way of sharing the world together in and through language, then in what sense can the Eucharist be applied to the political life of the Church? Just how applicable, in other words, is the gift of the Eucharist to questions of human belonging in ordinary time, in the *saeculum*? What sorts of actions or political stances may be deduced as “Christian” from it? I am going to argue that in constituting the means by which the Church comes to a shared world in which meaningful communication is possible that the Eucharist is an utterly political scandal. What I am going to claim that might be frustrating to the reader is that the Eucharist actually circumvents what we typically mean by “political” questions and opens up the horizon of the *authentically* political. This will come to mean that the Eucharist, in revealing the authentically political, is *eschatologically* oriented.

Still, I would like to preface all of this by saying as emphatically as I can what I am *not* arguing. I am not proposing that within a proper reading of the Eucharist, or even within a proper reading of the resurrected life for which the Eucharist is a sign, there is a stable set of political tenets by which the Church might inform itself of how God wills it to act in the various publics

to which it is now bound. The sacraments are not, as much as we might like them to be, the foundations of a “social programme.”<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that the Eucharist has nothing to say whatsoever about politics, mind you. Recent works on the Eucharist suggest that it is a vital resource in the prophetic voice of the Church seeking to make present in the world the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup> And yet what even those profoundly influential works suggest is that the Eucharist is more evocative of political ideals than it is descriptive of political positions. How, then, can the Eucharist serve as the proverbial north star of the Church’s public life without losing sight of the indeterminate nature of what and how much the Eucharist can “say?”

I believe it will help to say precisely how the term “political” is functioning here. I mean by “political” more than merely the negotiations and skirmishes involved in the particular arrangement of power in a particular community. I mean also more than merely the particular policies enacted in a given community, the goings-on of a *polis*. It may come as no surprise that I mean something having to do with the shared world created by language, in particular its status as establishing what Hannah Arendt called the “public realm.”<sup>35</sup> To summarize Arendt’s thought in the terms I have already established, the public realm is “what provides us with an identity in terms of language; it is the possibility of securing what I have been and done and said as an individual by locating it in a *tradition* of speech and recollection.”<sup>36</sup> To engage in public life is to “accept that I am finite and time-bound, born *into* a continuum of language and interaction I did not choose or invent, and yet also to transcend my finitude in the only way I can, by striving to

---

<sup>33</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 220.

<sup>34</sup> I am thinking in particular here of Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis and Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), William Cavanaugh’s *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), and M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50.

<sup>36</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 107

contribute to the language and interaction of the group some new qualification or nuance that can reasonably and properly become part of a tradition, a heritage.”<sup>37</sup> The public realm might be described as that common life born of the shared world we create in and through language, and to engage in public life is to seek to build that common life by “*knowing what to do or say next*” within that realm.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, does the Church not undermine or even scuttle this notion of a public life, in that it separates itself off into a private language with no interest in becoming translatable into the public realm’s terms? In a reading of Augustine’s *City of God*, Williams suggests that while Augustine does have stark criticism for the public realm of his time—the Roman Empire’s particular brand of social virtue—Augustine does value something like Arendt’s public realm. However, what Augustine seems to suggest is that the problem with the public realm is not that the Church must separate itself from it, but rather that the public realm *cannot be truly public*. Augustine, in other words, is “engaged in a *redefinition* of the public itself, designed to show that it is life outside the Christian community which fails to be truly public, authentically political.”<sup>39</sup> The Eucharist, I am arguing, accomplishes precisely this redefinition—as the gift of an unfinished identity in and through the gift of language the true sense of public and political life shows itself to the Church.

In what sense then is the Eucharist *political* language? Just what sort of political *bond* within the Church am I proposing the rite creates? In many ways the answer to these questions is the same. Just as the human subject arrives to a material world always already imbued with signification, so also the Eucharist is that language of the Church which always already there for

---

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *On Augustine*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, 68.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, *On Augustine*, 111.

the Christian. The Eucharist is the “what has been said” of the Church that sets the conditions for the possibility of any “going on” or meaningful expansion of Christian witness. I would argue that the Eucharist comes to function as the “thrownness” of the Church.<sup>40</sup> The Eucharist, in other words, throws the Church into an identity that is not, as Williams again instructs us, of our own making or choosing. Or perhaps better, the Church *finds itself thrown* by the Eucharist as that which establishes its facticity as a community. The Eucharist, in this way, does not cause the Church to be something, to think something, or even do something specific. The Eucharist reveals to the Church what it always already is.<sup>41</sup>

To say that the Eucharist reveals what the Church always already is, however, is not to claim that the Eucharist does nothing more than show the matter-of-factness of the Church’s identity. The Eucharist is still involved in a fundamental *change*, both in the way that we understand *things qua things* and in the being of a particular community. As the thrownness of the Church, the change we are speaking about occurs in the most human of places, that is, in our creation of a shared world together through language. How precisely this becomes something “political” might be better explained by reconsidering a notion from Chauvet: his notion of the “triple body” of “culture, tradition, and nature.” Chauvet is involved here in a redefinition of what we mean by “body” at all. The notion of the triple body tries to articulate how it is that our bodies are speaking (i.e., the body an individual site of speech) and how they are always-already spoken (i.e., we are born into a series of subject-defining relations without our consent). In terms

---

<sup>40</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 131-133.

<sup>41</sup> This claim is by no means new. It is an echo, albeit from an entirely different starting point, of *ressourcement* theology and of prominent Eastern Orthodox theologians. The claim echoes, in short, claims made by theologians who have advocated for the position that, as de Lubac put it, the Eucharist makes the Church. For a helpful account of this tradition see Paul McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).



of culture, tradition, and nature, a person's body is "spoken" by the culture of the group to which the person belongs, the "historic tradition" of that cultural group, and, finally, the confines of the physical universe. These three embodied realities are symbolically joined together in each person such that "the I-body exists only as woven, inhabited, spoken by this *triple body* of culture, tradition, and nature."<sup>42</sup>

Chauvet helps us, therefore, in understanding precisely how an embodied change might come to have its effect at the most general level of what it means to be human. The sort of change I am speaking about in describing the Eucharist as the gift of political language is thus a change in the triple body of culture, tradition, and nature that Chauvet holds as constituting our being as human subjects in the first place. Perhaps, then, the sort of change we are speaking about in the Eucharist is something like *transcorporation*. For the nature of the change is the transformation of two bodies—one, a pair of things and, two, a gathered body of people—into the Body of Christ. The locus of the mystery is not in the elements alone but also in the Church. The prickliest mystery of the Eucharist, I would argue, is not how it is that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ but how it is that the body of believers gathered together is changed into the mystical body of Christ. *That* is the true mystery of the Eucharist—not how it is that bread becomes something different, but how it is that an entire people come to share in a manner of being-with-one-another that is decidedly impossible given the limitations of the finite and fallen order. The way in which the Eucharist is a political scandal, therefore, is also an ontological question, i.e. just how it is that a body of people is changed into something else at the level of their status as a "body" of gathered people. The Eucharist is political in the sense that a

---

<sup>42</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 150.

body of fallen people become the sacramental presence of the *polis* to which all manners of human communities are “on the way” towards. It is the gift of a new “triple body,” the gift of a new culture, tradition, and even a renewed vision of the cosmos that reconstitutes the very matters of fact that determine the possibilities for belonging together.

In what sense then does the gift of the Eucharist *obligate* us to any particular actions within imperfectly public life? The difficulty for Chauvet’s account of gift-exchange in light of Derrida’s concerns about the utter gratuitousness of the gift was that Chauvet’s embrace of *obligatory* generosity canceled the gift from the outset. Even if we take the gift to the level of the gift-of-self those concerns remain, perhaps become even more extreme because then we are exchanging derelict and paltry versions of our self to the other and receiving the same in return. Is there a sense, then, in which the self-gift of God *obligates* a return gift? And what can the content of that gift be? Belcher is, again, quite helpful here:

There is one point at which this presentation of the gift becomes truly helpful, and that is with respect to theologies for women, children, and other historically marginalized groups. These peoples have historically been ‘obliged’ to many things that actively harmed them and their brothers and sisters, in order to enrich the already powerful. In the light of the discovery of the gift, it is clear that the only obligation are those that lead to liberation—not to oppression—and the only purpose of obligations is to authorize and motivate the practices that allow one to discover joy in the obligation itself—life, abundantly. In this authentic mediations of the gospel can, in theory, be distinguished from inauthentic ones.<sup>43</sup>

In a strong sense, there is no obligation imposed upon the Church to a certain conventionally political perspective. The only obligation inherent in the political scandal of the Eucharist is the obligation that exists to authorize and motivate practices of liberation. Yet, what I would also claim is that this is not even *for the sake of liberation*. In other words, the political scandal of the Eucharist is not something like the “preferential option for the poor,” i.e. a principle that is

---

<sup>43</sup> Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 177.

deeper than one particular practice but is fundamentally rooted in something like liberation. Rather, I think that the political scandal of the Eucharist is something deeper, precisely because it is a change at the level of the triple body. The political scandal of the Eucharist that I have been describing as a new manner of sharing the world together must be thought of as something like *joy*, and it is from this *joy* that true obligation springs. As Belcher puts it in an earlier passage: “[T]his amnesia [that forgets the gift transferred by becoming the gift] is itself another phase of discovery: the discovery that obligation has, all along, been an illusion; obligations are entertained only to point toward joy—and joy is the participation in the thing, the discovery that the obligation was given only to discover in the law, spirit, and in the spirit, freedom.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, far from imposing any conventional political position on the gathered community who is transcorporated into the Body of Christ, the Eucharist imposes the freedom from obligation via the entrance into those gift-giving relations that constitute the divine life—relations whose nature cannot be explained, only named as *joy*.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, when such joy occurs in the world bound to interminable conflict, such joy can only be spoken of as *mystery*.

Naming the political scandal of the Eucharist as joy implies two further principles. The first has to do with how the Church must negotiate its relationship with power. The second returns us back to the question of materiality and the joyful community’s relationship to things. As to the first, if the ontological scandal of the Eucharist is the gift of entrance into the Trinitarian life—relations whose nature cannot be adequately explicated—then it seems that Milbank’s second iteration of the political scandal of the Eucharist has gone quite wrong. To

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Beyond Belcher’s invocation of joy it should be noted that Alexander Schmemmann made joy an integral category of his sacramental and Eucharistic theology. For a treatment of the political implications of Schmemmann’s work in this regard see, Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, 115-132.

claim, as he does, that Christianity without Christendom is somehow delusional seems far too bold a claim based in a participatory metaphysic that has lost the key discipline of apophaticism on its speech. Even more importantly, however, if the political scandal of the Eucharist is a joy-filled manner of being-with, then the unfinished character of such a community cannot be identified with any finite political institution. Christianity implies Christendom only in so far as Christendom is wrongly identified with the *eschaton*.

A further reflection emerges, however, that a polity bound by joy is one that does not take up the power of the conventional political order so as to protect itself or secure for itself a freedom from the ills of the world. Williams notes this by reflecting upon one particular aspect of the life-patterns enacted in the story of Jesus, that is, Jesus' betrayal by Judas Iscariot and his being given over to crucifixion. Jesus' passive giving himself over to the passive stuff of bread and wine preempts the aggressive betrayal to come.

Thus, those who are at table with him, who include those who will betray, desert and repudiate him, are, if you like, frustrated as betrayers, their job is done for them by their victim. By his surrender 'into' the passive forms of food and drink he makes void and powerless the impending betrayal, and, more, makes the betrayers his guests and debtors, making with them the promise of divine fidelity, the covenant, that cannot be negated by their unfaithfulness.<sup>46</sup>

The community that is bound to this pattern of surrender is thus a community made defenseless even in light of Jesus' eventual triumph in the Resurrection. There is thus no conventionally political form of power that the Church can seize in order to secure its own defense:

God's promise to be faithful, even in advance of betrayal, and which thus can have no place for reprisal, for violent response to betrayal and breakage, or for pre-emptive action to secure against betrayal. There is no promise that people will not be unfaithful and untrustful towards each other, but there is an assurance that the new humanity does not depend on constant goodwill and successful effort to survive: its roots are deeper. If it is, properly, defenceless, that is because it does

---

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 216.

not need defending and *cannot* be defended by means that deny its basic assurances.<sup>47</sup>

An attempt to secure its standing in the world through political power or even withdrawing *from* the world in order to secure the purity of its cultural identity is to take up an instrument of defending itself by a means that denies its basic assurance. Christendom as anything other than an eschatological principle is ultimately self-defeating, for that would be to try to assert that the Church is something other than what the Eucharist most fundamentally declares that it is: a community that cannot be defended. To say that this community cannot be defended is to say that this community is one bound to joy, a community that is Spirit-filled, a community that is free.

As Williams further notes, from this pattern of defenselessness made powerful there comes an insight about the second principle I mentioned above, that is, an insight about materiality. There is first that when “seen in the perspective of the eucharist, cannot be proper material for the defence of one ego or group-ego against another, cannot properly be tools of power, because they are signs of a creativity working by the renunciation of control, and signs of the possibility of communion, covenanted trust and the recognition of shared need and shared hope.”<sup>48</sup> As I have already noted, Williams is adamant that what the sacraments reveal about materiality is not a “sacramental principle” that might see a hidden sacredness imbuing all materiality. Rather, “the divine presence is apprehended by seeing in all things their difference, their particularity, their ‘not-God-ness,’ since we have learned what the divine action is in the renunciation of Christ, his giving himself into inanimate form.”<sup>49</sup> The Eucharist as the gift of political language is, I have been arguing, a change in the triple body of culture, tradition, and

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 217.

nature. This final change in nature is, I would posit, the gift of things *as things*. Sacramentality is thus no longer a vision of the entire universe as “sacramental,” i.e. as always “on the way” to becoming the Body and Blood of Christ. Rather, sacramentality refers to the particular capacity of sign-making to “open to us the sense already made by God as creator and redeemer.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the Eucharist is not just an epiphany of the sacred, or if it is revelatory of anything sacred it is by its “re-ordering of the words and images used to think or experience social life.”<sup>51</sup> Materiality and signification are granted their worth as processes with their own integrity apart from the economy of salvation, but they can be thought of as caught up in a sacramental vision of the cosmos because of the arrival of a gift that radically alters just what it is both things and signs can make present to us.

I am sure there are quite a few questions that could be asked of this account, but I want to be sure to answer one in particular. In an essay already referenced in this text, Ambrose posed a question to both Chauvet and Pickstock’s theological systems, namely, of what use is all this to people in the pews?<sup>52</sup> Ambrose’s conclusion was that Pickstock’s reading of the Mass, while admirably rigorous, posed significant problems to the minister trying to implement her insights in their parish ministry. Chauvet, on the other hand, also posed deep theoretical hurdles for the minister to clear, but Ambrose was rightly appreciative that Chauvet’s project is ultimately motivated by pastoral rather than theoretical concerns. This orientation made his system the easier of the two to “preach,” if you will. Yet, it is a question worth asking again: in what sense do Chauvet’s and Milbank/Pickstock’s visions of the Eucharist as the gift of political language actually have any effect on the people in the pews? In other words, the reader might have been

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>52</sup> Glenn Ambrose, “Chauvet and Pickstock: Two Compatible Visions?” *Questions Liturgiques* 82, no. 1 (2001): 69-79.

harboring an objection all along to my argument that while what I have been arguing is a novel way of thinking of the Eucharist it is not ultimately how most of those who receive the Eucharist think of the rite. If the Eucharist is the gift of political language, then why does it have so little effect on those who partake of it? Why is the Church still beset by the same collapse of shared language and common value as the world? This is a vital objection to answer.

I want to make an observation, therefore, that might sound a bit extreme. That observation is this: because the Eucharist is the gift of language *every Eucharist fails*. But fails in what sense? Thomas Aquinas rightly reminds us that the Eucharist does not fail in communicating grace to us. The Eucharist communicates grace regardless of the piety of the priest and, in different ways, without regards to the faith of the recipient. This is precisely what we should expect if we encounter in the Eucharist the God who continually gives of Godself without reserve and without account. Yet, when the community goes out from this encounter—an encounter even in which I have suggested that the community is transfigured into the sacramental presence of the perfected and authentically political community—that community leaves and immediately falls back into the deformed patterns of belonging that characterize what we call “the world.”

I would argue that this means, as Denys Turner has put it, that the Eucharist, like speech about God, fails “not of truth, but of God.”<sup>53</sup> The particular sort of unknowing characteristic of Christian apophaticism—in which God is beyond not only our affirmations but our denials, without there being a subsequent despair over ever speaking truthfully of God—is very much present in our speech about how the Eucharist makes us holy as a gathered community. Our

---

<sup>53</sup> Denys Turner, “Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason,” in *Silence and Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

speech about the Eucharist is, like all other speech about God, “tainted with ultimate failure.”<sup>54</sup> Even more importantly, however, is the fact that the Eucharist *as language* is imbued with the life-pattern of Jesus’ renunciation and giving himself over to those who would betray him. This means that the sort of triumphant permanence of the joyful community one might expect from the transcorporation that is given in the Eucharist is the wrong expectation.

Yet, as theologians from communities that have been historically marginalized remind us, such an endorsement of renunciation and powerlessness can lead a tacit endorsement of the stifling and silencing of voices whose cry would alert the Church to one of the “true obligations” of liberation. There are ways in which even the Eucharist, without any explicit emphasis on renunciation, can pose quite troubling dynamics for victims of sexual trauma.<sup>55</sup> Here, in particular, is where I believe it is of the utmost importance to keep the failure of the Eucharist as an apophatic principle in sight. An insight from Milbank’s first iteration is quite helpful: If we admit that the truth is disclosed not in one single disclosure of the universal but in “many open pathways” that are “disclosive of transcendence in some degree,” then the way upon which the Eucharist sets us is a “pilgrimage from sacred site to sacred site.”<sup>56</sup> This is what we should expect, after all, from a rite best described by reference to the unfinished processes of gift-exchange and language. So if, in the service of a true obligation of liberation, something about the rite of the Eucharist needs to be changed for the sake of those who receive the elements, then such changes ought to be undertaken. More importantly, such changes do not cancel the gift of political language that is the Eucharist. In fact, such changes reinforce the gift of the Eucharist as

---

<sup>54</sup> Turner, “Apophaticism, Idolatry, and the Claims of Reason,” 16.

<sup>55</sup> See especially the essay by my colleague Hillary Jerome Scarsella, “Victimization via Ritualization: Relationships of Christian Communion to Sexualized Violence,” forthcoming in *Trauma and Lived Religion*, ed. Srdjan Sremac (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>56</sup> John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 173.



a *non-identical repetition* of the gift. The gift of political language that is the Eucharist, therefore, will move back and forth from ritual enactments of empowerment and defenselessness for the individual, but for the community at large the rite will always be a means of discovering the power of belonging together as the Body of Christ.

*Conclusion: An Apophatic, Sacramental, Political Theology?*

The sacramental is inherently political. In fact, the sacramental is the access point to *the* political, to that manner of human belonging that is constituted by the relations enacted in the story of Jesus and best named (albeit imperfectly) as *joy*. Such is the case because the sacramental discloses a particular vision of the cosmos as gift, of the human person as shaped by gift (and linguistic exchanges) and of the Christian community as eschatologically oriented to an identity that it proleptically possesses each time it gathers to repeat non-identically the moment in the particular story that threw the Church into existence. There is, therefore, no theology of sacramentality, no vision of the cosmos as gift or vision of the Christian as identified by the embodied rites of the Christian Sacraments, that does not also have a political correlate. Yet, the nature of the political itself is redefined in the fundamental theology of sacramentality that the Eucharist (among all the other sacraments) reveals to us. The conventionally political that we identify with the various strivings for and redistribution of power between left and right, liberal and conservative, bourgeois and revolutionary, are nothing more than an aspect of that conglomerate that the Gospel of John calls “the world.” As worldly and thereby fallen, such negotiations of various arrangements of power are by nature a privation of the positive modes of human belonging disclosed in the sacraments. Perhaps better, these interminable conflicts belong

to “the world,” and, as Herbert McCabe puts it, “The world here is past praying for. It can only be smashed.”<sup>57</sup>

There is a sense, then, in which what I have been arguing identifies the sacramental with the *eschatological*, and works on the nature of anamnesis confirm the merits of such an identification.<sup>58</sup> If anything, such an identification of the sacramental with the truly political, and therefore the eschatological, lends further credence to insisting that the politics of the Eucharist must be forever chastened by the apophatic discipline. The public life of the Church, as the inbreaking of the gift of authentic political language, is incomprehensible in our very bodies, as the site in which the triple body of culture, tradition, and nature that imposes itself upon those of us who traverse the world undermines the intelligibility of the political language gifted to us in the Eucharist. That triple body impedes the gift even to the point of making it impossible. Yet, we begin by the impossible. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard,” after all. Hence, the Eucharist as the gift of political language reveals to us a new horizon for a theology that refuses the distinction between thought and practice, between materiality and signification, between the apophatic and a rigorously Christian ontology. The Eucharist shows that even mystery must take a body, and that naming bodies as fundamentally sharing in the mystery that is the relations of the Triune life is nothing less than a political act of judgment. The Eucharist bids us begin, in other words, the politics of mystery.

---

<sup>57</sup> McCabe, *God Still Matters*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> See in particular Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, 189-213.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Ambrose, Glenn. "Chauvet and Pickstock: Two Compatible Visions?" *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 82 (2001): 69-79.
- . *The Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet: Overcoming Onto-theology with the Sacramental Tradition*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2012.
- Anscombe, G.E.M. *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe, vol. 3: Ethics, Religion, and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. New York: Benzinger, 1948.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- Augustine, St. *Sermon 272*. Vol. 7, in *Sermons III: On the Liturgical Seasons*, edited by John E. Rotelle, translated by Edmund Hill O.P., 300. Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J.O. Urmson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Belcher, Kimberly Hope. *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in Trinitarian Mystery*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.
- Benveniste, Émile. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Translated by Mary Elizabeth Meeks. Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*. London: Hogarth, 1976.
- Blankenhorn, Bernard. "Instrumental Causality in the Sacraments: Thomas Aquinas and Louis-Marie Chauvet." *Nova et Vetera* 4, no. 2 (2006): 255-94.
- Boeve, Lieven, and Lambert Leijssen, . *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*. Leuven: Peeters, 2001.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.
- Breton, Stanislas, ed. *Le mythe et le symbole: de la connaissance figurative de dieu*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1977.

- Brown, David. *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . *God and Mystery in Words: Experience Through Metaphor and Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Brunk, Timothy. *Liturgy and Life: The Unity of Sacrament and Ethics in the Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Burrell, David. *Aquinas: God and Action*. London: Routledge, 1979.
- Caldwell, Phoebe. *Finding You Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch with People Whose Severe Learning Disabilities are Combined with Autistic Spectrum Disorder*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battle. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Capretto, Peter. "On Not Operationalizing Disability in Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 4 (2017): 889-919.
- Caputo, John D., and Michael Scanlon, . *God, the Gift and Postmodernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Caputo, John. *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.
- . *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Cavanaugh, William. *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Chauvet, Louis-Marie. *Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001.
- . *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*. Translated by Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995.
- Copeland, M. Shawn. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Coward, Harold, and Toby Foshay, . *Derrida and Negative Theology*. New York: SUNY Press, 1992.
- Coyle, Justin, Justus H. Hunter, Richard Cross, Lydia Schumacher, and John Milbank. "Syndicate Symposium: Postmodernity and Univocity by Daniel Horan." *Syndicate Network*.

December 4, 2017. <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/postmodernity-and-univocity/> (accessed March 21, 2018).

Critchley, Simon. *Ethics, Politics, and Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought*. New York: Verso, 1997.

Davies, Oliver, and Denys Turner, . *Silence and Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

de Lubac, Henri. *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Gemma Simmond, Richard Price and Christopher Stephens. London: SCM Press, 2006.

DeHart, Paul. *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry*. London: Routledge, 2011.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul R. Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Depoortere, Kristaan. "From Sacraments to Sacramentality and Vice-Versa." In *Contemporary Sacramental Contours of a God Incarnate*, edited by Lieven Boeve and Lambert Leijssen. Leuven: Peeters, 2001.

Derrida, Jacques. *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*. Translated by John P. Leavey Jr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

—. *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

—. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976.

—. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Translated by Mark Dooley. London: Routledge, 2001.

—. *On the Name*. Edited by Thomas Dutoit. Translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr. and Ian McLeod. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

—. *Politics of Friendship*. Translated by George Collins. New York: Verso Books, 1997.

—. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

—. *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994.

—. *Speech and Phenomenon: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations." In *Philosophy in France Today*, edited by Alan Montefiore, 34-50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. 3rd Edition. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993.

- Durheim, Benjamin. *Christ's Gift, Our Response: Martin Luther and Louis-Marie Chauvet on the Connection between Sacraments and Ethics*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015.
- Flahault, Françoise. *La parole intermédiaire*. Paris: Seuil, 1978.
- Franke, William. *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2014.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse (II): Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten." *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* 2, no. 6 (1914): 485-91.
- Geach, Peter. *Symposium on What Is*. Vol. 25, in *Freedom, Language, and Reality*, 125-137. London: Harrison and Sons, 1951.
- Gustafson, Hans. *Finding All Things in God: Pansacramentalism and Doing Theology Interreligiously*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Poems and Fragments*. Translated by Michael Hamburger. London: Routledge, 1966.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by Arnold Davidson. Translated by Michael Chase. London: Blackwell Publishing, 1995.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1993.
- . *Being and Time*. New York: SUNY Press, 2010.
- . *Identity and Difference*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- . *On the Way to Language*. Translated by Peter Hertz. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- . *On Time and Being*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- . *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Heller, Nathan. "Trump, the University of Chicago, and the Collapse of Public Language." *The New Yorker*, September 1st, 2016.
- Hemming, Lawrence Paul, ed. *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Hemming, Lawrence Paul. "Transubstantiating Our Selves." *Heythrop Journal* 44 (2003): 418-439.
- Hénaff, Marcel. *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*. Translated by Jean-Louis Morhange. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994.
- Holtz, Dominic. "Sacraments." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, edited by Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump, 448-57. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Horan, Daniel. *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.
- Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1998.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas: Introduction to a General Phenomenology*. Translated by W.R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Macmillan, 1931.
- Jüngel, Eberhard. *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*. Translated by Darrell L. Guder. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.
- . *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Translated by John Webster. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001.
- James, Wendy, and N.J. Allen, ed. *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*. New York: Bergahn, 1998.
- Jones-Armstrong, Amaryah. "The Spirit and the Subprime: Race, Risk, and our Common Dispossession." *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 1 (2016): 51-69.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- . *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysic*. 2nd Edition. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2001.
- Kantorowicz, Ernst. *Selected Studies*. Locust Valley: J.J. Augustin, 1965.
- Kerr, Fergus. *Theology After Wittgenstein*. London: SPCK, 1997.
- Kerr, Fergus. "Transubstantiation after Wittgenstein." *Modern Theology* 15, no. 2 (1999): 115-130.
- Kilmartin, Edward J. *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*. Edited by Robert Daly. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004.
- Kucer, Peter Samuel. *Truth and Politics: A Theological Comparison of Joseph Ratzinger and John Milbank*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

- Ladrière, Jean. *Language and Belief*. Translated by Garrett Barden. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1972.
- . *L'articulation du sens, vol. 1: Discours scientifique et parole de foi*. Paris: Cerf, 1984.
- Lafon, Guy. *Esquisses Pour un Christianisme*. Paris: Cerf, 1979.
- Larson-Miller, Lizette. *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017.
- Lash, Nicholas. *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*. London: SCM Press, 1986.
- Lash, Nicholas. "Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Us?: Questions on Milbank's Aquinas." *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (1999): 433-44.
- Loudovikos, Nikolaos. *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity*. Translated by Elizabeth Theokritoff. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010.
- . *Church in the Making: An Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality*. Translated by Norman Russell. Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Press, 2015.
- Mackinnon, Donald. "Prolegomena to Christology." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 33, no. 1 (1982): 146-160.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*. Translated by Thomas Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Mauss, Marcel. *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: PUF, 1973.
- . *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W.D. Halls. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990.
- McCabe, Herbert. *God Still Matters*. Edited by Brian Davies. London: Continuum, 2002.
- Metz, Johann Baptist. *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. Translated by J. Matthew Ashley. New York: Crossroad, 2007.
- Milbank, John. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- . *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of People*. London: Wiley Blackwell, 2013.
- Milbank, John. "Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to any Future Trinitarian Metaphysic." *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 119-161.
- Milbank, John. "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions." *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (1991): 225-237.
- . *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico (1688-1774), Part I: The Early Metaphysics*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991.



- Milbank, John. "The Second Difference: For a Trinitarianism Without Reserve." *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986): 213-34.
- . *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. London: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.
- . *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd Edition. London: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.
- Milbank, John. "Were the Christian Socialists' Socialists?" *Papers of the Nineteenth Century Theology Working Group* (American Academy of Religion) 14 (1989): 86-95.
- Milbank, John, and Adrian Pabst. *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield International, 2016.
- Milbank, John, Pickstock, Catherine, and Ward, Graham, ed. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Milbank, John, and Catherine Pickstock. *Truth in Aquinas*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Moloney, Raymond. "Review of Symbol and Sacrament by Louis-Marie Chauvet." *Milltown Studies* 38 (1996): 148.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Translated by R.A. Wilson and John Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Moore, Gerald. *Politics of the Gift: Exchanges in Poststructuralism*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2011.
- Morrill, Bruce. *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000.
- . *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: The Paschal Mystery in People, Word, and Sacrament*. New York: Paulist Press, 2012.
- Mudd, Joseph. *Eucharist as Meaning: Critical Metaphysics and Contemporary Sacramental Theology*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1954.
- O'Donovan, Oliver. "Review of 'The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future by John Milbank and Adrian Pabst'." *Modern Theology* 33, no. 3 (2017): 484-88.
- Ortigue, Edmond. *Le Discours et le Symbole*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1962.
- Pickstock, Catherine. *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

- Plato. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997.
- Power, David N. *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition*. New York: Crossroad, 1992.
- . *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and its Reinterpretation*. New York: Crossroad, 1987.
- Rahner, Karl. *Theological Investigations*. New York: Crossroad, 1982.
- Richardson, William J. *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. New York: Fordham Press, 2003.
- Ross, Susan. *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*. New York: Continuum, 1998.
- Scarsella, Hillary Jerome. "Victimization via Ritualization: Relationships of Christian Communion to Sexualized Violence." In *Trauma and Lived Religion*, edited by Srdjan Sremac. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, . *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 2nd Series. Vol. 7. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.
- Schillebeeckx, Edward. *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. Translated by John Bowden. New York: Crossroad, 1993.
- Schrift, Alan D., ed. *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Seasoltz, Kevin. *God's Gift Giving: In Christ and Through the Spirit*. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Smith, James K.A. *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Smith, Jason M. "Must We Say Anything of the 'Immanent' Trinity? Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams on an 'Abstruse' and 'Fruitless' Doctrines ." *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 3 (2016): 495-512.
- Temple, William. *Nature, Man, and God*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964.
- Trinidad, Tom M. *The Word of God in Ecclesial Rites and the Formation of Christian Identity: A Comparison of Karl Barth and Louis-Marie Chauvet*. University of Notre Dame, 2007.
- Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Translated by Thomas Goddard Bergin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948.

Walsh, W.H. *Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975.

Webster, John. *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Williams, Rowan. "Making Moral Decisions." In *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Robin Gil, 3-15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

—. *On Augustine*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

—. *On Christian Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

—. *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Zettel*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, 1967.