18 *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, pp. 630-631.
19 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 207-208.
20 Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 241, 252.
21 In some ways this is similar to N.T. Wright's reconstruction of the stories that informed the worldview of first-century Judaism where he employs the structuralism of A.J. Greimas; see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 215-243.
22 Ibid., 195 n.70.
23 Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 144; Larry W. Hurtado, "A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Research," in *Whose Historical Jesus*, William E Arnal and Michael Desjardins eds. (Studies in Christianity and Judaism n. 7, Waterloo, Ontario: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1997), 283.
24 Ibid., 247.
25 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 250, emphasis added.

Irony and the Eucharist

Terry Eagleton

In one region of our lives, we have no problem in understanding how a thing can change its substance while apparently remaining itself. The process is known as metaphor. 'Fire' can mean anger or amorousness rather than literal flame, but the word 'fire' remains unaltered in this exchange, rather as the bread and wine of the eucharist still look and behave like bread and wine. Since the meaning of a word is its being, we can say that the being or 'substance' of the word has changed with this metaphorical transaction. Flame has transubstantiated into fury.

Moreover, 'fire' can act as a metaphor of passion only because there are real resemblances between the two. The relation between the two signs is not iconic (they don't look much like each other), but it is not arbitrary either. Maybe Seamus Heaney could get 'carburetter' to mean erotic passion, but for most of us 'fire' is a less laborious way of doing it. In a similar way, the bread and wine of the eucharist, as signs of our human solidarity which need to be destroyed (consumed) if they are to yield life, have natural affinities with the body of Christ. As Herbert McCabe once remarked, you couldn't consecrate Coke and burgers

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01835.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

because they aren't food and drink.

The notion of metaphor will only get us so far in understanding the eucharist, since a change of being which leaves a thing apparently intact is more mysterious than a change of meaning which does so. But a semiotics of the eucharist can be pressed further. How can the bread appear to be bread, retain the chemical form and physical behaviour of bread, while being in fact the body of Christ? To understand this puzzle better, we need to grasp the idea of a meta-sign. A meta-sign is a specially privileged sort of sign which comments on the nature of signification as such. What you are reading right now is a sort of meta-signification, since my language is reflecting on signs and meanings. It is signing to the second power. 'We never seem to get to talk', a line you can pluck from any second-rate movie or TV drama, is a sort of meta-signing, whereas such familiar cinematic one-liners as 'You've got to stop running', 'Try to get some sleep', or 'Me a murderer? You must be out of your mind, Inspector!' are not.

The eucharistic elements are meta-signs in more senses than one. To begin with, they are signs of an absence of signification, rather as zero is. All signification is discursive and mediatory: we come at things not eyeball-to-eyeball, but in and by tangled webs of signs. As Jacques Lacan observes: 'The symbol is the death of the thing'. And this is a far more intimate way of grasping things than some blank, wordless immediacy, whatever Romantic sentimentalists and actors in bad French movies may consider. In the kingdom of God, on the other hand, the bad French movie actors have thrones only a little below the saints, since there our presence to Christ and one another is unmediated, face-to-face, non-discursive. Or rather, it is the material body itself which now becomes our most eloquently expressive form of discourse. The 'risen' body is one with all the inexhaustible resources and fathomless creativity of a language, the body as Word. The rhetoric of heaven is a fleshly one. So the bread and wine of the eucharist are meta-signs in a second sense: not only signs about signs, but signs of the 'beyond-sign', *meta* as 'beyond' as well as 'second-order'. They signify the future death of signification.

If the eucharist is an historical foretaste of this new form of communication, then one can see why the bread has to behave like bread but not actually be it. For the irony of this love-feast is that it has to convey the non-discursive discursively. It has to signify a condition beyond signification. What we have, paradoxically, is a kind of symbolic face-to-faceness. And to that extent the eucharist is a self-cancelling, self-abolishing kind of semiotics, which like a symbolist poem can only say what it means by pointing beyond itself, using

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01835.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

language as a kind of trampoline which will bounce you beyond it. One thinks of the great revolutionary currents of early 20th century avant-gardism, for which the sign, compromised by its complicity with a degraded history, nonetheless strives to belong even now to a redeemed political future by cancelling or estranging or exploding itself, putting itself in parentheses, signifying the non-being of the future by the non-being of its own ironic self-destruction. It is as though signifier and signified belong to different histories or dimensions. The sign is thus where degradation and redemption intersect. In this sense, avant-garde poetics reinvent the classical idea of the sublime, for which infinity can be represented only in negative guise, by the representation drawing attention to its own stringent limits. We can feel that God or a raging storm at sea are so mighty just because they make us feel so small.

What the bread and wine mediate to us is immediacy. There is no way other than by mediation in which immediacy could mean anything for us. The eucharist is still, to be sure, a matter of discourse and mediation—of these finite, material, conveniently portable signs being handled, shared around, tasting of nothing but themselves. But the content of this discourse and mediation is not a particular signified thing, but a condition which has transcended signification altogether. It is this which makes the bread and wine a kind of meta-language, rather than just a set of signifiers in search of a signified. We can say that their signified is the body of Christ, as long as we recognise that this only sounds like saying that the signified of the verbal form 'Henry Kissinger' is an unbelievably nasty ex-US Secretary of State. It is really more like saying that what socialist or feminist discourse signifies is a future situation in which the discourse itself would lapse from existence as no longer necessary. Marx writes in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* of the socialist revolution as 'taking its poetry from the future'. In previous revolutions, he claims, 'the phrase went beyond the content', meaning that they dressed up the paucity of their social content in flashy, flamboyant symbolic forms. In the case of socialism, however, the content will go beyond the phrase: what socialist transformation envisages outstrips the language in which we might now describe it. If Marx's 'the content goes beyond the phrase' is a way of describing that, it is also a pithy enough summary of the eucharist.

The bread and wine of the eucharist, then, are signs of a non-sign, a doubled, self-negating piece of semiosis, for which our common term is irony. If what the bread and wine signify is a condition beyond the sign, then what they signify is their own emptiness. But they do not, for all that, fade chemically and physically from existence, since *something* must signify non-signification. There must be a signifier which stands in

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01835.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

for its own impossibility. As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued, every semiotic system of any degree of complexity contains one signifier whose role is to signify the impossibility of totalising the system as a whole.[1] The system as a whole cannot be totalised because the Real which founds it cannot be represented within it. A founding principle which was part of the system would not be a founding principle. But its absence from the system itself, the impossibility of representing it there, can nevertheless be represented. And this ironic representation of the non-representable is achieved through the negation of a signifier which points ostentatiously to its own emptiness.

For Christian faith, this founding Real is the body of Christ himself, the transcendent source of all signification which for that very reason cannot be represented within it. Only a non-representation, like the bread and wine of the eucharist, could capture this presence in all of its absence. And this brings us to a third sense in which the eucharist is a meta-sign. For the body of Christ is itself a sign, just as every living body is; and the bread and wine are thus signs of a sign. The body can be represented by a sign only because it is inherently expressive, and thus a kind of sign already. We are present in our bodies as the meaning is present in a word, not as a talkative teenager is present in a telephone box. The risen body is the flesh as pure expressivity, and so more of a sign, not less of one. Ironically, then, the bread and wine of the eucharist are in one sense signs of a meta-signifying condition, one which has passed beyond the sign altogether; but they are also signs of the fullest form of signification we can imagine, one in which the material body is itself transfigured to become pure communication.

In this sense, the death of the sign is also the consummation of it, and the eucharist, in another of its structural ironies, symbolises both of these conditions. Signs in the kingdom of God give way not to some brute reality, as the empiricist might imagine, but to a principle of signification—the body of Christ—which is so purely expressive that it has no need of mediation.This is why the fulfilment of the sign is also the abolition of it. Signification has the life-in-death, presence-in-absence structure of the body of Christ itself. The symbol may be the death of the thing, but it is also its redemption. The eucharistic elements are empty signs because they signify a signification so ultimate that it renders signs redundant. They are thus both more and less signs than, say, flags and poems. It is not that the material world has been pared away so that pure meaning can appear in all its naked glory, but that in the eucharist the material body itself appears in the form of pure meaning. If this real presence is less than full presence, since the body of Christ is present to us as sign rather than face-to-face, the eucharist—

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01835.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

precisely *because* it is sign—also represents the very essence of that body, which is to be purely signifying.

As with all sound politics, the eucharist must avoid the antithetical errors of reformism and false utopianism. This is what it means to say that the bread is the body of Christ. It is the *bread* which is his body—this sign of the current, quotidian world. The eucharist is a mediated, discursive affair. It is not as though a real heaven suddenly breaks rudely in upon us, triumphantly overriding our everyday life. But if the fact that the bread is still a material signifier guards against the blank disconnection between present and future which is false utopianism, the fact that its signified belongs to an inconceivable future refutes any mere reformism. It is for this reason that the doctrine of the real presence is of no interest either to the New Ageism which imagines that it lives in the future already, or to the Old Fogeyism which has no quarrel with the future as long as it turns out to be a repetition of the present.

1 'See in particular Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London,. 1999).

The Death of Jesus: Its Universal Impact

Louis Roy OP

Numerous people concerned with spirituality or religion nevertheless reject Christianity's claim — particularly forceful in the Letters of St Paul — that Jesus is the universal Saviour. As Daniel Helminiak aptly puts it,

> in the contemporary situation the scandal of Christianity is its insistence that Jesus of Nazareth was God-incarnate on earth. Today's scandal is to suggest that Jesus was divine in a way that no other human being was or can be.[1]

I am convinced that many reject this aspect of Christianity because it is misunderstood. Thus I would like to present it in a way that may bring its meaning to light. Many contemporary exegetes and Catholic theologians have renounced the 'high Christology' which underpins the doctrine of Redemption. However, if one purifies it of certain unfortunate

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01835.x Published online by Cambridge University Press