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Marburg and Modernity

Peter J. Leithart

A history of the relation of sacramental theology and practice to Western intellectual and cultural history has yet to be written. The notion that such a history would be worth writing might seem quaint in our day, but there are hints that the enterprise would be a fruitful one.

What, for example, are we to make of the fact that David Hume began his treatise on miracles with a discussion of Scottish eucharistic doctrine? In the course of that treatise Hume claimed that miracles were impossible to prove, a maxim he applied even to the miracles of Jesus. Hume's skepticism about miracles (and the similar sentiments of his contemporaries) in turn helped launch the movement in biblical studies dedicated to discovering naturalistic explanations for the miracles recorded in the Gospels–a movement justly mocked by Albert Schweitzer. The relation between Hume's treatment of miracles and his understanding of sacramental theology is a question worth investigating.

The influence of sacramental theology on the course of European history was most directly apparent during the Reformation. The Reformers, after all, split largely over the question of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At the Colloquy of Marburg in October 1529, the ecumenical efforts of the early Reformers came to an impasse from which Protestantism has never fully recovered. If Marburg had been nothing more than a rupture between Luther and Zwingli, it would have deserved at least honorable mention as a turning point in European history. The failure of the Reformation to form a unified international movement shaped the course of early modern social, political, and, of course, ecclesiastical history.

Yet the cultural significance of the Marburg Colloquy went beyond the splintering of the young Reformation. Edward Schillebeeckx has noted that differences of eucharistic doctrine are related to different conceptions of reality, an insight abundantly confirmed by the events at Marburg. Emphasizing the words of institution ("This is My Body"), Luther insisted that, though the elements of bread and wine were signs, they were signs that contained and communicated what they signified. Zwingli, by contrast, repeatedly quoted Jesus' statement that "the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63), and insisted that the Supper could not be taken as a literal eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood. It is debatable whether Zwingli completely denied the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but his tendency, and that of his followers, was to reduce the bread and wine to mere symbols.

Historian B. A. Gerrish has argued that Marburg was in essence a debate about the nature of religious symbols, and the relation of the symbolic and the real. In this respect, according to Indian scholar J. P. Singh Uberoi, Marburg not only splintered the Reformation, but began the splintering of the modern mind. In particular, Zwingli's insistence that the Eucharist was merely symbolic is the source of the "dualism or double monism" that Uberoi says is characteristic of the modern worldview: "Spirit, word, and sign had finally parted company at Marburg in 1529; and myth or ritual . . . was no longer literally *and* symbolically real and true. . . . Zwingli was the chief architect of the new schism and . . . Europe and the world followed Zwingli in the event. Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich, was in his system of thought the first philosopher . . . of the modern world."

The wider implications of this opposition of symbol and reality were described by Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann. Schmemann placed the rift earlier, arguing that the opposition of symbol and reality first appeared during the eleventh–century eucharistic disputes in the West, in which both sides, despite their antagonism, agreed on the basic point that symbol and reality were not only distinct, but fundamentally opposed to one another. One side contended that the sacrament contained the true body and blood of Christ, the other side insisted that the elements were only symbols of the body and blood. Both implicitly denied that the sacrament might involve both symbol *and* reality.

Patristic writers and many of the Reformers, by contrast, did not oppose symbol and reality, but claimed that Christ's flesh and blood were really communicated through the symbols of bread and wine. This view was rooted in the biblical doctrine of creation. According to the biblical conception, the entire creation reveals the Creator; reality is thus naturally and essentially symbolic of its Maker. Creation exists to reveal God to man, and to be a means of communion with him. As Schmemann explained, for the

Church Fathers the sacrament was not a "miraculous exception to the natural order of things," but rather "reveals and fulfills the ultimate meaning and destiny of the world itself."

Rooted as it was in the doctrine of creation, patristic sacramental theology was able to hold together what Schmemann called the "three dimensions or levels of the Christian view of reality: those of the Church, the world, and the Kingdom." The world, though created good, is under judgment because of the sin of man. By his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus began to restore the creation, a process that will be consummated with the final coming of the Kingdom. The Eucharist, the Church's memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus, celebrates the restored creation and points to its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.

Once symbol and reality are opposed, once the sacrament is disconnected from the doctrine of creation, the unity of the world, the Church, and the Kingdom dissolves. The sacrament of the Church comes to be thought of as a miraculous intervention into an alien world, a supernatural event in a world that is governed according to mechanistic natural laws, an intrusion of the sacred in a profane world. Christianity involves the manipulation of comforting symbols, but "real life" is something entirely separate. The biblical claim that Christianity is the truth about the real world is lost, as is the Church's claim to be the firstfruits of a new creation.

The political correlate of this sacramental theology is that the state is a part of the "real world," the world that is separated from the Church. Church and state are entirely discontinuous institutions, each serving one side of schizophrenic modern man. Jefferson's "wall of separation" is political Zwinglianism. Operating with the patristic view of the Eucharist, by contrast, Armenian Orthodox ethicist Vigen Guroian concludes that "the political life is part of that material of the Kingdom which the Church must take within its own life, sanctify, and return to God."

The "dissociation of sensibility" initiated at Marburg continues to bear philosophical fruit as well. George Steiner has recently argued that the period from 1870 to 1930 marked a decisive turning point in the history of Western thought. During those decades Western intellectuals broke what Steiner calls the "covenant between the word and world." They came to doubt the ability of linguistic symbols to describe reality, a doubt that Steiner sees at the heart of the deconstructionist project. Again, this is simply Zwingli in linguistic guise.

If there is anything to these reflections, the implication seems to be that any Christian effort to respond to the breach within modern thought and culture would involve a revival of biblical sacramental theology and practice. In fact, even if there is nothing to these reflections, that would not be a bad thing to do.

Peter J. Leithart, a frequent contributor to *First Things*, is Pastor of Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church in Alabaster, Alabama.