

EDITORIAL

Eucharistic Presence (through the eyes of a recovering physicalist)

As part of the Lenten observance, we listened to local pastors and priests explain how various Christian traditions celebrated the Eucharist. To introduce the series, our priest told of the response to the Eucharist by first, second and third graders at Saint John's Episcopal School.

When the priest broke the host and proclaimed, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us", one of the students gasped with an inspiration of shock, "Agh!" But when the bread was placed into another's hands she responded joyfully to "The Body of Christ, the bread of Heaven" with an exclamation of "Ooh!"

Those heartfelt "Aghs!" and "Oohs!" of the children were genuine: horror at the broken body of Christ, but joy and thanksgiving over his resurrected body, the bread of life, of which we all partake as 'living members of the Body of the Son, and heirs of the Eternal Kingdom'.

As a scientist, I am committed to describing everything in terms of 'methodological naturalism'. Simply put, I can never scientifically explain the world around me using mechanisms that go beyond my five senses (or their technological extensions); I must use naturalistic explanations for phenomena. No *super-* (beyond) natural mechanisms allowed!

I'm also reminded by my physicalist colleagues that I cannot trust or validate any internal emotional responses I may have from those sensory experiences. Emotions and feelings are merely 'qualia' of neural firings affected by hormonal fluctuations.

Even sense experiences must be corroborated by quantifying those experiences using an fMRI and realizing they are merely neurons and synapses firing in deterministic ways for no other reason than to enhance reproductive success. Everything has to be explained in terms of physical stuff and physicalist processes.

Of course, it's always fun to challenge the reductive physicalists by letting them know they have a self-defeating argument: their ideas dismissing my experiences are also nothing but neural firings and hormone fluctuations to maximize reproductive success. Consequently, science and logic and math also become mere neural firings to maximize fitness.

So how was I, a confirmed physicalist, going to handle *scientifically* the concept of the 'true presence' of Christ in the bread and wine, "a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death", according to Saint Ignatius of Antioch (35-

105AD)? How was I to accept the statement about “the food which has been made into the Eucharist ... *and by the change of which...is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus*” ? [Justin Martyr, 100-165AD, *First Apology*, 66]

A plethora of ‘explanations’

Catholic transubstantiation

Do I accept Aristotelian concepts that focus on ancient Greek thought about substances and accidentals of any material perceived? When at his Last Supper Jesus said: “This is my body”, what He held in his hands had all the appearances of bread. The Catholic Church teaches that the underlying reality is changed in accordance with what Jesus said. In other words, that the ‘substance’ or reality of the bread and wine is changed to that of his body and blood – a representation of Christ’s atoning sacrifice whereby the bread and wine become his physical and spiritual body and blood. (The doctrine of transubstantiation is claimed by some to *not* originate in Aristotelian concepts since the Catholic Church had adopted such ideas before Aquinas rediscovered Aristotle. However, this claim fails to realize that Aristotle was quite influential even before his ideas were recovered by the Arabs in the West.)

What others see as an unambiguous distinction between ‘substance’ or underlying reality, and ‘accidents’ of humanly perceptible appearances, I could not understand. It was just too much philosophical wordsmithing for me. Like Martin Luther, it seemed to me “an absurd and unheard-of juggling with words.” [Martin Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520] The goal of transubstantiation is admirable, however; it wants to choose a middle way between the ‘errors’ of a merely figurative understanding of the Eucharist and an interpretation that would amount to ritualized cannibalism.

Orthodox mystery

Maybe Orthodoxy has a better view? I can accept a mysterious and unexplainable process like the Orthodox, for no other reason than a mystery, even in Science, has the potential to be solved. Of course, I was still thinking like a physicalist. But at least the Orthodox Church does not claim to have resolved precisely how Christ becomes present in the Eucharistic gifts.

They simply take His pronouncement seriously (John 6.53-58). It’s unimportant to figure precisely how the change of the Eucharistic gifts occurs; the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is a mystical and sacramental partaking of the glorified humanity of Christ... however it mysteriously occurs. I might be able to live with that.

Anglican/Episcopalian real presence

Or do I accept, true to form, the Anglican's variety of views and who welcomes anyone who truly *does* discern Christ so that one does not eat and drink unworthily? Those who in faith receive the form or sign of the body and blood (bread and wine), receive also the spiritual Body and Blood of Christ. In true Anglican fashion, John Donne non-explicitly replied, "He was the Word that spoke it; He took the bread and brake it; and what that Word did make it; I do believe and take it".

As a result, it is sometimes difficult to pin down Anglican Eucharistic doctrine; it is often referred to as a spectrum "from Objective Reality to Pious Silence". Many Anglicans believe in the 'Real Presence' but understand this as a metaphysical mystery (similar to the Orthodox); others accept more of a sacramental union similar to Martin Luther's position. But there are also 'High Church Anglicans' who effectively hold to transubstantiation; they carefully juggle Article XXVIII of the Articles of Belief in the spirit of seventeenth century Irish Archbishop John Bramhall who did not want to reject any article 'at his pleasure' but also did not want them to be 'essentials of saving faith'. They were not obligations; however, one was 'not to contradict them'. At least there's enough 'wiggle room' for even as a physicalist to fit here.

Memorialism

Or do I accept that it is a representation and remembrance of Christ's sacrifice as many Protestant groups do? "Do, then, the bread and wine become the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ?" the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks. The answer is unequivocal, "No. But as the water, in baptism, is not changed into the blood of Christ, nor becomes the washing away of sins itself, being only the divine token and assurance thereof; so also, in the Lord's Supper, the sacred bread does not become the body of Christ itself, though agreeably to the nature and usage of sacraments it is called the body of Christ." My eyes begin to glaze over once again. Ironically, Luther's own phrase comes back to me: "an absurd and unheard-of juggling with words".

My own journey

I grew up in the Churches of Christ, a restoration movement in the Stone-Campbell tradition. Due to our congregational polity, it is often difficult to nail down doctrine regarding any of the traditional Christian sacraments (the exception being baptism). One of our endearing qualities is the high view of Scripture. We have historically leaned toward face value (literal) understandings rather than metaphor. So I wondered why we prayed over the bread and cup merely as 'representing' Christ when Christ's actual words indicated they *were* His Body and Blood. Why weren't we literal here too? We certainly made that move when it came to singing *acapella!*

The best explanation I got was that the alternatives were all ‘too Catholic’. As I grew into a scientist, complete with physicalist explanations for everything, I accepted the ‘representing’ concept, but in so doing, it seemed I lost something – the true presence of Christ in the Lord’s Table. The emptiness of memorialism and representation, despite satisfying my physicalist brain, told me something was not right.

For this reason, I began exploring other liturgical traditions. But I never lost my connection with my restoration heritage. I suppose I’m a ‘dual citizen’ in *both* the Churches of Christ and the Anglican tradition, with full membership in each (at least I’m in both Church Directories). I partake of the Lord’s Supper *representing* Jesus with my Church of Christ brethren, then I go to my Anglican family to take the Eucharist which *is* His Body and Blood.

A few years before he died I shared my concerns with my Oxford don and mentor, Father Ernan McMullin, while taking three years of summer courses in residence at Wycliffe Hall regarding the interaction between faith and Science. He assured me that Aristotelian thought about substances and accidents (transubstantiation), was really not going to work for physicalists like me ... or even himself!

Instead, he told me that it all hinged on my own perception of the true presence of Christ. It was all really a mystery, anyway. He said, “Go ahead and take the Eucharist over at The Oratory”. “You are properly ready. Besides, we are all not worthy but only say the word and we shall be healed.” Father McMullin was not your typical Catholic priest, I suppose.

With his imprimatur, I did participate in the mass. The effect on me was profound. In partaking of the bread and cup of salvation a peace descended over me that took away my usual anxieties. It was a particularly trying time for me. My eldest son, recently married, was recovering from a brain abscess. Not only did I feel a sense of healing and a sense that all would be well for him and his wife, but I also felt a renewal of life and peace in myself.

I still experience that peace to this day whenever I participate in the Eucharistic Sacrament and hear these words of Christ, “Whoever eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life...[and] dwells in me, and I in him.” (John 6.54, 56) These were statements that shocked His own disciples at the time. These notions were difficult to understand back then and continue to be incomprehensible today.

Still, as a physicalist, I *must* search out *some* empirical difference if my personal experience of Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist is to be understood. That *empirical* difference for me is the fruit of the spirit (e.g. “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” - Galatians 5.22-23) which I experience within myself. Perhaps that experience is an actual detectable empirical difference too! At least if Plantinga’s *Warrant and Proper Function* ideas are correct.

Being a scientist, I search out others who may also have this same experience to seek validation from shared experience. After all, perhaps my ‘spirituality’ is latent schizophrenia! As scientists, we typically ask for

confirmation, “Did you see (hear, smell, taste, touch) that too?” And then we present our discovery to peer review to see if others can refine the explanations of our experiences. So why not ask others if they too experience an *internal* ‘spiritual’ change upon taking the Eucharist? If nothing else, why not write an article about one’s own experience, and wait for the response?

A conclusion?

And yet here I am, still a confirmed methodological reductionist, knowing that the bread and wine, no matter how you analyze them physically will always come up as ... bread and wine.

Regardless of whether it is upon the Words of Institution or at the Epiclesis when the bread and wine become Christ’s body and blood during the Anaphora, I know that I could analyze them using the most powerful scientific instruments and molecular DNA tests available and never find ancient Jewish DNA or anything else *but* bread and wine. It *has* to be only a representation, right?

So ... why am I so transformed upon partaking of them when they are offered to me? “The Body of Christ.” “Amen.” “The Blood of Christ.” “Amen.” The peace and renewal that comes over me every time is profound. I experience taking into my very own corpus the living attributes of Jesus the Christ “... and that *we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son*, the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs, through hope, of thy everlasting Kingdom.” It *has* to be the true presence of Christ, right?

Perhaps discerning the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist does not require *any* of the other historical ‘explanations.’ Perhaps for the believer, the bread and wine does not *become* or *symbolize*, it just *is* the body and blood of our Lord.

At the end of the matter, maybe the children from Saint John’s have the response that makes the most sense: when the bread is broken, ‘Agh’, when it is placed into our hands as the body of Christ, ‘Ooh’.

Whenever my doubts creep in, I think I shall simply recall the children’s simple response and claim it for my own.

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