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# Eucharist and Trauma

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As I recall, it was not without some embarrassment that my catechist broached the doctrine of transubstantiation, i.e. the claim that Christ is substantially present in the bread and wine offered up during the Sacred Mass. Such embarrassment seems to reflect a broad consensus today, that it is somehow easier to believe that God created the world than changes bread and wine into Christ's actual body and blood. Perhaps because, while a general belief in God is really not that out of the ordinary, sitting quite comfortably at the limits of the known world, transubstantiation invites a particular belief, one that not only concerns an everyday object and event, but one wholly at odds with everything an empirical and rational mind has been brought up to believe. Maybe that is why it remains such an essential part of the Eucharist, elevating the rite above an act of mere remembrance, inviting instead a moment of unfathomable mystery into a world that increasingly refuses all that cannot be quantified and qualified by our experiences. For whatever reasons, the question remains: how does one speak of transubstantiation in the twenty-first century?

Of course, one can simply appeal to tradition. Considered to have been a part of the early Church,[1] transubstantiation has been formulated by all the ecumenical councils from the Fourth Lateran onwards (1215). Thus historically one can argue that the Church has resolutely maintained the identity of Christ with those sacramental elements, beyond what may be taken as a mere act of remembrance, for over a millennium; and so to believe otherwise is already to be standing outside the tradition. Yet surely the Church has a responsibility to explain itself to the world into which it was born? After all, doctrine is not a private language game anymore than language is private.

The most celebrated attempt to explain at some level transubstantiation was, of course, Aquinas' appeal to the Philosopher, Aristotle. By employing Aristotle's distinction between a thing's substance and accidents, Aquinas was able to reason that the bread and wine were transformed at the level of their substance, but not their accidents.[2] Hence while the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine, a transformation occurs on the metaphysical plane. And for

[1] J. Pohle, 'Eucharist' in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia V*, p. 578.
[2] *S.Th.* IIIa, 75, a5.

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good reason too; after all, who really wants to eat manifest human flesh and blood? But while Thomas goes some way to providing a framework of explanation, to what extent can he still be said to speak to us today? Does Aristotle's ontology have resonance for our ears. My feeling is, not very well.

Does that mean we must radically break with Aquinas? On the contrary, because were he alive today it is not Aristotle he would be engaging with, but more contemporary strains of thought, those associated with so called postmodernism, since it is the postmodernists who not only present the greatest challenge to the intellectual life of the Church – the loss of grand narratives, death of self, and reduction of institutions to power – they define our cultural milieu. In other words, if we are to remain faithful to Aquinas it cannot be a matter of merely repeating him verbatim, but repeating his gesture, i.e. finding a contemporary voice in which to rearticulate this troubling doctrine.

My wager is that if the church is to converse with the wider cultural milieu about transubstantiation, then the contemporary voice most suited is Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in particular Lacan's account of *trauma*. In other words, I argue that the Eucharist, and in particular the point of transubstantiation, is a thoroughly traumatic event. If I am right, not only is transubstantiation best described as a moment of rupture or break, but one can also describe the Eucharist as a form of social-psychoanalysis. However, my argument does not end there because I am not simply presenting the case for the employment of a particular metaphor. If the language of trauma and psychoanalysis is helpful for rethinking the Eucharist, it is because historically Christ's Incarnation and his subsequent institution of the Eucharist is already the paradigm for psychoanalytic accounts of trauma, i.e. psychoanalysis has always repeated the Eucharist in the Kierkegaardian sense of the word.

In what follows I shall begin by arguing for the psychoanalytic precedence of associating trauma with the Eucharist *qua* Freud and Lacan, then I shall explore how trauma helps us rethink the Incarnation and finally I shall examine the role of trauma the clinic and the Eucharist.

## Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Theology

The precedence for associating the Eucharist with trauma is not a new claim. According to Freud, culture was founded upon the murder of an alpha-male in an attempt by the lesser men to gain access to the women. The ensuing guilt would lead to the collective promulgation of law: the prohibition against incest and murder; and this sovereign moment initiated cultural life. So Freud already thought of our social

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bond as a minimal state of defence against the trauma of the Oedipal crime; and he understood the Eucharist in exactly these terms: a ritual reminder of that primal death, giving playful release to unconscious desire, whilst simultaneously seeking atonement. Freudian psychoanalysis therefore already made the link between the Eucharist and trauma.[3]

Lacan differs from Freud to the extent he offers a structural or synchronic account of trauma instead of Freud's historical account. According to Lacan any system is constituted upon the basis of a primary loss, what he calls the 'real' [*réel*] of existence or the constitutive exception; i.e. that which cannot be put into words because it is the very thing sacrificed as the condition of speech. Trauma subsequently refers to this leftover scrap; trauma is that which cannot be assimilated by the symbolic, remaining instead destined to appear as an anamorphic stain across our field, much like the skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors*. Moreover, like the skull, it signals death because the real of trauma invites us to step outside of the symbolic systems that sustain us.[4]

It is easy to see how Lacan's structural account of trauma helps one rethink the Incarnation and by implication the Eucharist. Consider first the relations between Christ's humanity and divinity. When Kierkegaard describes them, he does so in terms of God entering time, yet without being fully subsumed by time. The eternal is said to 'intersect' the temporal world but without being integrated into it.[5] In other words, Christ's divinity corresponds to this left-over scrap that Lacan calls the *real*. Moreover, in the way of the crazy paradox that characterises Kierkegaard's work, one gains access to temporality, precisely by recourse to this moment of eternity that refuses integration. If you try to reach for temporality in its immediacy you lose the meaning of temporality because you end up in an eternal now; instead, by starting from the eternal, one encounters one's life in such a way that the choices one makes effect eternity, and so history and hence temporality begin to matter in new and profound ways. And so, for the Christian, it is ironically only by recourse to the eternal, i.e. that which is out of joint, that history manifests.

And this is Lacan's point exactly: that the very element that appears out of joint, rather than impeding relations, is the very condition of social relations, thereby serving as the constitutive exception. Consider for example the standard question of the young lover: *why do*

[3] S. Freud, 'Totem and Taboo' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XIII*, (London, The Hogarth Press, 1962) pp. 1–162.

[4] J. Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–4*, (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, 1988) p. 66.

[5] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980) p. 87.

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*you love me?* The worst response a suitor could make is to provide an exacting list of such reasons, as if in the final analysis love could of itself be reduced to a list of predicates. Rather, love names precisely that uncertainty upon which the risk of a relationship rests. The point of the question is therefore not to elicit an answer but instigate desire by restaging the perpetual lack within the process of signification. In other words, it is the very failure to answer the question that is constitutive of the relation.

To highlight the novelty of Lacan's approach one should contrast it with today's prevalent forms of psychotherapy. Here, trauma is principally a negative state, and the emphasis is on gentrifying or integrating it into the symbolic. This is the route taken by Jung for example, in which the goal is to achieve equilibrium and wholeness.[6] Lacan's point is the absolute opposite: there is always some irksome trauma that cannot be balanced or integrated; yet rather than see this as an impediment to existence, he sees it as its positive condition.

Returning to theology, one can explain the Chalcedon (451) affirmation of Christ precisely in terms of the desire to preserve the trauma of the *real* against the heretics. For example, those labelled Monophysite declared that Christ had but a single and divine nature ($ουσια$), so rather than face the trauma of the eternal in time, they simply resolved the temporal into the eternal (a Gnostic heresy). Similarly, whilst the Nestorian heresy declared that Christ was two persons ($προσωπα$), one human and the other divine, these two did not commingle, thereby refusing the trauma of the eternal in time. By contrast, the Council of Chalcedon affirmed the existence of one person in two natures, 'which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation'.[7] Christ is neither two separate persons (as the Nestorians would have it), nor are those two resolved into a single nature (like the Monophysites): Christ is one person whose divine (eternal) nature grounds his humanity (temporality). In other words, Christ's divinity corresponds to the *real*.

It is not difficult to extend this model directly to the Eucharist and the relation between the divine and mundane elements. If the divine and the mundane are disjoined in the host, one would risk the eucharistic equivalent of the Nestorian heresy: impanation. The sacred host would be constituted in terms of two distinct and separate entities: the divine body of Christ covered in a separate wrap of bread. Consequently the Eucharist would lack the participatory quality; it would remain, as Catherine Pickstock suggests, an '*illustrative* signification which relies upon a non-participatory similitude between the

[6] C. Jung, *The Essential Jung*, ed. by Anthony Storr (London, Fontana Press, 1998) p. 18.

[7] N. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical council, Vol 1* (London, Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990) p. 86.

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bread and the Body'.[8] On the other hand, if the bread were wholly taken up into the divine then the Eucharist would fail to coincide with the historical temporality of the *ecclesia.* Instead, one should assert that Christ's body is in the bread, distinct yet inextricably joined. In other words, we can speak of the real presence of Christ in precisely the Lacanian sense of the term: Christ's presence renders the host traumatic.

However, in the manner of Žižek, one should qualify this further. It is not that the real presence of Christ can be grasped only in terms of the failure of representation. Such an account would suggest that the bread becomes a stand-in for the *real* of Christ who is rendered an unattainable object. Rather, in the Eucharist one encounters the *real as* bread, and this is why it is so traumatic. Here the split is not simply between symbolic reality and its inaccessible support, but inherent to the host itself, just as Christ is not a man transcendentally supported by God, Christ *is* God *and* man.[9]

## Psychoanalytic Acts

Psychoanalysis does not just resign us to the trauma or *real* of existence, it *uses* it. Indeed, this is the analyst's job: to traumatise the analysand, breaking through the analysand's neurotic defences by confronting him with the trauma of his unconscious desire, destabilising the ground of the analysand's experience. Yet precisely because the point of trauma brings one's symbolic supports and neurotic defences into question, the event is, as Kirby Farrell puts it, 'always supercharged with significance and always profoundly equivocal in its interpretive possibilities. Like traditional religious-conversion experience, it can signify rebirth and promise transcendence, or it can open onto an abyss'.[10]

Once again, trauma is not seen as an impediment, but the positive condition of experience, an approach that finds a curious analogy with *Asterix and the Big Fight.*[11] Here, the problem arises for Asterix because Obelix has accidentially knocked Getafix the druid over the head with a menhir rendering him mad. Getafix is therefore unable to make the magic potion and help the Gauls defeat the Romans.

[8] C. Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998) p. 254. Italics in the original.

[9] Zizek expresses this point in terms of the difference between the 'real as impossible' and the 'impossible as real'. Slavoj Zizek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Zizek* (Cambridge, Polity, 2004) p. 70.

[10] K. Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation* (Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1998) p. 18.

[11] R. Goscinny and A. Uderzo, *Asterix and the Big Fight*, trans. Anthea Bell and Derek Hock ridge (UK, Hodder Children's Books, 1974).

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However, Obelix reasons that if an initial bang sent Getafix mad, a further knock might render him sane again. And this is precisely the logic of Lacanian analysis: *the wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it*.[12]

Farrell's earlier reference to rebirth and religious-conversion is telling in that it points to my central thesis: that transubstantiation should be shocking, indeed traumatic, not simply because at the narrative level one is asked to identify with the central image of a crucified man, nor because we are also called to identify with the perpetrators of his violent death. But *because* it invites the absolute Other – God – into our every day proceedings, confronting us with the *real* of existence – God – so that what we take as bread and wine coincides with and thereby confronts us as Christ's body and blood; and this radical breach or *caesura* destabilises the ground of experience. Where we see ordinary bread, an interpretative space is opened up and it is entrusted to us to eat *the* body of Christ.

Returning to Lacan, one can call this point of destabilisation *traversing of the fantasy*; i.e. accomplishing an act that disturbs the fundamental symbolic structures that support us. As Lacan says: 'When the traumatic elements – grounded in an image which has never been integrated, draw near, holes [and] points of fracture appear in the unification, the synthesis of the subject's history'.[13]

However, Lacan does not abandon us to the void any more than the Eucharist does, not yet anyway. As he says: 'I have pointed out how in starting from these holes [the fractures drawn from the trauma] that the subject can realign himself within the different symbolic determinations which make him a subject with a history'.[14]

Lacan's point is that the traumatic break with the symbolic allows one to shatter one's neurotic supports, and subsequently reconstitute oneself, but in such a way that signifiers return not as demands, organising particular forms of behaviour, but questions, so the analysand is in some sense orientated towards the fundamental openness of language, and hence subjectivity. As Lacan says,

> what is realised in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.[15]

There are strong overtones of Heidegger in this quotation from Lacan. Indeed, Lacan's is explicit on this point through his invocation

[12] Wagner, *Parsifal*.
[13] J. Lacan, *Op. cit.*, p. 197.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] J. Lacan *(crits, A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, 2002) p. 84.

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of the future anterior. For Heidegger this grammatical tense is the favoured expression of 'care' because it implies an openness to the future which has the power to retroactively change the past.[16] Moreover, for Heidegger it is precisely a traumatic encounter with one's mortality/death (what Lacan associates with the *real*) which allows one to reconfigure one's past, because only after such an encounter does time matter in new ways: the past is not left behind, rather it impresses upon us how we are already in the world, the way prior events or tradition shape us as well as opening up possibilities for the repetition thereof. But the past also gets meaning from our future as fresh events cast new light upon past actions. Likewise, the future is not simply the yet-to-come, rather it comes towards us, met in the decisions we make.

I suggest that this Lacan-Heidegger approach lends itself to the Eucharist and the centrality of *anamnesis*. The point of transubstantiation amounts to the traumatic intervention of the *real*, which shatters existing symbolic determinates and makes time matter in new ways. The Eucharist subsequently provides the ritual co-ordinates to symbolically reconfigure one's life, situating one in the mode of the future anterior. From the perspective of the Eucharist, the past is not simply trailing behind, rather one can redeem it in the light of eschatological hope. That hope in turn is met in and determines the instant presently given to the eucharistic community.

In following this route, from Lacan, through Heidegger to the Eucharist, one should recall Heidegger's initial debt to Kierkegaard. Heidegger expressed the moment of trauma, i.e. the point one's life begins to matter in new ways, in terms of the German *Augenblick* "the moment of vision", figuratively derived from *Øiets blik*, a blink of the eye.[17] And this is precisely the term Kierkegaard uses to describe the 'instant' or trauma of the Incarnation, the point of divine intervention.[18] Moreover, as I have already mentioned, for Kierkegaard it is the traumatic kernel of Christ that brings the passage of time into relief precisely because in the incarnation God is *in* time. And for this reason one should maintain that trauma is not merely a useful metaphor for transubstantiation; rather, Christ's incarnation and subsequent identity with the Eucharist is the paradigm for trauma, historically mediated to postmodern psychoanalysis through Heidegger from Kierkegaard. In other words, psychoanalysis is a parody of the Eucharist.

[16] For example, 'I will be rested if I sleep now'. Being rested (the past) is dependent on the contingency of the future (i.e. getting enough sleep). And this is what is at stake in analysis, going back and changing one's past, because one way to describe a neurosis is in terms of being trapped in a past event, destined to endlessly repeat it.

[17] M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John McQuarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, Blackwell, 1962) p. 387.

[18] S. Kierkegaard, *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

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## Conclusion

If my argument is accepted, the Eucharist can be seen less as a ritual defence against the anxiety of the father, containing as it does the ritual death and worship of the almighty, and more as the very place of dramatic and traumatic confrontation – because the Eucharist only works if God breaks into time, *every* time, and it is not simply celebrated as an act of remembrance.

Kirby Farrell points out: 'In the Vietnam War, officers sometimes ordered new soldiers to kill enemies who were then revealed to be innocent civilians, deliberately using traumatic guilt to promote bonding among the new men'. Perhaps then we need the Eucharist as the Church's counter-trauma. Through the mass, in particular the consecration and splitting of the host, community is engendered by re-enacting the trauma of Christ's sacrifice. Called to identify with the wounded Christ, expressed through the doctrine of transubstantiation, the trauma of the mass invites and establishes a therapeutic community of openness.

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