

Some Thoughts on the Eucharistic Presence

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by G. Egner

2. The Current Theories

II

I turn to the newer theories of the eucharistic presence. They are not as accessible as the old: that much we can all admit. In fact, I begin what I have to say about them by giving two reasons for this inaccessibility. First of all they have been published for the most part in Flemish or Dutch, and in periodicals not easily traced in England. I got round this difficulty by having a large selection of material microfilmed in Holland: what I have to say, although I do not propose to take up much time in quotation, is in fact based upon original sources that I have read and translated for myself. The second cause of inaccessibility is more important. Just as the older theory was couched in the terminology of Aristotle (misleadingly so, if my contentions are correct), so the newer theories have their philosophical setting. The setting is the tradition known as phenomenology, and associated with the philosopher Edmund Husserl, who died in 1938. To understand what the newer theology is getting at here, one needs to know something of this way of philosophizing.

I have one help in embarking on a brief description: the relationship between the newer theology and Husserl is not the same as the relationship between the traditional account and Aristotle. The newer opinions do not abuse phenomenology in the way that the concepts of actuality and potentiality are abused in the theory of transubstantiation. On the other hand, phenomenology is a very difficult brand of philosophy to put into a few words. Be that as it may, I think it is possible to pick out one or two things from it that have influenced recent theological speculation on the eucharistic presence. First, an insistence that meaning and significance are not to be understood in isolation, but in the whole context of the world of life which we have in common. (Some of you may find resemblances here to another philosophical tradition.) In other words, phenomenology reacts against the approach to reality found in so many philosophers of the last 300 years, which makes the quest for understanding into something individual and isolated, a hazardous inference from appearances to a mysterious reality beyond them. In place of this, phenomenology puts an awareness of the *shared* character of reality. How we understand and categorize the world depends upon the interpersonal relations we have: indeed the very concept of 'world' needs grasping in terms of the communal activity of those who understand it. We are not isolated spirits dwelling in a receptacle called 'the world': our situation is better described in a phrase beloved of French phenomenological writers—'je-avec-autrui-dans-

le-monde'. Self, significance, world of life, community: these are concepts that are mutually dependent, and no philosophy can come to anything if it wants us to think we are intellectual Robinson Crusoes.

How do these preoccupations of phenomenology show themselves in recent theological writings on the Eucharist? I mention four that seem to me important. The first uses Husserl's notion of the world, and applies it to the Creation and Redemption. These constitute the world of life—*Lebenswelt*, to use Husserl's term—within which the Eucharist has its significance, and in which the eucharistic presence of Christ is to be understood. Christ is already present in the redeemed and in their assemblies; all creation expects his coming to complete all things—it is of all this that the Eucharist is a sign, and Christ's presence in the Eucharist cannot be expounded as if it were something separable from the whole *Lebenswelt* of Redemption.

The second point follows up the refusal of phenomenology to make the traditional separation between mind and body. We are not to divorce reality into two worlds, one mechanical (the body) and one ghostly (the soul): the body is not a sign or empty sign, but of its very nature a manifestation. And the presence of one human being to another is not reducible to the juxtaposition of two physical objects. Christ's eucharistic presence, the newer theology submits, cannot be usefully discussed in the terms of any philosophy of nature at all. Aquinas, in looking for philosophical concepts to express the eucharistic presence, looked in the wrong place when he went to those used by Aristotle to elucidate change.

The third point is related to the second. Our human corporeal nature is how we communicate—there would be no personal presence were it not for words, gestures, or actions. But the same corporeal nature is a barrier to complete unity: its very definiteness and materiality keep us apart. The Risen Christ is seen as the reconciliation of this tension, and his presence seen as transcending the limitations of place and time: so the eucharistic presence must be discussed with reference to the Risen Lord.

The fourth and last point is for us the most important: it starts, as did the first, with the notion of *the world*, and with the Husserlian tradition's insistence that this world is not some static receptacle for us, but is constituted by the activity and interrelations of human beings. The human setting of the Eucharist—a meal—exemplifies this constitutive power of communal activity among mankind. Eating itself involves both a choice of material and its preparation, usually by cooking; consequently, the finished product essentially depends for its significance upon human destiny and employment. So the reality we confront in bread and wine cannot be considered in physical or chemical isolation from the use we make of it, and conversely, our own being as men shows itself in our need for food and in our preparation of it: our giving of significance to what we cook

and eat also manifests what we ourselves are. The notion of giving significance is extended to the Eucharist, but here the ultimate norm of significance and reality is divine, not human. One author writes: 'If Christ really is the keystone, then the one definitive point of view of things is that from which Christ sees and judges them. Things are purely and simply what they are for Christ, because the mind of Christ is the absolute norm of our own mind, just as his own existence is. Perceptible and physico-chemical properties have only a relative meaning.'

You will have noticed that, in this exposition of the newer theories, I have not so far used the words 'transignification' or 'transfinalization'. The omission is deliberate. To begin with, the words—apart from being cacophonous—are not often used by the theologians themselves; and secondly, as I mean to show, the newer views are less novel than they appear: transignification amounts to no more than a rather modish version of transubstantiation, and is ultimately just as empty.

I start my proof from a point made in the extract quoted above: the idea that things are what they are for Christ, and that physical properties are only relative. Here lurks a confusion that is to be found elsewhere in theology today: I call it the Fallacy of Replacement. Let me describe it. Very often, a theologian of our time has to evacuate positions he formerly held—suppose, for example, that he no longer believes a certain part of the Bible to be literally true. You know what he will say: 'This passage is not meant to be history. It is poetry, or a parable, or a midrash, or—' well, some other word. So far, so good. But suppose he goes further, and says: 'You simply cannot *ask* whether the events narrated in the passage ever happened; the passage is poetry, and historical questions are out of place'. Then, he *is* talking nonsense. Historical questions there may be out of place but they can still be put. If a person says (to take an innocuous example) that the Book of Jonah is not history but poetry, we can still ask: 'Was there a man called Jonah who was swallowed by a great fish?' And to this question our answer will have to be: 'No, there wasn't'. This is not all we shall want to say, but that much we must say. The introduction of a new set of questions does not mean that those of a former set are therefore unaskable. One set does not *replace* the other in that way; and to think that it does is to fall into the Fallacy of Replacement.

Let me now show how theologians speculating in the newer fashion about the Eucharist commit the fallacy. They make Christ, or God, the norm of meaning; things are what they are for him; physical properties are only relative. We can put this assertion beside a familiar phrase already quoted—'looks like bread, tastes like bread, but is not'. Why is such a phrase wrong when used about a consecrated host? Wrong, notice, not meaningless like 'transubstantiation'. The phrase has a perfectly straightforward meaning but not

one that is suitable for the Eucharist. Suppose we were given something to eat which had all the look, texture and taste of bread, and were then told that it was in fact a laboratory-made substitute prepared from—I don't know what—polystyrene, perhaps. Should we call it bread? We might: after all, we already call some pretty odd things 'bread', sliced bread for instance. But we might demur on the grounds that its origin was too unusual for it to be bread—'it looks like bread and tastes like it', we'd say, 'but really it isn't, it's only a bread-substitute'.

But what meaning are we supposed to give the phrase in a eucharistic context? No theologian will claim that investigations of the sort I have just described would show that a consecrated host is not, despite appearances, bread. The conversion, he tells us, lies beyond any traceable process. But the trouble with this apparently reasonable remark is that it directs our attention away from the real problem. It makes us think in terms of transformation when we should be thinking in terms of what words mean. To say that something only *looks* like bread is to commit oneself to denying that all the criteria for being bread are satisfied: and, whether justified or not, such an assertion at least makes sense. But to say that something only *looks* like bread and at the same time to say that no criterion for being bread is absent, makes no sense. We cannot interpose an appeal to divinely wrought change, for appeals to omnipotence are, as we have already seen, out of order when intelligibility is at stake. Talk of transformation or of conversion, natural or supernatural, cannot make sense out of nonsense. We may keep to the older phrase and say that a consecrated host looks like bread but is not, or follow recent fashion and say that physical properties are relative and that things really are what Christ sees them to be. In either case we commit the Fallacy of Replacement, and our claim is empty. It is couched in a form that demands some piece of extra, controverting evidence, but at the same time denies that such evidence does or could exist.

To make a claim which is not empty we must abandon the fallacy, stop denying the meaning of words, and assert the reality of what we perceive, while claiming that it is the vehicle of something greater. We are familiar already with such claims. Many of us will have learned at school Blake's lines:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

Some of us may have learned other lines of his, lines in which Blake warns us of imagining there is only one way of looking at the world—the way he associates with Newton:

'Now I a fourfold vision see,
 And a fourfold vision is given to me;
 'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
 And threefold in soft Beulah's night
 And twofold Always. May God us keep
 From Single Vision and Newton's sleep!'

But the whole force of Blake's warnings against a philistinism that will accept no categories but those of natural science is that we should respect our everyday evaluations of things while seeing them as an epiphany of something far greater. The grain of sand must still be there, or we should not be able to see a world in it. The supreme vision is *fourfold*; insight cumulates, it does not deny our workaday knowledge.

We can bring out the substance of this approach by contrasting it with the Fallacy of Replacement as found in a deservedly popular book on the Eucharist by Schillebeeckx. I choose one passage among many: 'We confront the world as giving it meaning, certainly, but it is not our handiwork. It is given to us by God as our world. . . . The meanings given by man are governed by a reality which is in the first place God's, and only then man's. . . . The deepest essence of persons and things therefore always escapes us' (pp. 128-129). One can admit all this, and admit it in the spirit with which we would agree with Blake. Push it philosophically, however, and it brings us back to our Fallacy of Replacement. There is not—how could there be?—any competition in this sense between 'what God says things are' and 'what we say things are'. The very *unpretentiousness* of a word like 'bread' excludes it from competition, not only with some supposedly divine norm, but even with the more elaborate human descriptions of organic chemistry. Calling something 'bread' is not an exclusive alternative to calling it 'carbohydrate': the two descriptions do not compete for our assent. That something or other is bread means that it satisfies certain rather pedestrian and loosely defined criteria, and means nothing more recondite. Other accounts may well tell us more and unexpected things about what we call bread. But how, short of showing that our homely criteria are *not* satisfied, can we withdraw our equally homely description? To return to our passage from Blake, we do know what grains of sand are, in the humble though not useless sense of being able to distinguish them from grains of sugar and (if we have the skill) of being able to measure their silicon content. We may in a golden moment come to share Blake's wonder at the world God made; but such a revelation goes no way towards convincing us that we were wrong about what the grocer sold us, or failed in our laboratory analysis. If we talk as if nothing existed except what we could detect by sense or experiment, then (among other things) our moment of insight will prove us wrong, convicting us of 'single vision'. But our vision is not single if we simply claim to know when something is a grain

of sand and when it is not. And just the same needs saying about our claim to know when something is bread and when it is not.

I have accused the older and newer theories of committing the Fallacy of Replacement. I now suggest that they have something even more disreputable in common—they both lead to philosophical scepticism. You know the kind of thing I have in mind. How do I know this penny will fall? Perhaps the Future is not going to be like the Past. How do I know that you really exist, and are not just figments of my imagination? How do I know that a bar of Cadbury's really is chocolate? It looks like it, tastes like it, has been made from cocoa beans—I know all that, but that's only appearance; what of the reality? We may have encountered doubts of this sort, may even have shared them for an uneasy hour: they seem hardly a suitable diet for a theologian. But where else do the older and newer theories lead? The older is driven to adopt a travesty of Aristotle in which one substance is removed from under the veil of the accidents and replaced by another; the newer proclaims that our verdicts on what we call bread are only relative. One and the other have set up an unreal opposition—unreal because vacuous—between what things are and what they seem to be. Such a distinction can be and often is perfectly legitimate. Here—and this is what marks it as scepticism—it is conceived as an opposition that is essentially incurable. Any evidence offered falls under the same attack; the sceptic is invulnerable because he says nothing. And the theologians here, opposing accident to substance or our view to Christ's view, are just as invulnerable, because they are not saying anything either. The words they use just don't work in the way they want them to.

III

I have left myself little time for an elaboration of what I think should be put in the place of views I have rejected. It would take much longer than this to do the job, just as the greater part of my book is devoted to the elaboration of a positive alternative. So many headings in the later chapters could be mentioned—where to find eucharistic belief; cultic pictures; the significance of the rubrics; education of children; ritual and what it ritualizes; eucharistic devotions; tabernacles; the Galilean presence; the life of prayer; pleasure and pluralism—the list goes on quite a way. Let me for the present do three things: (1) State briefly where I think an account of the eucharistic presence should start. (2) Contrast this with the older and newer opinions. (3) Give some general principles that need bearing in mind when we argue over topics like this.

(1) *Where to start*

One description does not exclude another; the fourfold vision is fourfold, not single; grace perfects nature, it does not destroy it.

That is what needs remembering. We must begin from what we know about; we know what bread is when we see it, we know what eating is when we see it, and, knowing this, we also know that we do eat bread and that we do not eat Christ. We must start from the significance of eating. I mentioned this in describing newer views—community, human needs and foresight, dependence on and power over the rest of creation. We proceed to the role played by eating in ritual, be it of a family, social or religious nature; we try to see the significance attached over the ages by mankind to this, and our researches will take us beyond theology into life itself. We then go further, and consider the ritual of the Passover Meal: its incorporating of those who share it into the redemptive and liberating act of God; its making present for later generations the reality of what was done for their fathers; we recall its link with the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb and with the sealing at Sinai of the covenant between God and his people. We then, as it were within the concentric analogies of meal, ritual, and passover, take the Lord's own actions at the Last Supper as uniting us in the new people in whom he lives; as making us share in his redemptive and liberating act; as showing how his own blood seals the bond of the new and everlasting covenant between God and mankind. Whatever we say of the eucharistic presence of Christ must be said in the context of the ritual meal. There is no taking a host as a starting point and asking 'Is this Christ?' Rather, we must do what Christ did, and use the ritual to point to a union with him of which no human language (and Christ himself spoke one) can give an adequate account. The meal is no disguise for Christ, no appearance set against reality; the meal is the vehicle for a union with Christ which, hinted at by eating, by ritual, by the Passover, could never be achieved by human endeavour alone.

(2) *Contrast with old and new opinions*

With the newer this approach has this in common: it takes the notion of sign and of ritual seriously, and it insists upon discussing the meaning of actions and gestures in the context of their employment, just as any sign means what it does mean because of the rules and manner and context of its use. But what I assert differs from the newer theology in its refusal to let the reality of Christ's gift negate the reality of the earthly means of its giving. And in doing so keeps close to the pattern of the theology of the Incarnation, where Christ's divinity has never been allowed to justify a refusal to say that he is truly man. With the older theology the contrast is sharper, though a longer account would not display the contrast as absolute. Briefly, the difference is most striking in that the meal is acknowledged to be real in itself, and significant because of Christ's use of the whole pattern of ritual association found in it. For the older view, the visible meal is only camouflage. In case anyone finds the word strong, I cite Aquinas (*Summa*, 3.75.5) who asks why Christ chose

to be present under the appearances of bread and wine, as he puts it. The reasons are: (1) It is not customary for men but revolting to eat a man's flesh and drink his blood: Consequently, the flesh and blood of Christ are offered to us under the appearances of what is more commonly used as human food, namely bread and wine. (2) If we were to eat our Lord under his own appearances, unbelievers would laugh at the Eucharist. (3) To give us the merit of belief in things unseen. What else have we here but camouflage? More seriously, what else is being camouflaged but cannibalism?

(3) *Principles of argument*

I have briefly stated my own view, and contrasted it with other opinions. I end this paper with five principles useful in questions like this.

(i) *Variety of source in religious belief.* Religious activity covers a far wider field than theology or articulated belief. What Catholics believe, here and elsewhere, shows itself in the complicated interplay of creed, ritual, explanation, qualification and instincts, none of which is ever felt to be all that it should be. Moral: our investigations must range over the whole field of religious phenomena.

(ii) *Adjustment and Accommodation.* In my book *Birth Regulation and Catholic Belief*,¹ I remarked upon the happy capacity of Roman Catholicism for domesticating unwelcome novelties by suitably readjusting its past. The eucharistic presence illustrates the constant process of accommodation that reflexion on belief demands. This or that Church decree is modified and mollified in interpretation; this or that devotion or custom is refashioned, or simply forgotten (remember Mass before the Blessed Sacrament? Tabernacles dominating sanctuaries? Being warned not to bite the host?). Most of all, a process exists that I would call *selective amnesia*. As the Victorian ballad puts it, 'You taught me how to love you; now teach me to forget'. Instinctive forgetfulness enables hymns, prayers or formulae to be tacitly robbed of unwanted significance. Thus, three Sundays ago [the 20th after Pentecost] a prayer in the Mass spoke of the Eucharist as a medicine which purged us of our sins: were we as shocked as we might have been? Again, 'Blood of Christ, fill all my veins' we pray in the *Anima Christi*: do we really want it to? And do we realize that even those words are an euphemism—that the Latin original means 'blood of Christ, make me drunk'? Learning to believe includes learning to forget.

(iii) *The need for something more.* Adjustment and forgetfulness are not enough. First of all, because the diffusion of knowledge and opinion by modern communication takes away the buffers there used to be between religious tradition and criticisms of it. In other words, we are living at a time where we can no longer trust to an inherited sense of fittingness: we must (at all events, some must sometimes)

¹Sheed and Ward, London, 1966.

articulate decisions and not just perpetuate habits. Secondly, because the linguistic community in which we express our beliefs is no longer as sacral as it was. What we say, we say in a tongue which is dominated by secular and human purposes; and whatever we do say can be overheard by all too many.

(iv) *Understanding and confrontation.* These, I suggest, are two forms which our 'something more' must take. The first, *understanding*, has been part of a general pattern in human activity for many years—an endeavour to let each age or culture speak in its own authentic manner, without forcing it into patterns of another setting. (Example—the Bible cannot be read as a collection of texts to prove things with.) This understanding must be extended to the origin and development of the Eucharist, to seize as clearly as we can the significance of it. I suggest an example. Our Lord spoke of the cup as the New Covenant in his blood, and in doing so displayed the bond at Sinai and the sacrifice there as a type or sign of his own self-giving in which we share, the blood shed on Calvary. To drink the cup of wine will be to share in a new Sinai. As a Jew, let alone as a human being, he could not possibly have suggested that to drink the cup was in some disguised way to drink his blood. But understanding is to be supplemented by *confrontation*. We do not just try to understand the past: we pass judgment on it, and if need be we reject it. We already do this to the Bible—having jettisoned fundamentalism, we acknowledge the defects and limitations of Scripture, including the Gospels. (Example—do we really think that a brother who won't hear the Church is to be treated like 'a heathen or a publican'?) But having confronted the Bible, why not confront the Councils? Why be surprised or shocked at my refusal to accept Trent's decree here?

(v) *Looseness of fit.* 'It reads better than it lives', said one of James Bond's innumerable girls. For us, the motto must rather be 'it lives better than it reads'. If, as I have already suggested, no one manifestation of eucharistic belief does it justice, or is not liable to correction and modification by another, we need a sense of finesse, an intellectual *tact* in discussing the matter. Our observations must not lose contact with the whole array of Christian life, within which Eucharistic belief is held and multiply displayed. If my programme of reform is wide-ranging—and I leave my book to shew that it is—it needs to be executed with a sympathy and discernment that are just as wide. The fact must be faced that people can use the most foolish and superstitious practices as a way to God: which is not to justify superstition, but only to inculcate a caution against discarding what is valuable along with the grossly imperfect vehicle of its expression. For instance, I think that Trent was using words that made no sense in the decrees I quoted; but I also think that Trent used them to distinguish the eucharistic presence from any presence reducible to human thought or activity like memory or association,

or to the kind of symbolism that a crucifix or flag could provide. And, of course, I think that Trent was right to do this, even though I regard its decrees as now a museum-piece and efforts to revive them (like *Mysterium Fidei*) as futile and dangerous. Looseness of fit: we are seeking to understand and to confront a complex and vulnerable past, and we are all very complex and unexpectedly vulnerable people. We must move carefully; but we must move. We probably shall not end by agreeing, but just have to agree to differ. No matter—in fact, a good thing, if we keep minds keen to learn and a love that does not palliate division but accepts it and still loves. Which, after all, is one of the things the Eucharist is about.

Marx on the Religious Illusion

by John Maguire

Marx spent most of the years 1843 and 1844 in Paris, having been expelled from Germany. During this period he produced three essays, two on the Jewish question and one on Hegelian philosophy in Germany, as well as the more famous *Paris Manuscripts*.¹ My aim in this essay is to present a puzzle which arises about the argument which Marx proposes in these writings as to the relation of religion and politics, and to suggest a possible partial explanation and some possible implications of the occurrence of this puzzle.

We may start by making clear Marx's intention in the writings in question, particularly the three essays. He is concerned to warn the Jews against those who say: 'Give up your religion, which marks you off from all of us; you cannot merit the privileges of modern political life unless you agree to shed your religious distinctiveness, at least where your politics is concerned.' Marx tells the Jew to inquire carefully into the real conditions of life in modern society. If he does so he will see that shedding his distinct religion will in no way help him to overcome the defects of his real, concrete existence: he will still live a narrow, isolated life, in enmity rather than co-operation with his fellows. This sphere in which we live our concrete, day-to-day existence, Marx calls Civil Society, and he contrasts it with the State, or political sphere; together, the two spheres go to make up what I shall call 'modern society'. This name refers not precisely to any actual historical society but to an 'ideal type' to which post-Revolution France and the post-Independence United States of America would be close empirical approximations.

¹All published in T. B. Bottomore (ed. and trans.): *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (London, 1963). Page references to this volume are given in the text by the letter B followed by the page number in question. To facilitate internal reference without repetition, I have numbered my quotations by a symbol such as (Q 1). The writings are discussed in some detail in David McLellan: *Marx before Marxism* (London, 1970), and more thoroughly in my forthcoming *Marx's Paris Writings* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1972).