



The Eclipse of Sacramental Realism in the Age of Reform: Re-thinking Luther's Gutenberg Galaxy in a Post-Digital Age

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Abstract

In the last 500 years our modern world has oscillated between the belief in “disenchanted” strategies of bureaucratic control and surveillance, and the celebration of iconoclastic ruptures that are supposed to preserve our sense of freedom and dignity. Yet, the equilibrium between these poles has fallen out of balance after the turn of the millennium. While the obsession with control has released concerted efforts to replace our supposedly irrational intelligence by the “artificial intelligence” of digital technologies, the implementation of ICT technologies in our everyday life has undermined the iconoclastic conviction that artefacts are merely tools. Our smartphones have a “magic life” of their own – be it that they afford a life that we appreciate, or that they nudge us into a life that we abhor. This challenge requires us to recover our ability to distinguish between idolatrous attachments and the prudent use of “magic objects” that is consistent with our natural desire to transform our life for the better. The following essay will discuss the question to what extent the basic assumptions of the confessionalized religions of the post-Reformation era distract us from the task of engaging with this challenge. Moreover it will question the modern inclination to replace the engagement with sacramental objects with an engagement with pious “master signifiers”: authoritative substitutes for the “body of Christ”, like the Eucharistic host, the Bible or secular party books that reduce the attachment to religious traditions to a matter of formal belief and submission to an authoritative system of clerical, bureaucratic, or (today) robotic surveillance.

Keywords

Digitisation, media history, transhumanism, sacramentality, Reformation

The Challenge of a Post-Digital Age

For more than 500 years our modern world has been driven by an uncritical admiration of machines. In the case of doubt, we do not treat machines as servants, but subordinate our intellectual intuition to the clear cut, digital rationality of algorithms, calculators, and robots. Even in our ethical judgement, or in academic assessment procedures, we trust uncritically in the mechanical application of anonymised schemata and rules. We consider the allegedly “unbiased” selection of decontextualised, identically repeatable decision-making procedures as “objective” and “fair”, and comply with the rules, although every civilised person knows intuitively that it is not only impolite, but also unjust to subject everyone to the same schemata, laws, or proceedings.¹

The idolatrous attachment to measurable or probabilistic procedures that are supposed to be “objective” is a general feature of liberal societies, no matter whether we look at right or left-wing representatives of this tradition. However, in classical modernity the inauthentic and contemptuous character of this attachment was paradoxically counterbalanced by an iconoclastic attitude that aimed at subverting the fetishising of totalising rationalisations.² Revolutionaries and artists were supposed to preserve our sense of dignity. Hence, our thinking oscillated between the “avant-garde” celebration of political revolutions, artistic subversions, philosophical demystifications, and “disruptive” economical innovations on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the conviction that the social spaces that we inhabit need to be subjected to scientific strategies of bureaucratic control, surveillance, quality assessment, academic rankings, risk assurance, etc.³ As “enlightened autonomous subjects” we are supposed to believe in iconoclastic ruptures, yet in our everyday life we are

¹ Up to a certain point this insight emerged already in the late writings of Jacques Derrida. See, for example: Jacques Derrida, *Passions* (Paris: 1993); and Axel Honneth, “Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit. Habermas und die ethische Herausforderung der Postmoderne” in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 24 (1994), 195-220. As for the premodern tradition see: Bocken, Inigo, “*Aequitas: Gerechtigkeit in actu von Thomas von Aquin bis Suarez*” in *Coincidentia* 5/2 (2014), pp. 277-298.

² Hoff, Johannes, *Das Paradox des Glaubens und der Holzweg moderner Entscheidungslogik. Kierkegaards Lektüre von Genesis 22 und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte von Heidegger bis Derrida und darüber hinaus*, in Hoping, Helmut; Knop, Julia; Böhm, Thomas (Ed.), *Die Bindung Isaaks. Stimme, Schrift, Bild* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2009), pp. 238-258. Bruno Latour has made a similar point with regard to the modern dualism between nature and society. See Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1993).

³ This was the topic of Foucault’s famous lectures on “gouvernementality”, see for example: Burchell, Graham, Gordon, Colin, and Miller, Peter (Ed.), *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality, with two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (Chicago 1991).

“preoccupied with a struggle against life, its goal being to completely stifle it with a system of schemas.”⁴

The genealogy of our iconoclastic mind-set leads us back to the Age of Reform, although the position of the reformers was not univocal from the outset. Luther, for example, did not support the iconoclastic attitude of Calvin and Zwingli, although he shared the “grapholatic”⁵ inclination to focus on the written word at the cost of spiritual engagement with icons and other non-linguistic media. However, already two generations later Francis Bacon extended the suspicion of idolatry to *every* common-sense-based attachment of the human mind.⁶

This was the starting-point of an unprecedented series of iconoclastic revolutions. As noticed by Edmund Burke in discussing the French revolution, the suspicion of idolatry exposed everything to the “hammer” of enlightened reasoning.⁷ Ultimately, only the emerging, modern concept of liberty and subjective autonomy remained untouched. Yet, this is not surprising, given that the modern concept of liberty is only defined *ex negativo* as the absence of attachments, whatever they might be.⁸

The modern “subject” is a sublime mystery, since it is ultimately meaningless and pointless. However, this does not mean that it is immune from idolatry. In hindsight we might rather follow James Simpson’s historical conclusion, that it represents a paradoxical type of idolatry: the obsessive attachment to the desire to be free from any attachment, which has found its most condensed expression in the veneration of “statues of liberty” that disguise their status as mesmerising idols, for example, by offering explanatory inscriptions.⁹

It is easier to see through this paradox today, since we have already entered the stage of the “owl of Minerva” that (to paraphrase Hegel)¹⁰ spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk. The sublime mystery of negative freedom has lost its power to unite people under the banner of an irreversible history of freedom and progress. As the sociologist Bruno Latour noticed already in 2004, the “critical

⁴ Florensky, Pavel, *Reverse Perspective*, in *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art* (London: Reaktion Books LTD 2002), pp. 197-272, p.217; see also below Fn. 46.

⁵ See Nordhofen, Eckhard, “*Idolatrie und Grapholatrie. Eine Medienkonkurrenz der monotheistischen Religionen und Konfessionen.*” In: *Merkur* 11 (2015), pp. 18-30.

⁶ See Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum. Annotated Edition* (Altmünster: Jazzybee Verlag 2015), pp. 8-12; and Simpson, James, *Under the Hammer. Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2010), pp. 16, p.124 f.

⁷ See Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Dover Publications 2006), particularly pp.48-64.

⁸ See Simpson, *Under the Hammer*, pp. 116-158.

⁹ Simpson, *Under the Hammer*, pp. 85-115.

¹⁰ See the famous conclusion of the preface of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law*.

spirit” of the Enlightenment tradition has “run out of steam”:¹¹ While the obsession with revolutionary breaks and deconstructive acts of subversion has been appropriated by Islamist and populist movements, the democratic traditions of liberalism have taken refuge in governmental strategies of surveillance and control. The vision of a democratic state of law, that celebrates the dignity of man, has become replaced by the commitment to creating a security state.¹²

This new development becomes particularly evident in the increasingly powerful transhumanist movements of our present time: in the project, deadly serious in political, economic and technological terms, to replace the supposedly fallible and irrational intelligence of human minds by the allegedly more optimal, “artificial intelligence” of robot-driven technologies, artificial agents, machine-learning algorithms, etc.¹³ We might consider this techno-fascist movement as an illegitimate offshoot of the modern history of progress. However, the ideology of transhumanism is not only completely consistent with the liberal commitment to defend the achievements of “negative freedom”.¹⁴ It also confirms the century-long western prioritisation of “digital”¹⁵, “left-hemisphere based”¹⁶ types of intelligence. Despite romantic attempts to move against the grain, the Enlightenment

¹¹ See Latour, Bruno, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” in *Critical Inquiry* 30/2 (2004), pp. 225-249.

¹² For an exemplary analysis of this phenomenon see: Agamben, Giorgio, “From the State of Law to the Security State: Giorgio Agamben on the State of Emergency in France” in *Autonomies* (2015), pp. <http://autonomies.org/pt/2015-12/from-the-state-of-law-to-the-security-state-giorgio-agamben-on-the-state-of-emergency-in-france/>.

¹³ See Spiekermann, Sarah, Ess, Charles, Cockelberg, Mark, Hampson, Peter, and Hoff, Johannes, “Die gefährliche Utopie der Selbstoptimierung: Wider den Transhumanismus” in *Neue Züricher Zeitung* (2017), pp. <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/kommentare/die-gefaehrliche-utopie-der-selbstoptimierung-wider-den-transhumanismus-ld.1301315>; for an extended English version of this text see: *The Ghost of Transhumanism and the Sentience of Human Existence*, http://privacysurgeon.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Human-manifesto_26_short-1.pdf.

¹⁴ See Sharon, Tamar, *Human Nature in the Age of Biotechnology. The Case for Mediated Posthumanism* (Dordrecht: Springer 2016), pp. 24-28. Similar to the liberal tradition (see Fn. 46), the focus on the freedom of individual choice goes along with a totalising utopia of a collectivist future. As for the (mainly British-imperialist and communist) origins of the transhumanist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century see: Coenen, Christopher, “Transhumanism and its Genesis. The Shaping of Human Enhancement Discourse by Visions of the Future” in *Humana Mente* 26 (2014), pp. 35-58.

¹⁵ Strictly speaking the phenomenon of digitization is inherent to every form of writing technology since the invention of clay tables. See Ong, Walter J, *Language as Hermeneutics. A Primer on the Word and Digitization*, ed. by Thomas D. Zlatich (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2017).

¹⁶ For a thorough investigation of this phenomenon see: McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary. The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2009), part I. The historically oriented, second part of this volume would need a thorough revision in the light of the philosophical, theological and historical research of the last 30 years.

tradition always failed to cultivate “analogical” types of cognition, such as emotional intelligence and practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

This is the first challenge that we have to face when we try to read the signs of our time: we have to develop a “post-digital” rationality. In the “digital age” we had to cope with the emergence of social and economic inequalities caused by unequal access to (or unequal familiarity with) electronic information and communication technologies.¹⁷ In our present time, a new divide is about to emerge, one caused by a lack of the practical, ethical, emotional, and spiritual skills to implement digital technologies in our analogical life-world. Poorly designed technologies encourage the economic exploitation of our attention, undermine our cognitive self-confidence and creativity, and pollute our gift to be attuned to our never fully penetrable social and natural environment. Hence, a new divide emerges between those who are able to focus and direct their attention, and those who leave this task to the invisible hand of the market, globalised rankings, soft-ware agents, or the algorithms of the “church of google.”¹⁸

In my view this challenge requires us to overcome the post-Reformation fetishising of “negative freedom”, based on a retrieval of the premodern tradition of analogical reasoning that was governed by the concerted striving to live a “eudemonic” life. However, a related, second challenge requires us to retrieve the premodern tradition: we need to rethink the modern assumption that artefacts are merely tools, or beautiful objects of the purposeless free play of our cognitive faculties.¹⁹ In genealogical terms this conviction is the rationalistic flipside of the modern war against magic or fetishist attachments: we have lost the capacity to distinguish between “good” and “bad” magic, because we think there is no magic.

In his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man of 1486*, Pico della Mirandola was still able to proclaim that magic can provide the best proof of the Christian belief in the divinity of Christ. Pico was still convinced that it is possible to distinguish between things that are benign (“white magic”) and things that have malicious influence (“black

¹⁷ See: OECD, “*Understanding the Digital Divide*” in *OECD Digital Economy Papers* 49 (2001), pp. <https://doi.org/10.1787/236405667766>.

¹⁸ Carr, Nicholas G., *The Shallows. What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton 2011), p.149 ff. See also Turkle, Sherry, *Alone Together. Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (New York: Basic Books 2013); and Turkle, Sherry, *Reclaiming Conversation. The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Books 2016).

¹⁹ This is the notorious core thesis of Kant’s ground-breaking attempt to provide a systematic account of the principles of modern aesthetics. See Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*. Transl. by J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon 1988).

magic”) on our attempts to transform our life for the better.²⁰ This earlier assessment of the power of things was no longer compatible with the mainstream thinking of the post-reformation tradition. After all, the “stripping of the altars”²¹ and the demolition of sacred objects had the pious purpose of demonstrating that all power must be reserved to God alone. If no finite thing has the legitimate power to effect pious actions, then *every* “chalice” has to be turned into a “cup” and *every* “altar” into a “table”²² – as the heading of a famous engraving of the 17th century expressed it.²³

Subsequently the vanguard of western culture has made every effort to convince its followers that physical objects have no power over educated, autonomous subjects. Yet, seen from the viewpoint of contemporary philosophies of technology, this doctrine was bound to fail from the beginning. We are “trans-organic social animals”²⁴ who are by nature inclined to transform our lives based on the intelligent use of artistic fictions and social conventions. This means that our social and intellectual lives are always already shaped by artifices, fictions and tools that have a “magic life” of their own: be it that this “magic life” affords a life that we appreciate, or that it nudges us into a life that we abhor.

Already in the late nineteenth-century thinkers such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud realised that we have never been autonomous subjects; and the neo-Marxist tradition of the twentieth-century followed this path.²⁵ Yet, the “critical” thinkers of this time were nevertheless committed to defend the utopic vision of a “counterfactual”

²⁰ Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni, *Oration on the Dignity of Man. A New Translation and Commentary*. Ed. by Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio and Massimo Riva (Oxford: Oxford UP 2012).

²¹ Duffy, Eamon, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press 2005).

²² It is, of course, possible to discover a powerful symbolism in the functional simplicity of cup, as the high theology of the post-Vatican II tradition demonstrated. Yet the globalized generalisation of this possibility tends to relate to its prototypes like the social house building of the 70s to the Bauhaus movement. I am grateful to Dr Frank Turner SJ. for drawing my attention to this difference.

²³ “The Soldiers in their Passage to York turn into Reformers, Pull down Popish Pictures, Break Down Rayles, turn Altars into Tables.” See <https://www.scholarsresource.com/browse/work/2144666754>.

²⁴ See Milbank, John, *Beyond Secular Order. The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell 2014), pp. 158, 175, 184 passim. As the technic philosopher Bernard Stiegler has pointed out in his trilogy “Technics and Time”, we are by nature “prosthetic” creatures, see: Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time. 1. The Fault of Epimetheus*, transl. by Stephen Barker (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press 1998). For a mapping of the recent philosophical discussion on technology see: Sharon, *Human Nature in the Age of Biotechnology*.

²⁵ For a thorough investigation of the failed modern battle against fetish-objects see: Kohl, Karl-Heinz, *Die Macht der Dinge. Geschichte und Theorie sakraler Objekte* (München: Beck 2003).

realm of negative freedom. Only maverick Catholics like Marshall McLuhan developed a more realistic assessment of the modern “history of progress”.²⁶

This situation has changed in the twenty-first-century, as becomes evident if we recall an event that caused perhaps the most rapid shift in our everyday habits since the invention of the printing-machine. In 2007 Apple founder Steve Jobs introduced a telephone that “changed everything”.²⁷ Jobs’ iPhone started to push competing mobile phone companies like Nokia out of the market, not because it was better designed to meet the demand for new devices, or because it was superior in terms of efficiency. In fact, the first iPhone was fragile, its battery life was poor, and its technical qualities modest. Yet it disrupted the mobile phone market because it appealed to our synesthetic intuitions – using for the first time multi-touch technology in a mainstream device.

Jobs presented this device as a quasi-sacramental object that can be simultaneously seen, touched and heard (“You can just touch your music! It’s so cool!”).²⁸ When he introduced its music function, which had previously been included in a separate device (the iPod), he staged the synesthetic features of his new device by touching with his fingers (projected on a screen by an additional camera) the song *With A Little Help From My Friends* from the Beatles Album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Hence, it might be no accident that the era of smiling multi-touch devices that appeal to our synesthetic ability to hear what we can see and touch started on the 9 January 2007 with the touching voice of the young Ringo Starr: “Lend me your ears and I’ll sing you a song”²⁹

This moment gave rise to an era in which almost every digitally alphabetised western person who had forgotten her mobile phone felt like a nineteenth-century man who had forgotten his trousers.³⁰ What has happened? Have we suddenly turned into superstitious idolaters?

Sacramentality, Technology and Idolatry

At this point I will end my attempt to read the signs of our time, in order to provide in the second part of this essay a short

²⁶ See McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press 1994).

²⁷ “Every once in a while a revolution comes along that changes everything.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN4U5FqrOdQ>, 46-53”.

²⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN4U5FqrOdQ>. 14’57”.

²⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN4U5FqrOdQ>. 17’9”.

³⁰ For an illustration of this phenomenon see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OINa46HeWg8>.

summary of my research on the distinction between icons, and idols or simulacra.³¹

In phenomenological terms, the example of Steve Jobs' iPhone is illuminating, because it exemplifies a basic feature of sacramental objects: sacramental objects are not reducible to mere tools that are "ready to hand". As with a human body, they have a unique mode of presence that affects our perceptive and cognitive attitudes, as well as our desires and aims. Empirical research on how we handle proximate and distal objects moves along similar lines when it indicates that the mere presence of my smartphone can produce decrements in high level cognitive functions, even if my phone is hidden in my pocket and my attention successfully focused on something else.³²

As indicated, the most striking example of such modes of invisible presence is a human body. Simone Weil draws our attention to this phenomenon when she points out that we move differently, if we step aside for a passer-by on the road than if we step aside to avoid a billboard – for the same reason that "we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently" when we are alone in our rooms.³³

This phenomenon is not only a characteristic feature of our attitude toward human bodies. It also characterizes, albeit to a lesser extent, our attitude towards non-human bodies, such as animals and trees. To use an example of Thomas Nagel: "it would be callous and objectionable to cut down a great old tree just for the fun of trying out one's new chain saw."³⁴ Why would it? Because my attitude towards a tree differs from my attitude towards a chunk of timber: a tree has the character of a symbolically charged entity that shapes my perceptions and cognitions, and makes me interact in a responsive way. Symbolically charged entities have the power to "evoke" responsive actions and cognitions, because they affect our synesthetic sensibilities. I am able to "hear" and "touch" what I see, for example when I am "touched" by a face that "speaks", even if I look into a speechless face from the distance.

This gift can be the foundation of unique skills. Experiments with blindfolded people show, for example, that we are able to "see" invisible trees, or to play catch in an invisible forest, using sound, smell

³¹ I will engage with this complex topic more thoroughly in my forthcoming monograph on *Magic Objects. Art, Technology and Sacramentality in a Post-digital Age*.

³² See Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Gneezy Ayelet, and Marten W. Bos, "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity" in *Journal of the Association of Consumer Research* 2/2 (2017), pp. 140-154.

³³ Weil, Simone, *War and the Iliad*. Transl. by Mary McCarthy (New York: NYRB Classics 2005), p.7.

³⁴ Nagel, Thomas, *Mind and Cosmos. Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press 2012), p.118.

and touch as a mode of vision.³⁵ However, our capacity to cultivate this skill has to rely on pre-reflexive intuitions. Blindfolded people who tend to adopt a detached, self-conscious or hyper-reflexive attitude when they feel insecure are incapable of playing catch under invisible trees. What is the ontological status of this “synesthetic sense”?

As modern Kantian or Utilitarian subjects, we are inclined to argue that our ability to see invisible trees or speaking faces is of no more than aesthetic significance. But this is an analytic fallacy. Rowan Williams recalls an observation of Ludwig Wittgenstein that clarifies this point: everyone who is able to look sincerely into a human face knows that the expressive dimensions of perceptible entities are not accidental to their existence.³⁶ A smile or a frown that speaks to us is not an accidental feature of a face; it is only intelligible *as* the shape of a *real face*. If I am looking into the face of a beloved person, I *really see* what it is expressing. I do not look metaphorically into the eyes of my wife – its expressive dimensions are “really present.”

It is, of course, possible to reduce the perception of a human face or body to the perception of an inanimate object in the “outer world”: The ophthalmologist who investigates the eye of his patient perceives nothing but the “empirical” features of a dead eye; the objectifying gaze of a gynaecologist sees nothing but the genitals of a corpse – after all modern physicians are trained to perceive human bodies as corpses.³⁷ But this perceptive attitude, useful in delimited circumstances, is the result of an artificial training programme; it is not consistent with our natural disposition as intelligent, rational animals.

In contrast to modern societies, pre-modern civilizations did not consider unresponsive habits as desirable or virtuous. The modern fetishising of “fairness” and “objectivity” had not yet distorted their minds. For this reason, thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa took it for granted that our synesthetic sensibility plays an indispensable role in our scientific *and* everyday perception.³⁸

³⁵ See *Appendix Six* in: McLuhan, Eric, *The Sensus Communis, Synesthesia, and the Soul. An Odyssey* (Toronto - New York: BPS books 2017). McLuhan’s experiments with blindfolded students were inspired by the autobiography of Jacques Lusseyran, see: Lusseyran, Jacques, *And There Was Light: Autobiography of Jacques Lusseyran, Blind Hero of the French Resistance* (New York: Parabola Book 1998).

³⁶ See Williams, Rowan, *The Edge of Words. God and the Habits of Language* (London - New Delhi - New York: Bloomsbury 2014), p.26 f.

³⁷ See Foucault, Michel, *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1963).

³⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Transl. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, Ind: Christian Classics 1981), Ia q. 78 a. 4 ad 1; and I q. 57 a. 2 resp. As for Cusa’s theory of perception see: Hoff, Johannes, *The Analogical Turn*.

Following Aristotle, they called it *sensus communis*³⁹ and interpreted it as an interior dimension of touch: if we want to keep in touch with the real world we inhabit, we have to pay attention to the *sensus communis* as a quasi-tactile “sixth sense” that represents the foundation of our five specialized senses, and governs their pre-conceptual harmonisation.⁴⁰

In phenomenological terms, we might interpret this synesthetic “sense of touch” as a musical sense of self-attunement: The *sensus communis* mediates between our five specialized senses, and discloses similarities between their characteristic features. Yet it needs to be accompanied by a sense of trust with regard to our environment. My ability to be “touched” by “speaking” faces is, for example, always intertwined with my ability to share my perceptions with other people. The cultivation of our intra-sensual self-attunement presupposes a kind of “musical attunement” with our social environment – there is no *sensus communis* without a healthy measure of *common sense*. It is no accident that the English expression *common sense* derives from the Latin *sensus communis*. The two meanings of this technical term have been intertwined since Aristotle.⁴¹

Steve Jobs’ iPhone exemplifies the significance of this common-sensical dimension of human perception for our engagement with technological devices. However, as David Jones has pointed out in his ground-breaking essay *Art and Sacramentality*,⁴² it was already possible to analyse this phenomenon in 1959. Jones anticipated the genius of Steve Jobs when he discovered the paradigm case of a sacramental object (as Jobs did two generations later)⁴³ on the inner side of a motor-car – in the well-proportioned integrity and splendour of a diesel engine.

Re-thinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013), pp. 75, and 168-74.

³⁹ For an introduction to the history of this concept see: *Art. Sensus Communis* in Ritter, J.; Gründer, K. (Ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 9 2017, 622-675.

⁴⁰ Already Aristotle associated the *sensus communis* with the sense of touch. See Otabe, Tanehisa, “Das Problem des ‘sensus communis’. Die Wahrnehmung des Wahrnehmens (Aristoteles) und das ästhetische Bewusstsein (Kant)” in *Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo, Aesthetics* 39 (2014), pp. 69-82, p.74. For a phenomenological evaluation of Aquinas’ appropriation of Aristotle’s theory see: Milbank, John and Pickstock, Catherine, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge 2001), pp. 72 ff.

⁴¹ The intersubjective dimensions of the *sensus communis* were already discussed by Aristotle, and had become prominent again in the late Kant: See Otabe, “Das Problem des ‘sensus communis’”, p.74 ff.; and Arendt, Hannah, *Vita activa. Vom tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer 1960), pp. 202 ff.

⁴² Jones, David, *Art and Sacrament* in Harman, Grisewood (Ed.), *Epoch and Artist. Selected Writings* (London: Faber and Faber 1959), pp. 143-179; see also: *The Utile. A note to ‘Art and Sacrament’* (1958), *ibid.* pp.180-188.

⁴³ Jobs father was a mechanic. See Isaacson, Walter, *Steve Jobs. Die autorisierte Biografie des Apple-Gründers* (München: BTB 2012), pp. 19 ff; and *ibid.* pp.153-163.

As children of the industrial age, we are inclined to consider a diesel engine as a neutral means to an external end. However, despite its character as a tool, an engine cannot but display simultaneously the qualities of an entity that has a unique integrity. As Jones argues, it displays the three basic features of the Thomist concept of beauty, *integritas, proportio et splendor*, and “gives itself to the observer in an ‘overflow’ of presence”⁴⁴ – at least as long as it is well and honestly made, and not the upshot of industrialised mediocrity.⁴⁵ We might encounter technical or artificial creations that display only the ‘appearance’ of beauty in the sense of Kant and Nietzsche. But in this case our assessment indicates that they are actually ‘nothing’ – the work of botched dilettantes.

This consideration leads us to the critical point of my short introduction to the phenomenology of sacramental objects: how do we distinguish between sacramental objects on the one hand, and idols or simulacra on the other?

David Jones’s painting *Vexilla Regis*⁴⁶ might provide us with an illustration of this difference.⁴⁷ The most characteristic feature of this painting is that it cannot be captured by an autonomous viewer in a single glance. Like in a Byzantine icon, we have to *read* this painted world-tree if we want to succeed in discovering its sacramental dimensions.⁴⁸

This scriptural feature of Jones’s painting is reminiscent of one of the etymological roots of the Latin word *religio, re-legere*, which can be traced back to Cicero: religious people are people who “choose” and “select caringly” (*relegere, diligere*), “bring together” and “elect” (*eligere*), in order to “gather” and “understand” something (*intellegere*).⁴⁹

In accordance with this principle, sacramental objects are always embedded in an open network of narratives and social interactions. This distinguishes them from simulacra such as Dr Ford’s robots in the science fiction thriller *Westworld*. The stories that charge sacramental objects with meaning are never enclosed in the tidied-up narratives of artificially created fantasy worlds; they are always part

⁴⁴ Williams, Rowan, *Grace and Necessity. Reflections on Art and Love* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse 2005), p.13.

⁴⁵ See Jones, *The Utile*, p.180 ff.

⁴⁶ http://criticalflame.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/get_img297.jpeg.

⁴⁷ See Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, pp. 58-69.

⁴⁸ I have investigated this iconic feature of sacramental objects more thoroughly in a forthcoming essay, see: Hoff, Johannes, *Iconicity and the Anamorphosis of Social Space. Retrieving Nicholas of Cusa’s Political Pneumatology* in Dürr, Walter; Negel, Joachim (Ed.), *Komm Heiliger Geist! Reflexionen über das vielfältige und einheitstiftende Wirkung des heligen Geistes* (Münster: Aschendorff 2018).

⁴⁹ See Cicero, *De natura deorum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1880), II, 72.

of the real world that we inhabit, a world in which people gather together in order to celebrate and share the unpredictable sorrows and joys of their life. In contrast to the made-up narratives of entertainers, which are designed as means to extrinsic ends, it is never possible to determine the beginning and the end of the stories that contextualise sacramental objects.

We might call this the *de-centring* feature of sacramental objects. According to Jones, this feature must be counterbalanced by a *re-centering* feature that binds the multidimensionality of sacramental objects back to a unique centre. This holistic feature of sacramental objects is consistent with Lactantius's (AD 250–325) second etymology of the word religion as *re-ligare*: religious practices recall the bond of piety through which God binds (*ligare*) man to himself.⁵⁰

The task of binding complex structures back to a principle of wholeness and simplicity cannot be achieved by trial-and-error experiments, or rational calculations alone. It requires wise and prudent persons, who have an intuition of goals and ends. This is the reason why we cannot leave the task of finding order in our world to software agents or the (per definition selective) algorithms of self-learning machines. *Sapientis est ordinare*:⁵¹ The wise person is like an artist who is able to see a meaningful order where ignorant people perceive nothing but chaos, and computers nothing but more or less randomly selected patterns (however stable they might be in probabilistic terms). This difference has a very simple reason: the actions of wise persons are governed by acts of '*re-ligare*' – the intellectual desire for harmony that has the power to make an infinite potential of simplicity and beauty concrete and visible. We have to "read" the world-tree of Jones's painting while it is "being "re-lit" by the non-local but utterly concrete presence of the coming of the Word of God."⁵²

The third and last characteristic feature of sacramental objects sheds light on the concept of God: sacramental objects are *transforming* – they can take us by surprise and teach us to see the world with new eyes. This distinguishes sacramental objects like an icon from a simulacrum "that reflects back only what is projected onto it — like the dazzling fetish of money".⁵³ Sacramental objects have the power to challenge the schemata that govern our understanding of the world. For this reason, Moses's encounter with the non-consuming fire of the thorn bush at the "mountain of God" (Exodus 3:1) was

⁵⁰ Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Liber IV* in Migne, J. P. (Ed.), *Patrologia Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, 6 (Paris: Garnier 1815), 28.2.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1 cap. 1.

⁵² Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, p.68.

⁵³ Ward, Graham, "The Commodification of Religion or the Consummation of Capitalism" in *The Hedgehog Review* (2003), pp. 50-65, p.61.

a decisive turning point in the history of practices of *relegere* and *religare*: It introduced the “meaning of meaning” into the religions of the past and directed our attention to a sacramental reality that has the power to transform because its being is not exhausted by the spatio-temporal dimensions of the universe that shapes our everyday thought and behavioural patterns. According to Jones, this sacramental reality has assumed its ultimate sacramental shape in the Lord’s Supper: The “real presence” of the body of Christ in the Eucharist marks the point where the order of “signs” (*signum*) coincides, under the species of a “real thing” (*res*), with the inexhaustible fullness of being itself (Exodus 3:14).

Since it is not my intention here to discuss the Eucharistic theology of Thomas Aquinas, I will end my introduction to the phenomenology of sacramental objects at this point in order to recapitulate its significance for the technological revolutions of our present era.

Jobs’ iPhone triggered, what economists call the “value revolution” of ICT-technology, because it introduced tools that *incorporate* values:⁵⁴ A smart phone has the character of a symbolically charged reality that motivates and inspires responsive actions, and controls our everyday habits, for better or worse. The challenge of this revolution is that it requires us to discern the spirits. We have to learn to distinguish idolatrous objects that keep us trapped in artificially created fantasy worlds and confound our attunement with the analogical world that we inhabit from symbolically charged objects that are consistent with our natural desire to transform our life for the better.

The pre-modern tradition had good reasons to consider our engagement with symbolically saturated objects as an essential feature of our everyday life. For this reason sacramental practices played such an important role in pre-modern cultures. The engagement with sacramental objects and actions strengthened their ability to discern things that help us to actualise our potentials to be truly human from things that weaken this ability. By contrast, our modern, left-brain-dominated, analytic mind-set supports a Kantian style of reasoning, which dissipates the sacramental character of the world that we inhabit.

Martin Luther and the Genealogy of our Modern Mindset

In the last part of my essay, I want to focus on the genealogy of this anti-realistic, modern mind-set; and this leads me back to Luther and the Age of Reform. I have referred to Immanuel Kant above,

⁵⁴ See Spiekermann, Sarah, *Ethical IT Innovation. A Value-based System Design Approach* (New York: Taylor & Francis 2015), pp. 39 ff.

because the post-Kantian tradition plays a major role in German narratives about the significance of the revolution of October 1517. According to this narrative, the name “Luther” marks the turning point of an historical development that culminates in such thinkers as Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and the dialectical theology of the twentieth-century.

Leading German Luther-scholars, such as Oswald Bayer, have rejected this reading, arguing that Luther was much more consonant with Immanuel Kant’s critic Johann Georg Hamann.⁵⁵ This objection did not change the mainstream interpretation in Germany. However, Bayer’s counter-movement has more recently received indirect support from new readings of Luther that question the dominance of German scholarship and share Bayer’s criticism of Kantian readings.⁵⁶

In Lutheran terms this new development is somewhat ironic: it seems to be possible to rescue Luther out of the stream of naïve Enlightenment narratives about the history of progress. Yet, if such attempts turn out to be successful, he will lose his reputation as the original ground-breaker of our modern world-view. Against this background, the central question of the last part of my essay might be put as follows: where else should we locate the origins of our modern world-view, if it did not originate in Luther’s legendary posting of the 95 theses?

The most recent research on long term developments confirms the suspicion that our modern world-view is not the upshot of some unique historical upheaval, but of a long series of reforms that can be traced back up to the Gregorian Reform of the eleventh-century. As I know from my own research on Nicholas of Cusa, the movements that led to the Reformation were anything but unique; the entire Middle Ages were a constant effort to seek reform.⁵⁷

This does not mean that late medieval reformers agreed about the path to the future. Cusa, for example, built on Dionysius the Areopagite and the tradition of Albert the Great, which deviated significantly from the voluntarist scholastic mainstream of his time. In contrast to Cusa, the later tradition weakened the participatory relationship between God and his creation, and undermined the unity of the philosophical desire for wisdom and the religious desire for

⁵⁵ Bayer, Oswald, *Martin Luther’s Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans 2008); and Bayer, Oswald, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johannes Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, transl. by Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013).

⁵⁶ See for example: Braaten, Carl E. and Jenson, Robert W., *Union with Christ. The New Finish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998).

⁵⁷ See also Simpson, James, *Reform and Cultural Revolution. The Oxford Literary History Vol. 2* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2002).

salvation.⁵⁸ *Religio* was no longer concerned with the wise ordering of things to their principle of wholeness and simplicity. Rather, it was turned into a matter of good will: our relationship with God is no longer mediated by the theophanic relationship between God and his creation and the desire for a harmoniously ordered life, but by the inscrutable power of a divine lawgiver.

This voluntarist concept of mediation encouraged a transactional approach to salvation: if you stick sincerely to the rules, the divine lawgiver will reward you in return. Luther's famous attacks against the trade in indulgences deconstructed this transactional logic. More significant in the long term, however, is the fact that the focus on divine commands encouraged, however unintentionally, a secular attitude towards ethical and political affairs. Charles Taylor has drawn our attention to this phenomenon, when he points out that the pre-sixteenth-century reformers tended to focus exclusively on matters of discipline and morals at the cost of the cultivation of sacramental practices, rituals, and the festive dimensions of popular piety.⁵⁹

The reforms of Luther and Calvin can be interpreted as a counter-reaction against this moralistic reductionism. Yet their counter-reaction went along with a pious anti-sacramental attitude that had a fatal long-term effect.⁶⁰ Salvation was no longer a matter of reforming or reshaping our life, but "a matter of faith in the mercy of God who is alone righteous".⁶¹ Hence, instead of reversing the unintended trend towards secularisation, the reformers replaced the century-long effort for reform by a quietist attitude. This was fatal, not only because it accelerated the trend to reduce "common-sensebased" everyday practices to a matter of "disenchanted" pragmatic convenience; the focus on "faith alone" also reinforced the authoritarian attitude that underpinned the voluntarist obsession with an inscrutable lawgiver.

To be sure, reformers like Luther were neither indifferent quietists, nor uncritical followers of the Scotist or nominalist schools of the

⁵⁸ Fort the following see: Gregory, Bred S., *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP 2012), pp. 1-128; Gillespie, Michael Allen, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2008), pp. 19-43; and Pfau, Thomas, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2013), pp. 160-213.

⁵⁹ Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007), pp. 25-220.

⁶⁰ See also Manent, Pierre, *Metamorphoses of the City. On the Western Dynamic*, transl. by M. Lepain (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP 2013), pp. 304-328

⁶¹ Milbank, John, "Reformation 500: Any Cause for Celebration?" in *Unpublished Paper* (2017), p.6. I am grateful to John Milbank for sending me his manuscript.

late Middle Ages.⁶² Yet, in genealogical terms it is hard to deny that Luther's "metaphysical undernourishment"⁶³ encouraged fideist tendencies that were, advertently or not, conveniently allied with the nominalist and authoritarian mindset of his time.⁶⁴

This thesis becomes particularly evident in terms of the late-medieval trend to replace the engagement with sacramental practices by the engagement with authoritative "master signifiers" like the Bible or the eucharistic host. As far as I can see, Michel de Certeau was the first thinker to investigate this long-term trend systematically – particularly in his magnum opus *La Fable Mystique*. De Certeau builds in this monograph on de Lubac's research on the spiritual exegesis of the Middle Ages and summarizes the outcome of this research as follows: "Before the 'modern' period, that is, until the sixteenth or seventeenth century, this writing [Holy Scripture] speaks. The sacred text is a voice, it teaches . . . it is the advent of a "meaning" (*un "vouloir-dire"*) on the part of God who expects the reader (in reality the listener) to have a 'desire to hear and understand' (*un 'vouloir-entendre'*) on which access to truth depends."⁶⁵

The critical point of this quotation is related to de Lubac's observation that the practice of "reading" the Holy Scriptures had increasingly lost its embedding in common-sense-based oral traditions, in the wake of a process that started in the twelfth-century and culminated in the Reformation.⁶⁶ Media theorists like Marshall McLuhan have made a similar observation, when they drew attention to the fact that the reading of scripture became increasingly decontextualized.⁶⁷ How, therefore, was scripture read before?

⁶² As for the controversy about the last question cf. White, Graham, *Luther as Nominalist. A Study of the Logical Method used in Luther's Disputations in the Light of Their Medieval Background* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society 1994); and Muller, Richard A., "Not Scotist: Understanding of Being, Univocity and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought" in *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 14/2 (2012), pp. 127-150.

⁶³ Millbank, John, "Reformation 500: Any Cause for Celebration?", p.17.

⁶⁴ Luther rejected the rationalistic logicism of the late-scholastic tradition, the semi-Pelagianism of the nominalist tradition, and the general tendency to downplay the significance of Christ, yet the classical points of conflict between Luther and Calvin – trinity, christology, real presence and double predestination (not to mention the problem of free will) – would have turned out to be pseudo-problems for theologians who have a firm grounding in the participatory realism of the tradition of Albert, as Nicholas of Cusa still had in the fifteenth-century. For a more thorough discussion of this issue see *ibid.* pp.11-22.

⁶⁵ Certeau, Michel de, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984), p.137; and Certeau, Michel de, *The Mystic Fable*. Transl. by Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), pp. 90-94.

⁶⁶ For the following see: Candler, Peter M., *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuaction, or Reading Scripture together on the Path to God* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co 2006); and with regard to the twelfth-century: Illich, Ivan, *In the Vineyard of the Text. A commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993).

⁶⁷ See McLuhan, Marshall, *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of the Typographical Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2012), pp. 104-109.

The pre-modern reading practice might be exemplified by illuminated manuscripts such as the Book of Kells (800) or the Luttrell Psalter (1325-35).⁶⁸ Nowadays we may perceive the subtle design of illuminated manuscripts as pure decoration. However, the painstaking labour devoted to illustrating and glossing books was part of a sublime collective mnemotechnics. Even the great scholastic *Summae* of the high Middle Ages were not perceived as systematised deposits of knowledge. Rather the content of these books was perceived as a *manuductio*, to be learned by heart as a guide that enables us to read the signs of a world that is inherently charged with meaning.

This being the case, it was impossible to isolate the usage of scripture from shared *oral* reading practices. The Bible had to be illuminated, glossed, and liturgically performed in accordance with the yearly cycles, and the vagaries of history, and be remembered again and again through the common exercise of a liturgical imagination that was informed by the great masters of the spiritual and allegorical reading of scripture. Imaginative, textual and performative practices charged them with significance and made them speak anew.

When the reformed, iconoclastic tradition rejected the imaginative, multi-sensual contextualisation of medieval reading practices in favour of the *sola scriptura* principle, it claimed to fulfil the biblical ban on images. But in reality it only enforced the *privatisation* of our spiritual imagination. This explains why scripture became mute after the early modern break: it no longer spoke because it no longer affected our *sensus communis*. The collective re-narration of the Holy Scriptures in varying multi-sensual contexts was no longer perceived as a matter of necessity. Instead, the faithful exercise of our spiritual imagination turned more and more into a private matter.

At the same time, the subjectification of common sense-based reading practices was accompanied by a fetishising of its textual counterpart. Thanks to Gutenberg's "amazing printing press", "the Bible" began to appear as a commodity – a clearly definable signifier of authoritative significance that could be reproduced on a large scale, but one that no longer spoke or provoked unpredictable spiritual movements on the level of our common-sense-based, collective imagination.⁶⁹

To cut a long story short, "the Bible" turned in to a prototypical simulacrum. That is, the Holy Scriptures of the past were no longer passed down as part of an ongoing, orally recollected story that needed to be performed and re-narrated in the suspended time of a public liturgy. Bound together in discrete book editions, "the Bible"

⁶⁸ For the last example see: Brown, Michelle P., *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* (London: The British Library 2006).

⁶⁹ As for the last point see: Milbank, John, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell 1991), pp. 17-20.

appeared as a reproducible and locatable entity while its hitherto shared mystery became disseminated into subjective private imaginations that neutralized each other.

The leading exponents of this fetishising of “the Bible” were the progeny of reformed traditions, yet the more reactive post-Tridentine Catholic tradition did not resist this epochal shift. Certainly, the Counter-Reformation insisted on reading the Bible in the context of a broader tradition. But it viewed this tradition as a *depositum fidei*, a collection of propositions that was comparable to a modern book or storage device, and tended to turn images and symbols into pedagogical or propagandistic tools.⁷⁰ Hence, although the duo of scripture *and* tradition extended the scope of the sacred text, the “revealed truth” of the Catholic tradition had as little impact on the common-sense-based collective imagination of modern societies as the privatized imaginative free-play of the reformed milieu.

In the second chapter of *La fable mystique*, de Certeau investigates the beginnings of this epochal break starting with a pictorial example: Hieronymus Bosch’s famous triptych *The Garden of Delights* (1500).⁷¹ Ambitious both in form and content, Bosch’s masterpiece thwarts every effort to uncover a stable relation between imaginations and their meaning. By provoking endless *possible* interpretations, it exemplifies the early modern subjectification of our perceptual and imaginative skills. Overwhelmed by a radically decentred, unlimited range of possibilities, the viewer’s ability to respond to what he sees becomes muted.

This disturbing experience did not befall the Age of Reform unprepared. The modern inflation of the *imago* can be traced back to the nominalist tradition in which every meaning was conceived as an arbitrary abstraction that is no longer rooted in the contemplation of the sacramental qualities of real things, or in the liturgical commemoration of the history of salvation. Bosch’s triptych marks a turning point only in so far as it indicates that this destabilisation is no longer perceived as a fate, but turned into something that we can deliberately bring about.

Against this background it is hardly deniable that the reforms of the sixteenth-century were at least partly infected by the nominalist trends of the late Middle Ages. If we want to assess the impact of the authoritarian flipside of this trend, we have to recall a second aspect of de Certeau’s genealogical account of our modern mindset that is of equal significance. De Certeau builds at this point on another

⁷⁰ See Candler, *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction, or Reading Scripture together on the Path to God*, p.18 f.

⁷¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights.

ground-breaking work of de Lubac, his monograph on the Eucharist in the Middle Ages.⁷²

According to De Certeau's (not completely unproblematic)⁷³ reading of de Lubac's monograph, the most fundamental shift in the medieval understanding of the Eucharist can be traced back (again) to the middle of the twelfth-century. This shift was related to an inversion of the semantic relation between two expressions: "mystical body" and "true body". From a certain point onwards *corpus Christi mysticum* (mystical body) no longer designated the Eucharist but the church as "body of Christ"; and inversely *corpus verum* (true body) no longer designated the church but the sacramental body of the host.

After this shift, the grammar of Christian learning became increasingly focused on the authoritative presence of a visible, positively objectifiable "master signifier". This is most evident in the post-Tridentine, scholastic language-use of the Catholic tradition, which focused on the doctrine of "real presence" at the cost of the apophatic roots of Aquinas' concept of "transubstantiation". Aquinas did not use the expression "real presence". But even if he had, he would have used it in a way that is closer to the linguistic usage of David Jones than to that of the sixteenth-century, which is consonant with the Franciscan tradition. In that tradition, the technical term "real" was increasingly interpreted as the signifier of a discrete entity (*res*) – as if the transubstantiated body of the host was a container for Christ's "real body", and not the radiating focus of a non-localisable theophanic mode of presence.⁷⁴

Hence, it might be argued that the post-Tridentine tradition turned the Eucharist into a simulacrum – in accordance with the Protestant polemic of this time. However, as de Certeau points out, the obsession with objectifiable fetishes was not confined to the Catholic construct of the "real presence" of Christ. After all, "the Bible" was increasingly perceived as a simulacrum as well: Luther's *sola scriptura* principle was equivalent to the semiotic substitution of the physical

⁷² Lubac, Henri de, *Corpus Mysticum. The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, transl. by Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM 2006). For the following see: Certeau, *The mystic fable*, pp. 79-90.

⁷³ See Hoff, Johannes, *Mystagogische Zugänge zur Kirche als Leib Christi. Certeaus taktische Re-lecture von Corpus Mysticum und das Vermächtnis Henri de Lubacs* in Bauer, Christian; Sorace, Marco A. (Ed.), *Gott, anderswo? Theologie im Gespräch mit Michel de Certeau* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald 2017) (forthcoming). This text is a substantially revised version of: Hoff, Johannes, *Mysticism, Ecclesiology and the Body of Christ. Certeau's (Mis-)Reading of Corpus Mysticum and the Legacy of Henri de Lubac*, in Bocken, Inigo (Ed.), *Spaces. History and Mysticism in Michel de Certeau* (Louvain/Paris: Peeters 2012), pp. 87-109.

⁷⁴ See Ward, Graham, *The Church as the Erotic Community* in Boeve, Lieven; Leijssen, Lambert (ed.), *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context* (Leuven: Peters 2001), pp. 167-205, pp. 179 ff.

body of Christ by the authoritative body of the Bible (no matter how he interpreted this substitution in theological terms). If someone felt offended by the sacramental fetishism of the papalist party, he was now faced with the alternative of the Protestant party, which focused on the philologically controlled reproduction, interpretation, and distribution of an alternative, authoritative fetish.

Marshall McLuhan's research on the "making of the typographical man" confirms this observation from the viewpoint of early modern media history: a new "separative and compartmentalizing or specialist outlook"⁷⁵ emerged that supported the illusion that everything can be dissected into discrete, identically reproducible, objectifiable units. The movable-type characters of the printing machine represented the prototypical instantiations of such units. However, the analytic delusion, that everything can be dissected into discrete, mathematically objectifiable units was also supported by new imaging methods that transformed our perception of images and visual spaces.⁷⁶ In combination, both innovations encouraged the modern inclination to act as detached spectators, who hide behind a window or a surveillance camera in order to observe analytically objectifiable "neutral facts" or more elementary "information units".

The modern, Cartesian spectator no longer interacts with his environment in a responsive way. Rather he has turned into a "buffered self".⁷⁷ Similar to a Kantian "subject" or a modern physician, who dissects corpses, he is able to dissect everything he perceives into discrete, identically reproducible information units, types, or codes, in order to "synthesize" them again in a controlled way.⁷⁸ He is trapped in the narcissistic illusion that he can adopt an "objective" view from nowhere on his world, and this enables him to turn everything into an identically reproducible, exchangeable commodity – including "the Bible" which represents, as it were, the archetype of our modern commodity economies.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*), p.126. McLuhan builds here on the ground breaking research of Walter J. Ong: see Ong, Walter J, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue. From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass, London: Harvard UP 1983).

⁷⁶ See Edgerton, Samuel Y., *The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry. Art and Science on the Eve of the Scientific Revolution* (Ithaca - London: Cornell UP 1991); Edgerton, Samuel Y., *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope. How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed our Vision of the Universe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2009); and Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, part II.

⁷⁷ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 25-220.

⁷⁸ McLuhan calls this the "power to act without reacting". McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.4.

⁷⁹ The Protestant retreat from the logic of papal indulgencies and socio-economic practices of sacred donations did not drain the "fetish practices" of the past. Rather, it created the space in which the true religion of the modern age emerged: the religion of capitalism. See Leshem, Dotan, *The Origins of Neoliberalism. Medelling the Economy*

Against this background, it might be argued that the theological innovations of the reformers of the sixteenth-century were only the tip of an iceberg that had emerged out of the “galactic” interaction between multiple technological, cultural, political, economic, philosophical, and theological developments. Yet, the semiotic substitution of the host by an almost incorporeal, exchangeable commodity marked the dubious core of these innovations: It created a confessional world in which identity-establishing institutions competed about the power to control the authoritative centre of a homogenised social space.

To be sure, from the seventeenth-century onwards secular powers intervened in this battle in order to replace the body of Christ with secular substitutes, such as the portrait of King Louis XIV.⁸⁰ Yet, secular interventions did not change the basic rules of this competitive game: a confessional age emerged, forcing everyone to choose between competing candidates for the authoritative slot of the “true body” – from Louis XIV, Napoleon, Lenin, Hitler, and liberal idols of liberty, up to the “singularity”⁸¹ of post-modern transhumanism.

This authoritarian turn was equivalent to the breakdown of the symbolic realist universe of the past. The pre-modern focus on multiple theophanic, sacramental, and liturgical modes of mediation between the creator and his creation became replaced by the totalising focus on authoritarian “master signifiers”. We can choose between competing confessions, ideologies, and party books, but the new confessions are no longer a matter of sacramental fellowships that engage in the common-sense-based enactment of religious mysteries.⁸² Rather the attachment to a religious, philosophical, political, or scientific tradition becomes reducible to a matter of formal belief, prescribed rule, and private beneficence that coincides with the submission to an authoritative system of clerical, bureaucratic, or (today) robotic surveillance.

Against this background, we might conclude (following Brad Gregory⁸³) that the Reformation marked a turning-point in the genealogy of our modern world-view, not because of its theological intentions,

from Jesus to Foucault (New York: Columbia UP 2016); Goodchild, Philip, *Theology of Money* (Durham and London: Duke UP 2009).) The commodification of the Bible marked the point at which the old religion overlapped with the new religion.

⁸⁰ See Marin, Louis, *Portrait of the King*, transl. by M. M. Houle (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Pr 1988); and Hoff, *Mystagogische Zugänge zur Kirche als Leib Christi* (forthcoming).

⁸¹ Kurzweil, Ray, *The Singularity is Near. When Humans Transcend Biology* (London: Duckworth 2006).

⁸² According to Eamon Duffy, the early modern Catholic tradition departed as much from the prioritisation of sacramental community fellowships as the reformed tradition. See Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.1-15.

⁸³ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*.

but because of its unintended side-effects. It encouraged the cultivation of a disenchanting, unresponsive attitude towards the world that we inhabit, and facilitated the conceptualisation of our natural and social environment as a dead and meaningless machine. It is no accident that the upheavals of this era were accompanied on both sides by an unprecedented rise of literalist readings of scripture that caused competition, division and mistrust.⁸⁴ Since the divine Word no longer spoke through its creation, the latter had to be subjected to positivistic strategies of decontextualized, controlled objectification – as if the world were a book that displays the same underlying structures as the print editions of Gutenberg’s Bible. God appeared as a giant printer, who has created a giant commodity out of a discrete set of movable, identically repeatable codes. Yet, the meaning of this giant print-copy turned out to be a riddle that provoked a competition about exploitation rights.

Seen in this perspective, the German tradition of interpreting Luther as a predecessor of Kant is not completely beside the point. However rich his theological thoughts might have been, his legendary posting of the 95 Theses encouraged the emergence of a subject-object split that reduced the mystery of the world to a synthetic configuration of well-formed “information units”. Luther’s “revolution” marked the breaking point at which the world-view we have cultivated and promoted in the last 500 years started to take shape: a mechanistic metaphysics of commodifiable codes. And the transhumanist religion of our present time might be marked as the last product of this metaphysics. It represents, as it were, the theologically thinned-out icing on the obscene business-world of Oliver Stone’s movie *Wall Street* (1987), in which the millionaire Gordon Gekko declares without any hint of embarrassment or self-deprecation: “The most valuable commodity I know is information.”⁸⁵

The mercantile logic of this metaphysics holds even philosophically educated thinkers captive, as the proto-transhumanist “information philosophies” of Oxford scholars like Luciano Floridi demonstrate.⁸⁶ However, even if we agree with secularisation narratives that describe the Reformation as a decisive step in a globalised process of

⁸⁴ “Literalism, as a cultural phenomenon, is always a child of mistrust, and literalism must always become the parent of mistrust. The words on the page inevitably produce division, but the literalist can only appeal to the words on the page or written in the heart.” Simpson, James, *Burning to Read. English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 2010), p.143.

⁸⁵ Floridi, Luciano, “*Semantic Conceptions of Information*” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia* (2017) [accessed 09/09/2017]. Floridi concludes his entry with an affirmative quotation of this declaration.

⁸⁶ See, for example: Floridi, Luciano, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2016).

disenchantment, this does not mean that this process was a matter of irreversible necessity.

Already in the 1962 McLuhan predicted the emergence of new, second type of “orality” that leaves the logic of the Gutenberg galaxy behind.⁸⁷ And, despite exaggerations, he was not wrong in this prediction. As pointed out in the first part of this essay, we have already entered a new world that is shaped by highly responsive and synesthetic “oral” modes of communication. Yet, as McLuhan emphasised when he warned against an unprecedented retribalisation of our political, social and cultural interactions, this is a dangerous and potentially destructive transformation process that requires us to pause in order to re-orientate our thinking:

As our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.⁸⁸

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that the political, economic, cultural and technological challenges of our time require us to recover a sacramental ontology that guides our ability to ‘discern the spirits’. This does not mean that everything we have learned in the wake of the anti-sacramental turn of the Reformation has become irrelevant. However, since the Gutenberg Galaxy, that shaped the fate of western societies in the last 500 years has lost its spell, the confessional dichotomies that derived from this spell should no longer distract us from the ‘craft of thinking’. The confessional traditions of Europe are in a process of irreversible decline. We have already entered a post-confessional age – and all we can do is to recover the resources of traditions that were not yet hypnotised by the ‘moveable types’ of Gutenberg’s printing machine.

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⁸⁷ As for this prediction see also: Ong, Walter J, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London - New York: Routledge 2001).

⁸⁸ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p.37 f. See also: McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Quentin, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York - Toronto: McGraw Hill 1968).