

CAN GOD BE PRESENT IN THE LITURGY IN AN AGE OF DECONSTRUCTION?

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The question of 'presence' inhabits, to about the same degree but in very different forms, both the presuppositions of Christian liturgical practice and post-modern, or more exactly, post-structuralist, discourse.

On the one side, the discussion reaches back many centuries, perhaps initially surfacing as a discussion in the dispute between Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus of Corbie in the ninth century as to the mode of Christ's presence in the eucharist.¹ For Protestants, with whom the eucharist or Sacrament of Holy Communion as they prefer to call it carries less importance, the notion of 'presence' finds a more diffused form as a 'presence of God' inhabiting the entire liturgy. Though less clearly articulated, the idea (of 'presence') is here not less structurally or theologically important.

On the other side, Jacques Derrida's 'deconstructive' strategy has from the outset been directed toward the presumption of 'presence' in western rationality - the assumption that the thinking subject is directly present to her or his thoughts, that he or she is thus present to him or her *self*, and that in utterance there is a direct correlation between this mental presence of thought to itself and its expression in spoken language.²

Perhaps not unexpectedly, given the fairly enclosed theatre within which liturgical theology attends to its work, there seems little engagement between these two discussions of 'presence'. On the other hand there seems to be a *prima facie* case for drawing them into conversation; or, any rate, for theology to give more sharply focussed attention to its understanding of 'presence' in light of the 'deconstructive' critique. If 'presence' generally is now difficult or perhaps impossible to articulate, is it possible for theology to remain within these conceptualities? And how might that be done? *How is God 'present' in worship?*

DECONSTRUCTION

My own attempts hitherto to give an account of the 'presence' which is encountered or realised in the act of corporate worship have drawn more or less directly on aesthetic models - the well worn tracks that run between the

arts and religion. Of great importance to me in this, for something like a decade, has been a sentence from the Roman Catholic systematic theologian David Tracy, who draws a connection between the practice of the artist and the perception of fundamental truths:

The difference between the artist and the rest of us is one of intense degree, not one of kind. The difference is one where the journey of intensification - a journey which most of us fear yet desire, shun yet demand - is really undertaken... The sign of the artist may well be a willingness to undergo [this] journey of intensification into particularity to the point where an originating sense for the fundamental questions and feelings that impel us all... is experienced.³

It is in the intensification of ordinary things, I have been inclined to say - the kind of walking which we recognise as processional, the embroidery of language which makes it into hymnody and prayer, gestures which are not just gesticulations - these ordinary things but enriched, intensified, changed or charged, which mediates this sense of 'difference' or 'otherness' which we call 'the presence of God'.

There can be little doubt, I think, that this has been a distinctly 'modernist' project. The supposition that there is a surface of ordinariness through which one may pass in order there to apprehend the 'otherness' of God *within* or *under* ordinariness has all the hallmarks of mid-century aesthetic aspirations. Introducing the collected writings of Paul Tillich on art and architecture, John Dillenberger writes: 'Expressionism originally referred to developments in Germany and France in which the natural, self-contained finite world was rejected in favour of a view of the world in which *depth and ultimacy* were affirmed *underneath the surface* of reality...'⁴ In the ensuing volume Tillich himself confirms this point of view:

I know the appearance and structure of a tree and its relation to the surrounding realities. Science can tell me volumes about every tree in this respect. But I do not know its inner meaning, the way in which it expresses the power of being which is present in everything that is. But there is a way of penetrating into this hidden quality of the thing and this is the way of artistic creation. All the arts penetrate into the depths of things which are beyond the reach of cognition.⁵

There is an unmistakable family resemblance between 'art which is achieved by the "journey of intensification"', 'a way of penetrating the inner meaning of things', and worship which finds God in 'the intensification of ordinariness'. Moreover, they belong to approximately the same generation: a sort of now-classic mid-century modernism: If we will go deep enough, we will encounter something approaching ultimacy.⁶

But we have come to another age; another generation now occupies the house. I think that at least three critical changes have been made which affect the notion of 'the presence of God' in the liturgy. These are: the collapsing of the relationship between surface and depth; the deconstruction of the 'self (as that which provides the possibility of apprehending an 'other'); and the collapsing of 'reference' within signification.

Whereas Tracy and Tillich saw surfaces as superficial and depth as desirable, the newer criticism has scattered to the four winds this confidence in depth and positively flaunts its exuberance in surfaces. In introducing a recent essay in a volume on Postmodernism and Religion, for example, Mark Taylor quotes from Jean Baudrillard's *America*:

Why is L.A., why are the deserts, so fascinating? It is because you are delivered from all depth there - a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points... The fascination of the desert: immobility without desire. Of Los Angeles: insane circulation without desire. The end of aesthetics.⁷

Among his many deconstructions, Derrida too has subverted the opposition between surface and depth or, its near equivalent, between inside and outside. Writing of what he regards as Foucault's ironical undertaking (in writing *reasonably* about madness) and punning (as always) on Foucault's 'scission' (decision) whereby rationality was able to define and then exclude madness, he says: 'As always, the dissension is internal. The exterior [is] the interior, is the fission that produces and divides it along the lines of the Hegelian *Entzweiung* [dissension].⁸ Or one thinks here of Derrida's widely cited reflection on the status of the frame, the 'parergon', which belongs both to the painting *and* to the world beyond the painting, and in this sense belongs properly neither to one nor the other?⁹

This reference to the deconstruction of the distinctions between surface and depth or inside and outside leads us directly to a second element in the 'post-' program which impacts directly on the question of liturgical presence: namely the systematic subversion of all antitheses or dualities. Perhaps the most characteristic move of deconstruction has been to show that nothing has its identity separately from that which is different from it, separately, that is, from that which allows the differences between them to be identifiable; so that the hidden trace of otherness infuses all identity. This becomes especially pertinent when we come to speak the identity of selves in relation to others, either other human beings or, in our case, the otherness of God. As innumerable commentators have observed, the

cartesian *cogito* has been a kind of Magna Carta for 'modern' sensibility, bringing together as it does the long history of logocentrism (the elevation of rationality - i.e., placing it beyond inquiry - to be that by which all other inquiry is determined) and identity (the rationalist tendency to find similarities rather than differences). The postulate of the self as an entity fully present to itself became, in the *cogito*, the touchstone for all other forms of inquiry. Postmodern or deconstructive criticism, however, has been brought to bear on this foundational assumption from so many directions (Lacanian psychology, Derridean textual studies, Foucault's studies of the transmission of power) that it is now apparent not only that the self of the cartesian *cogito* is a social construction but is one fraught with dangerous potential.¹⁰ Returning to our question, then, it takes only minimal reflection to see that the deconstruction of the autonomous ego implicates the objectivity of that which is other than me. In other words, to have some confidence that it is *God* I am encountering, I need to be pretty certain that is not simply a projection of myself. But if the identity of the self (the presence of the self to itself) is now rendered doubtful, so the objectivity of that which the self encounters as other must be equally ambiguous.

This then leads us, thirdly, back to the matter of surface and depth, via the question of reference. Tillich and Tracy's confidence is that if one cares to penetrate the surface of things, there is a depth, there will be a disclosure of how things really are. There *is* something to which the signs ultimately point. Postmodernism has relinquished any such supposition. In deconstruction all we can know about is the endless chain of signs which are distinguishable precisely in their difference and deferral:

...there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc.¹¹

Needless to say, liturgical practice has from the beginning assumed that the sign points beyond itself to *an* other, intangible yet real; that the sign stands for, re-presents, makes present a real presence. It can hardly be more apparent, then, that a representation of reality which sees only the endless play of differences, sets pretty profound challenges for liturgical theory as it has traditionally understood itself.

We shall see that the way forward which most deconstructive theologians have taken is that of *exploiting* the unfinality of the signs - that absence which remains when signification is exhausted, what Taylor calls 'a

non-absent absence'.¹² How easy it might be to carry this phenomenology across to liturgical praxis remains to be seen.

QUESTIONS

To the best of my knowledge there is no significant interest among liturgical theologians in the matters I have raised. The technical study of liturgy is almost wholly absorbed in antiquities or, at best, more contemporary historical studies. Where, *very* occasionally, what might loosely be called the theory or theology of worship is probed, practically invariably, I will say, the Christian conventions and convictions with respect to 'God' and 'God's presence' are presumed from the outset. I have also said that circumstance seems to me to be lamentable for several reasons; not the least of which is that insofar as a worship service consists in a construction of signs, a theory which seems so centrally to the nature of signs and signification as does deconstruction can scarcely be left out of consideration.

In beginning to think through these issues, I want first to pose some questions toward post-modernist reflection from the point of view of situating Christian worship in this scene. Then I want to make some recuperative suggestions. The first question has to do with the public, i.e., *corporate*, nature of worship. One repeatedly gains the impression that those who think about the religious dimensions and possibilities within deconstruction, do so from within a privatising, individualistic perspective. Words such as 'pure alterity', 'silence', 'absence', or 'negation' abound. As Kevin Hart observes, citing Derrida: 'The most that deconstruction can do is glimpse "the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure".'¹³ There is much talk of mysticism and of the *via negativa* (of which Hart's book is a luminous example). Moreover, with the more or less singular exception of Taylor's interest in art and architecture, deconstructive theology preoccupies itself practically exclusively with *texts and textuality* - that is, with the silent, inward contemplation of words on a page. 'Silence', 'unnameable glimmer' and 'non-absent absence' seem to offer little scope for the necessarily communal actions of a liturgical assembly.

One dimension does seem accessible. In the essay of his which I have mostly cited, Taylor explores his thesis of a 'non-absent absence' particularly through the paintings of Anselm Keifer.¹⁴ It is not difficult to envisage the religious power that works such as Keifer's, hung in a worship space, could, would have for the gathered congregation. This said, a great deal more is expected to happen in an act of worship than the silent contemplation of

artefacts. So that the question about the corporate aspects of a deconstructive understanding of God's presence in worship returns.

A second question seems to arise from the customary *cursum* of deconstructionist studies: 'absence', 'silence', and so on: *is there room in deconstruction only for negation?* And is this a sufficiently fulsome curriculum for a congregation's worship? Worship, one hopes, leads to an enhancement, an enrichment of people's lives, an enabling of them to live more vibrantly and confidently. From this point of view we may recall that Roland Barthes' *jouissance* was as much an originating element of deconstruction as was Derridean 'play'?¹⁵ Still, even where deconstruction does not explicitly own to nihilism, there seems a consistent tendency toward negation and denial:

My question here, chiefly to Taylor but to some extent also to Derrida, is to do with the *pathos* of this model, the pathos of the 'veiled truth, of a diurnal or primitive perception in need of dismantling. A string of dualisms opens up in the background: the intelligible and the mysterious, speech and silence, the inside and the outside, the apparent and the real, the speaking ego and the speechless void, even - dare I evoke it - spirit and nature. The sacred, the liberative, is here the second set of terms - the ineffable, the outside, the eternal. My anxiety is to do with the relegation to profanity of the temporal, the communicative, the implied devaluation of 'exchange'....¹⁶

My third question has to do more with the site than the content of a deconstructionist liturgical theology; the question is occasioned by the fact that the arena is ordinarily occupied by literary, philosophical and cultural practitioners. I mean that a 'theology of presence' formed in some degree of accountability to post-modernism has to be thought through not on the basis of artefacts in museums of contemporary art or with reference to the poetry of Baudelaire. I do not mean at all in this that a cleft must be riven between 'culture' and the 'people', that the artefacts which find a place in galleries have nothing whatsoever to do with the lives people are living in the western suburbs of Sydney where I live. I mean that the subject matter of a deconstructionist theory of the 'presence of God' must be truly demotic, must be fashioned of those materials with which people in congregations of worshipping people construct their lives, in precisely the way in which academics construct *their* conceptual lives out of texts and art and literature.

RECONSTRUCTION

As I have observed, deconstruction is essentially an 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. It lives by exposing hidden inconsistencies and complacencies. Its

value lies in showing us the cracks and fissures in what we thought was intact, the margins of what we had supposed would run forever.¹⁷ Any ostensible *rapprochement* between liturgy and deconstruction will thus need to be more than vigilant that it does not take back to itself precisely that which deconstruction would have exposed as dubious and spurious. Theologians might know, but seem often not to know, the wonderful dexterity of our own sleight of hand.

I have listed some of my questions. Beyond these, however, I think there are undoubtedly some critical contributions which a deconstructionist approach can make to a reflection on liturgy and 'the presence of God'. The first I take to be of inestimable importance. The most central tenet of deconstruction, I say again, is that the chains of human signification are endlessly recursive: there is no last word, or first word, or point of access outside our own signifying systems. God is forever clothed in *différance*.

Anyone therefore who observes a congregation singing its heart out, but in so doing showing all the secret or not so secret signs that they love the words or the words and music but have practically no attention at all for that to which the words and music point; anyone who observes charismatics or other enthusiasts lost in their adoration of the experience itself; anyone who observes presiders reciting words and miming gestures in purely mechanical ways; anyone who watches a procession 'process', the members of which are variously interested in who is or isn't in the congregation, or how their robes appear, or why the organist cannot seem to keep a proper beat; anyone, that is, who attends and observes most parish congregations at their worship, understands the need and importance in liturgical reflection and praxis of deconstruction. In practically every place one goes, 'God' in Christian worship has been domesticated, is known, is familiar. There is scarcely any perception that God is 'other', that God is, as deconstruction urges upon us, wholly enfolded in *différance*.

Mark Taylor speaks of the temptation in painting to an inversion in which 'the secular becomes sacred', 'the love of image that mistakes [the image] for the real or absolute'.¹⁸ This temptation, actually this endemic tendency, is scarcely unknown to worship and to worshippers. But to be reminded of it as insistently and as provocatively as deconstruction does is an inestimable service.

A second contribution which is perhaps to be found in deconstruction is its insistence that this 'difference' is embedded *within* likeness or similarity or identity. I have said that worship in practically all the churches has achieved an unpromising familiarity with 'God'; God is *an* other, not all

that different from all the other others whom we know and can identify. But equally, perhaps paradoxically, this 'other', known, recognisable, determinable, is also made a detachable other *among* the others. So that there is little inclination to recognise the surprising *difference* of God in the *familiarity* of the ordinary world.

In contradistinction, I think of the profound impact made on me by Noel Rowe's reading of his paper (to the best of my knowledge not ever published)¹⁹ on Francis Webb's 'Harry'²⁰ and his (Noel Rowe's) insistence that the mongol Harry's letter to the 'house of no known address' is *precisely* a manifestation of 'the Word unwritten'. Or, in more gentle vein, I think of Kevin Hart's 'The Gift':

Impossible to tell, now, what was given
And what was not: slivers of rain on the window,
Those gold-tooled *Oeuvres* of Diderot on the shelf;

The strawberry dreaming in a champagne flute --
Were they part of the gift or something else?
Or is the gift still coming, on its way?²¹

The work of the liturgy oscillates between ordinariness and difference; it represents itself as a 'coming into' and a 'going out from' the presence of God. That presence, that difference, has to be sensibly, discernibly different from the ordinariness of ordinary lives, otherwise we are left with what John Milbank calls the secularising of the secular,²² the apotheosis of ordinariness. At the same time, in all this there is no departure from this world; it is here in ordinariness that this difference must be located. Logistical, practical questions about how the liturgy may effect this disclosure of difference *in* ordinariness, this play of sacrality in secularity, doubtless present themselves as a heavy tax on the imagination of priests, presiders, planners and participants. But that the liturgy might function as does a poet (such as Francis Webb) or a critic (such as Noel Rowe) seems to me to be possible.

A final reflection returns to the question of the subjectivity of selves and its implications for encountering the 'otherness' of God. Deconstruction or post-modernism, I said, has set itself to undercut wherever it can, the 'illusion of self-consciousness'.²³ There can now be no doubt, I suppose, that the self which is our knowledge of ourselves is both divided and the product of social constraints. For all this, it is still hard to relinquish the sense that each of us has a unique personal history, that we think and feel and react differently from every other human being and that there is,

therefore, *some* partial sense of identity, even where this is confessedly located in the amalgam of difference-from-and-dependence-on others. There are critics who, while espousing a general post-modernist position, believe that it is possible to maintain a qualified theory of the self.²⁴

It seems to me possible, then, given a residual theory of the self; that the selves of worshippers may in fact be *enhanced* in the event of encountering the sort of difference which I said earlier is a crucial desideratum for liturgical experience. The 'illusion of self-consciousness' leads us to suppose that we can itemise, catalogue, account for all otherness; but an otherness that locates, confronts and challenges my self - as the liturgy hopefully might - seems to me to offer more than an undifferentiated play of ordinariness, the dazzling (but perhaps in the end unilluminating) so-called 'secular' world.

REFERENCES

¹ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 14ff; Patrick McCormick Zirkel, 'The Ninth Century Eucharistic Controversy: context for the beginning of eucharistic doctrine in the west', *Worship* 68, 1, January 1994, pp. 2-23.

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.70: 'To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity', 'immediacy', 'presence'... is my final intention in this book.' Similarly: 'The first step of this deconstruction of philosophy... is precisely the examination of the notion of *presence*' (the translator's introduction to Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. x, his emphasis.

³ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981), p. 125.

⁴ Paul Tillich, in John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger, eds, *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. xvi (my emphases).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶ 'Presence' is regularly linked with 'Being'. One of Derrida's direct predecessors in the critique of 'presence', Martin Heidegger, had given himself to 'the destruction of metaphysics of presence'. Derrida believes, however, that he never did escape his fascination with Being as a describable entity (see e.g., *Writing and Difference*, pp. 82 and 97f). In the same way Paul Tillich wanted to denominalise 'Being' and to speak only of 'the Ground of Being', yet in the citation I have given, he still rather clearly pines for 'the power of being which is in everything' and which 'reaches beyond cognition.'

⁷ Mark C.Taylor, 'Reframing Postmodernism' in Phillipa Berry and Andrew Wernick, eds, *Shadow of Spirit: postmodernism and religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 11.

⁸ *Writing and Difference*, p. 39.

⁹ Jonathon Culler *On Deconstruction: theory and criticism after structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 193-9; Taylor, p. 25; also Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: deconstruction, theology and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 212, 218.

¹⁰ For example, see John McGowan, *Postmodernism and its Critics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 20: 'Postmodernism views the humanist self as a social/historical construct that is harmful in two ways: because it denies the fact that the self is socially constructed, thus promoting [an] anarchic liberal individualism...; and because the very act of

constructing such a self (an act that humanism tries even to deny) necessitates the repression of heterogeneous elements... that would threaten the self.'

¹¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 159. See also the translator's note in *Writing and Difference*, n. 34, pp. 304f.

¹² Taylor, p. 26.

¹³ Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, p. 231.

¹⁴ Taylor, pp. 21-25.

¹⁵ According to Derrida 'meaning is a function of play' (*Writing and Difference*, p.260). In spite of this Carl Raschke ('Fire and Roses, or the Problem of Postmodern Religious Thinking' in [ed. Phillipa Berry and Andrew Wernick] *Shadow of Spirit: postmodernism and religion*, p.95) remarks: 'Barthes' semiosis of reading, encapsulated in the slogan the 'pleasure of the text', would appear to be the schema for Derrida's 'supplement' of writing. Nonetheless, Barthes' *jouissance*, as a sense of the libidinous freedom and revelatory aesthetics of sign-production, is transfigured by Derrida into a 'joyless' chain of paralogisms, which turn out to be transgressions without conquests, wounds without healing, lesions without disclosures.'

¹⁶ Rowan Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity' in Berry and Wentick, eds, p.74.

¹⁷ So Rowan Williams, *ibid.*, p. 79: 'in so far as the Derridean critique of dialectical negation warns us of the dangers of a glib historicism - such as Hegel's rhetoric does not always avoid - and a reduction of the apophatic dimension to a play of concepts, it is of crucial significance. If we are steered away from a metaphysics of anthropomorphic divine subjectivity and recalled to the recognition that the God of Christian theology is not an agent among agents, well and good. If we learn to look warily at systematic claims to overcome the plural and conflictual character of our speech and world, we shall have profited.'

¹⁸ Taylor, p. 24.

¹⁹ Noel Rowe, 'God Came Stumbling: another theological reading of Webb's poetry'. The paper was read at a commemorative conference for Francis Webb held on 20 November, 1993 at the North Sydney campus of the Australian Catholic University.

²⁰ In Les Murray, ed., *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1986), pp. 192f; or Michael Griffith and James A. McGlade, eds, *Cap and Bells: the poetry of Francis Webb* (North Ryde, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991), pp. 217f.

²¹ Kevin Hart, 'The Gift' in Hart, ed., *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 92.

²² John Milbank, 'Problematising the Secular: the Post-Postmodern Agenda', in Berry and Wernick, eds, p. 37.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 148. Ricoeur is not generally seen as post-modernist or a deconstructionist. In fact I am inclined to believe he was undertaking deconstruction before the term was available. I also tend to think that he offers more for a contemporary account of worship than the better-known deconstructionists.

²⁴ E.g., McGowan, pp. 242-47. Predictably, Jurgen Habermas, who as 'an old European rationalist' locates himself in explicit contradistinction to post-modernism, constructs a narrative theory of personal identity (for example see his *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 102f or 136; similarly, see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. ch. 6.