

The Word Made Flesh: Toward a Sacramental Theology of Language

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Introduction

Liturgy is an event in which God speaks to human beings. Martin Luther asserted that nothing else ought to happen in worship except that “our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise.”¹ Karl Rahner writes of “a theology of the word which includes as intrinsic to itself and as its own proper supreme point a theology of the sacraments,” and Louis-Marie Chauvet describes sacraments as “the Word of God at the mercy of the body.”² In all these uses, “word” is richly multivalent. It can refer to Christ as incarnate Word, to scripture, to the word of preaching, to the words of prayer, or to all of these at once. It can also be extended to include the celebration of sacraments as ways in which God’s incarnate Word is spoken to human beings. In all such encounters, God’s speech is prior to—and enables—human response.

In this paper I attempt to develop a theology of language as potentially sacramental: capable of bearing God’s presence to human beings. I consider sacramentality as the mode of God’s continual self-communication in the material world. This happens outside liturgy as well as within it—for Christians any aspect of life is a potential arena for the encounter with the triune God—yet the church’s corporate worship is a particularly important and a particularly reliable one. I begin by exploring the process of human knowing, drawing insights from the field of cognitive linguistics to suggest that nearly all of the language available to human beings for considering complex and abstract realities is metaphorical, and that metaphor, far from being a

¹ From his sermon at Torgau. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, trans. John W. Doberstein, vol. 51, American ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 333.

² Karl Rahner, “What Is a Sacrament?,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 142; Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

mere ornamental device, is capable of bearing genuine if always partial truth. With this understanding, I reflect on the nature of theology as what happens when God speaks to humans and humans, in response, speak to and about God. Because all theology is based on the self-revelation of God to human beings who are finite as well as fallen, theological language can never aspire to exhaustive, definitional precision. Yet it can be true, insofar as it is *apt*: it can carry genuine metaphorical truth by which humans can encounter God and live faithful lives in response to God. Next I turn to the relationship between words and other elements of liturgy such as objects and gestures, arguing that words no less than these others are material symbols which convey the reality they signify. Thus liturgy is a communicative event in which both word and sign bear sacramental significance. I close with a brief reflection on some elements of my own Anglican liturgical tradition that illustrate a “hermeneutic of multiplicity”: an appreciation for multiply-metaphorical language and a trust in the faithfulness of God to effect the sacramental encounter without exhaustive definition.

The title of this essay points to the Johannine assertion that in Jesus Christ the Word of God has become incarnate. This is the basic ground for the Christian understanding of sacramentality. Another benediction for this project might be the opening of the epistle to the Hebrews. Here too Jesus is described both as word and as tangible image: an appropriate invocation for an exploration of the sacramentality of words.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb. 1:1-3)³

³ Biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

The Metaphorical Quality of Human Language

The role of metaphor in human speaking and thinking has received a great deal of attention at least since Aristotle, for whom mastery of metaphor was the chief indicator of intellectual ability.⁴ Although Aristotle perceived metaphor as primarily a rhetorical device, twentieth-century thinkers have suggested that it is instead deeply entwined with basic human processes of meaning-making.⁵ Recent work in linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science suggests that human cognition is in fact substantially based on metaphor: it is by the metaphoric process of thinking about something from one domain of experience in terms of another that we construct an understanding of the world.⁶

This understanding is grounded in basic sensory experience: a core principle of cognitive linguistics is that language and cognition are *embodied* activities. Even abstract concepts—from those we use each day, like “democracy” or “beauty” or “friendship,” to highly specialized scientific or theological vocabulary—rely on metaphorical understandings drawn from physical experience, often so familiar as to go unnoticed. Basic models of spatial relationships and force dynamics in the physical world combine with experiential metaphors such as AFFECTION IS

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Internet Classics Archive), 3.22, accessed May 23, 2013, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>.

⁵ Particularly important studies of metaphor in the second half of the twentieth century were Max Black, *Models and Metaphors; Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962) and Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). In the field of theology Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) and Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) have been influential. McFague is particularly helpful on the metaphorical quality of theological discourse, although I differ from her on the continuity between metaphor and symbol, as will be explored below. Soskice defines metaphor as an exclusively linguistic phenomenon and thus minimizes the value of early studies in cognitive linguistics (e.g. on p. 81); however, her terminology of “model” in fact fits a cognitive understanding of metaphor rather well.

⁶ The seminal study of metaphor from a cognitive perspective is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). A good more recent study is Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: a Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For an accessible overview of the broader field of cognitive linguistics, see David Lee, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001). Philosophical implications of metaphor are explored in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); the work’s philosophical heritage stems largely from the pragmatism of John Dewey and the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

WARMTH, SIMILARITY IS CLOSENESS, IMPORTANCE IS SIZE, and HAPPY IS UP to allow humans to conceptualize their world in ways that make sense for the human-bodied beings we are.⁷ Thus metaphor is not simply an ornamental phenomenon but a cognitive one: as theologian Sallie McFague writes, “[f]ar from being an esoteric or ornamental rhetorical device superimposed *on* ordinary language, metaphor *is* ordinary language. It is the way we think.”⁸

This is not to say that there is no such thing as literal language. Humans are capable of describing things with which we have direct sensory and motor interaction with considerable precision. We can say “the cat is on the mat” with confidence that our interlocutors will be able to form a corresponding mental image. Many of these categories are culturally constructed—“the chair is on the stair” makes sense only where there are understood to be such things as chairs and stairs—but these are still objects with which we have direct physical experience. Yet there are also literal names for things at greater levels of abstraction—what Eleanor Rosch calls superordinate categories—such as “mammals” and “furniture.”⁹ These are more difficult to understand directly: it is easy to form a mental image of a generic cat or chair, but much harder to form a mental image of a generic mammal or piece of furniture without choosing a more specific instantiation of the category. Literal language works best with topics amenable to direct bodily interaction: with less tangible topics, literal language tends to serve to define rather than to describe. The farther a concept gets from direct embodied experience, the more difficult it is to think about it without using metaphor. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write,

[O]ur most fundamental concepts—time, events, causation, the mind, the self, and morality—are multiply metaphorical. So much of the ontology and inferential structure of these concepts is metaphorical that, if one somehow managed to eliminate metaphorical

⁷ The standard convention in cognitive metaphor study is to capitalize metaphors and write them as “TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN.”

⁸ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16.

⁹ On Rosch’s work, see George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39–57.

thought, the remaining skeletal concepts would be so impoverished that none of us could do any substantial everyday reasoning.¹⁰

Thus, in order to think meaningfully about time, we think of it in terms of space. English-speakers imagine ourselves moving through time, with the past behind us and the future ahead of us.¹¹ In contrast, speakers of Aymara tend to think of the past as in front of them and the future, which cannot be seen, as behind them.¹² But the need for a spatial metaphor is common across cultures, and certain primary metaphors seem to be so common as to be almost universal. A young child experiences social interactions and other complex concepts as correlated with particular sensory experiences. Affection is experienced together with the warmth of being held: AFFECTION IS WARMTH. A pile of objects rises vertically as more objects are added: MORE IS UP. A parent says, “Let’s see what’s in the box,” and vision is correlated with new knowledge: KNOWING IS SEEING. It is through SUCH a complex process of metaphorical meaning-making—the process of saying THIS IS THAT—that human beings construct a world.

This process is prior to verbal language in that the cognitive link between domains of experience does not depend on the prior acquisition of words for those domains. Yet it is also shaped by words: the existence of a word for a particular culturally determined concept (such as “chair”) allows that concept to become real. This can then become the foundation for the extension of the category to other objects in one’s experience. As McFague writes, “[e]ven as simple a statement as ‘this is a chair’ means only that I have made a judgment that I will think about this object *as* a chair because there is sufficient similarity between this object and other

¹⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 128.

¹¹ There is a variant (or “dual”) of this metaphor in which we imagine ourselves standing still while events move toward us; the two differ only in that the Moving Observer metaphor highlights the person while the Moving Time metaphor highlights the event. See Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 137–161.

¹² Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 141.

objects which I have called ‘chairs’ in the past that I believe my assertion is justified.”¹³ The prototypical “chair” may be a wooden kitchen chair, but under the right circumstances a beanbag, a cushion, or even an aptly shaped rock can also be called—can, indeed, *be*—a chair.¹⁴

An understanding of metaphor as the mechanism by which human beings construct a world suggests that our cognitive categories are *neither* inherent in the world “as it is” *nor* purely arbitrary and personal. In other words, neither positivism nor relativism does justice to humans’ embodied ways of knowing. Positivism fails because meaning is always the product of interaction between subject and object, and this interaction takes place in the context of interpersonal relationships and cultures. Relativism fails because human meaning-making is constrained by a shared physical universe as well as by all humans’ biological similarity and genetic relatedness: some metaphors really are better (which is to say, more apt for successful living) than others. We do not have unmediated access to reality, but we have enough to construct understandings that allow us to live successfully in the world. This permits an understanding of human knowing that is both appreciative and humble: because metaphor is truth-bearing, this really *is* that. And yet there are always ways in which this is *not* that: an epistemological modesty is crucial to all human discourse, scientific and theological alike.¹⁵

Chauvet identifies language as the most characteristic feature of being human.¹⁶ It is through the process of naming reality that its “raw factualness” becomes a coherent world rather

¹³ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16–17.

¹⁴ On radial categories and prototype effects, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 68–117.

¹⁵ This epistemological stance has much in common with the “critical realism” of Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); also in Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Paul Avis extends this concept to speak of “critical realism,” “symbolic realism,” and “mythic realism” in *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 137–174. Lakoff and Johnson use the terms “experiential realism” or “experientialism,” as in Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, xv; Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 508–09.

¹⁶ *The Sacraments*, 3. Chauvet is operating at the cognitive level: his use of “language” includes gestural and other nonverbal forms of communication and thus fits well with a cognitive account of metaphor as the mechanism by which this takes place.

than “a chaos or a meaningless jumble.”¹⁷ This inevitably results in a distancing from direct experience as some aspects of reality are singled out for attention and naming while others are ignored—Chauvet cites Jacques Lacan’s phrase “the murder of the thing.” Yet this distancing is a necessary part of being human and finite.¹⁸ Indeed, the temptation to imagine that we have access to an objective conception of reality is an attempt to deny the embodied nature of human existence, a hubristic attempt to supersede the necessity of language and symbolic mediation. On this account, “[t]he human being would be some kind of lame angel.”¹⁹

Chauvet’s identification of language, or the symbolic order, as what makes human beings human is theologically significant. Because the metaphorical process brings new meaning into existence, naming is an act of creation—one secondary, of course, to God’s own work. Thus the human capacity for language can be seen as a participation, by beings created in God’s image, in God’s own creative activity. This is seen in Genesis when God gives the first human being the authority to name the animals and birds: “and whatever the human called every living creature, that was its name” (2:19).²⁰ The words of humans are derivative and reflective of God’s Word—a symbol throughout the biblical tradition of God’s creative and self-disclosing activity in the world. “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps. 33:6). Thus I turn to a consideration of God’s word and human words.

¹⁷ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 13.

¹⁸ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 11. For the phrase, see Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2007), 114.

¹⁹ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 4.

²⁰ Here I replace the NRSV’s “man” with “human.” McFague (*Metaphorical Theology*, 8–9) cites the traditional patriarchal reading of Gen. 2 as indicating that the man names the world without the woman’s participation. Mindful of the injustice with which language has historically been used to preserve male domination, I nonetheless pursue a more optimistic valuation of this passage here and note that the alternate interpretation in which it is a still gender-undifferentiated prototypical human who does the naming is at least as strong. The gendered words *‘ish* and *‘isha* do not appear until Gen. 2:23.

Theology: God's Word to Humans, Humans' Words About God

Fundamental to Christian faith is the assertion that God *speaks*. God, who is transcendent and ineffable, has nevertheless chosen to make God's self known to us. It is God who takes the initiative: God who creates, God who reveals. Catherine Mowry LaCugna has aptly noted that it is meaningless to imagine who God is "in Godself" as if we had access to any sort of knowledge about a God who had not chosen to be revealed. In fact, God does self-reveal: this is "a God who is alive, who is ineluctably oriented 'other-ward,' who is plenitude of love, grace, and mercy overflowing."²¹ Because God is utterly faithful, what God reveals is reliable and true: in Karl Rahner's axiom, the immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity. Yet we can never claim to know God exhaustively. This is "the paradox that stands at the base of all theological knowledge: God freely, utterly and completely bestows God's very self in the encounter with human persons, yet God remains ineffable because the creature is incapable of fully receiving or understanding the One who is imparted."²² LaCugna notes that Christian theology has always needed both apophatic and kataphatic traditions: apophasis insists that God is greater than any human language or concepts while kataphasis dares to say metaphorical things about God. The two approaches work hand in hand to allow a real though partial knowledge of God.

In his book *Hunting the Divine Fox* Robert Farrar Capon spins a whimsical fable about the priority of God's self-revelation and both the dangers and the necessity of metaphorical speech about God. Capon posits a philosophical oyster who is granted a brief theophany. God describes the glories of creation, focusing primarily on things that move: squirrels, basketball players, and above all ballerinas. Since the only thing in the oyster's world that can move is a starfish, it tries to make sense of its experience through analogy. But, as Capon points out,

²¹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 230.

²² LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*, 231.

Unless our philosophical oyster gets a firm grip on the truth that discourse about realities other than himself is always couched in analogies, parables, images and paradoxes, he could very well conclude his definitive treatise *On the Prima Ballerina* by proving that ballerinas have five feet and glide along the ocean bottom at four miles per hour.²³

Capon concludes his fable with the admonition: “When you’re on the low end of an analogy, be very slow to decide you know what the upper end is all about.”²⁴

Overextension, a phenomenon in children’s language development, can serve as a useful analogy for the limitations of human language about God. In overextension a child applies metaphoric thinking to categorize her experience in a way that conventional adult use does not permit. She may use the word *cat* to refer to any animal or *moon* to refer to any round object.²⁵ Within the limitations of the child’s existing vocabulary, the metaphorical extension of her existing concepts makes perfect sense, although reality as understood by adults is more specific.

Theological language is much like this. Because God is always beyond full description by human categories, which are the only ones we have, it is essential to acknowledge the wrongness of any language about God. While clarity is a virtue, full terminological precision in theological discourse is a chimera.²⁶ Thus Paul Avis has argued (persuasively, in my estimation) that there is

²³ Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: Images and Mystery in Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 7.

²⁴ Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, 8.

²⁵ Lee, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 17.

²⁶ While many theologians would agree, this is not a universally acknowledged statement. A recent example of an approach seeking literal terminological precision in theology which I find unsustainable is Garth L. Hallett, *Theology Within the Bounds of Language: a Methodological Tour* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011). Hallett’s “Principle of Relative Similarity” leads him to strive for such definitional accuracy as to reject using the word “ocean” to describe the Gulf of Mexico since the more precise term “gulf” exists (67). Near the conclusion to his project, Hallett finally has to create an exception to his entire principle when it comes to metaphor since he is laudably unwilling to reject all metaphorical discourse in theology (205). But he overconfidently states that “[o]n the whole, it is not difficult to distinguish” metaphorical from nonmetaphorical language—overlooking the ways in which metaphor is embedded throughout most human discourse. An example of a slightly different approach which still fails, in my view, to respect the irreducibility of metaphor is Anna Wierzbicka, “What Did Jesus Mean?—The Lord’s Prayer Translated into Universal Human Concepts,” in *Metaphor, Canon and Community: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Approaches*, ed. Ralph Bisschops and James Francis, Religions and Discourse (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 180-218. Wierzbicka makes a bold, perhaps heroic, attempt to deculturate the Lord’s Prayer so that it may then be translated into other cultural idioms—but the five-page version she creates is not only tortuous but also remains dependent on her own cultural and theological presuppositions. Recent theological works on language that I find more promising include Kevin Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics*:

no “non-symbolic, literal truth about God” available to humans. While God does indeed speak to humans in various ways, this takes place in the mode of interpersonal encounter with all its ambiguity, and primarily through metaphor, parable, poetry, and symbol, not through propositional statements “given, ready-made, whole and entire, and without remainder.”²⁷ This suggests that theological language is at its best when it makes use of multiple metaphors since one can disclose aspects of God that another hides. As Robert Taft writes, “[t]he precise genius of metaphorical language is to hold in dynamic tension several levels of meaning simultaneously. In this sense, one and the same eucharistic table *must be* at once Holy of Holies, Golgotha, tomb of the resurrection, cenacle, and heavenly sanctuary of the Letter to the Hebrews.”²⁸

Chauvet notes that univocality in language is appropriate only to impersonal objects:

[U]nivocal scientific language is unable to do justice to the whole human reality, despite the claims of scientism. . . . the *primary* function of language is not to designate things in a univocal way, to label them. This, language does also and necessarily; in this regard, it comes under instrumentality. But its primary function lies elsewhere, in its unique capacity to place things at a distance by naming them. . . . The result, as we have insistently said, is that the raw elements of the universe become a world of meaning in which human beings can dwell as subjects.²⁹

But Christian faith insists that ultimate reality is *relational*: that God is not less personal than human beings but more so.³⁰ While (relatively) univocal terminology is useful and necessary as a tool, polysemous natural language is the currency of personal relationship. Here the postmodern critique of metanarrative, as articulated by Jean-François Lyotard, is applicable: a multiplicity of images and narratives is more likely to do justice to the complexity of reality than an attempt at a

God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

²⁷ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 4.

²⁸ Robert F. Taft, “The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1982): 74.

²⁹ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 77.

³⁰ See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).

single definitional truth.³¹ It is not insignificant that the Christian church has chosen to include four different and mutually unharmonizable gospel stories in the canonical scriptures by which it proclaims the person of Jesus.

God “making” himself flesh (the “poetry” of the incarnate Word) inevitably meant a plurality of images and metaphors, as language struggled to capture the mystery of what had happened. The words, like the flesh itself, function sacramentally in both pointing to a divine reality beyond themselves, while at the same time mediating, however inadequately, something of that reality. But that will only be fully appreciated if the interconnectivity of metaphor and its irreducibility are allowed full play.³²

If there is an unavoidable wrongness to all language about God, it is important to insist that there can also be a *rightness*—partial yet genuine nonetheless.

It is not true that because we do not know the essence of God as it is in itself, we do not really know God. On the contrary, we *do* know the essence of God—this is what a theology of divine self-communication must presuppose—but always in a mediated and imperfect way, as that divine essence exists and is manifested concretely in Jesus Christ and the Spirit.³³

A Christian understanding of sacramentality rests on a faithful God who reveals Godself through concrete encounters in embodied human history. God’s faithfulness is the warrant for a certain optimism about the capacity of language to mediate a genuine encounter with God. David Brown thus argues that “language can sometimes be said to function sacramentally”: metaphor can be a way, not merely of illustrating truths *about* God, but actually of *experiencing* God.³⁴

In this understanding of metaphor I differ from McFague, who sees a theology of metaphor as sharply distinct from one of symbol and sacramentality and argues that a sacramental view of the universe is untenable in a modern age. She notes—rightly, I believe—that metaphor is partial, fragmentary, and concealing even as it reveals. Yet she asserts that

³¹ Lyotard’s classic statement is “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

³² David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama*, 1st paperback ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55.

³³ LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*, 331.

³⁴ Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 17.

sacramental understandings lack this ambiguous quality: “in symbolical or sacramental thought, one does not think of ‘this’ *as* ‘that,’ but ‘this’ as *a part of* ‘that.’ The tension of metaphor is absorbed by the harmony of symbol.”³⁵ McFague’s preference for “metaphor” over “symbol” is grounded in her commitment to “what Paul Tillich calls the ‘Protestant Principle,’ the fear of idolatry, the concern lest the finite ever be imagined to be capable of the infinite.”³⁶

Yet McFague’s distinction between metaphor and symbol seems unfounded. It rests, perhaps, on an assumption that there is a dichotomy between verbal language and material interaction: the dualistic Cartesian rupture between mind (words) and body (symbols). As I have argued above, language is itself a mode of embodied material action, and I will discuss the relationship between words and other symbols at greater length below. McFague also offers little warrant for her assertion that symbolic or sacramental thought, unlike metaphor, ignores the tension or fragmentation of the reality it conveys. More recent sacramental theologians have explored the relationship between presence and absence in symbols in great depth.³⁷

It is ultimately the pessimism implied by McFague’s relinquishment of the concept of sacramentality that I find unsatisfying. McFague notes that she writes from a Protestant temperament, which she identifies with the “prophetic” voice in scripture. Certainly the concern for justice reflected in her sensitivity to feminist and liberation viewpoints brings a crucially needed critique to any “priestly” sacramental understanding.³⁸ Yet the Protestant temperament does not have a monopoly on liberation: indeed a robust sacramental concern for the goodness of the body (including the bodies of the marginalized) has nourished many social movements around the world. In a world that needs not only prophetic critique but also positive revelation

³⁵ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16.

³⁶ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 13.

³⁷ Absence is a major theme in Chauvet, *The Sacraments*.

³⁸ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 12–17.

and meaning, McFague gives up too quickly on sacramentality—and on the optimism about the goodness of creation that is the reverse side of the partial quality of metaphor. While McFague contends that the world is irrevocably desacralized, Capon points toward a reclamation of metaphor as revelatory of the relational character of all reality:

We must remember the oyster, of course, and avoid the mystery-stealing silliness of thinking that cats actually conceptualize as we do, or that stones literally make up their minds. But having done that, we are in a position to reclaim that older, better reading of creation which only the best analogies give. Think of what it would be like to have with us once more dogs who *know*, sunflowers who *like*, great stones which *refuse* to budge and rivers which *make glad* the City of God. Imagine getting back a universe moved by *love* for the good, full of creatures who are *priests* for each other, with heavens that *declare*, waters that *rage*, stars that *sing* and a sun who once again can *rejoice as a giant to run his course*.

It really was a better world—and our foolishness about words is the only reason we have to put up with the sleazy substitute we're making do with right now.³⁹

Capon's language is intentionally whimsical—and while he is not writing for a primarily academic audience, his method reflects the fact that a certain playfulness and creativity, even poetry, can be appropriate to the theological task. The goal of theological language is not to be exhaustively, univocally true, but to be *apt*: to disclose aspects of reality that can be understood only through metaphor. Language that is apt can thus serve as a genuine means of relational encounter with the living God—just as water and wine and bread and people and oil and burning bushes can. None of these modes of divine self-revelation is guaranteed against misinterpretation or misuse: human beings are not only finite but also fallen. There is an apophatic “no” to every theological assertion: as Gordon Lathrop insists, liturgical language is always the “wrong word.”⁴⁰ And yet—through nothing but God's own grace—we human beings are sometimes enabled to say things about God which are true; true enough for us to live by.⁴¹

³⁹ Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, 11.

⁴⁰ *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 142.

⁴¹ Gail Ramshaw writes of a three-step approach to all liturgical language: yes-no-yes. “The Paradox of ‘Sacred Speech’,” in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: a Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo,

Because theology is a relational endeavor—it is words about *God*, who is living and self-revealing, and whose own word is always prior to human response—theologians like LaCugna and Geoffrey Wainwright are right in asserting that the most appropriate mode for theology is doxology.⁴² Human beings can never stand apart from God in order to talk about God in objectifying terms. Theology is done, as Wainwright writes, “from faith to faith”; while it may have an apologetic function, its integrity rests on the theologian’s prior commitment to relationship with the triune God.⁴³ Indeed, theology consists of words spoken *to* God as well as words spoken *about* God; thus the liturgical discourse of praise, thanksgiving, and supplication is a form of theology, as is a treatise or conference paper. But even when the primary audience of theological language is other humans, God is always a partner in the conversation.

This is not to say that all theological language must be couched in the poetry of immediate mystical encounter or in images and metaphors drawn directly from the pages of scripture. McFague describes a continuum from more concrete to more abstract discourse (concepts and theories); this is similar to Wainwright’s concept of a continuum between more immediate and more reflective modes of discourse.⁴⁴ The advantage of these models is that they avoid the sharp dichotomy between what is often called *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda* and instead acknowledge that *all* experience of God is mediated by human categories and concepts, whether more immediate or more reflective and abstract. Theological language understood as literally true tends either to be unrecognized metaphor—which runs the risk of idolatry—or to consist of technical terminology which is true by definition but is nearly

2000), 167–177. Ramshaw here draws on Paul Ricoeur’s concept of second naïveté.

⁴² LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*, 319–368; Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁴³ Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*, 4. See also Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, ix: “Theology is a believer’s task.”

⁴⁴ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 26; Geoffrey Wainwright, “The Praise of God in the Theological Reflection of the Church,” in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 112.

impossible to talk about in meaningful ways without resorting back to metaphor: in Lakoff and Johnson's terms, it is skeletal and impoverished.⁴⁵ Conceptual language is indispensable in theology; what is crucial is to acknowledge that it too is metaphorical and so its truth lies in *aptness* to reality rather than in categorical, complete *correspondence*.

I have used the phenomenon of overextension in language acquisition as an analogy for what happens when human beings speak of God—which raises the question: is the opposite process possible? What happens when God speaks to humans? As it happens, there is indeed a reverse phenomenon known as underextension. Rather than applying an *already*-learned linguistic category too *broadly*, a child learns a *new* linguistic term and applies it too *narrowly*. Thus a child might use the word “dog” only for her own dog and not others. David Lee recounts his five-year-old daughter's confusion about the word “egg” as she watched a television program about mammals: after the program she remarked, “I didn't know that cows laid eggs!” She had only encountered chicken eggs and had a narrower concept of “egg” than do adults.⁴⁶

It is intriguing to consider whether the analogy of underextension might be apt to describe what happens when God speaks to people. At first it might appear that only a fundamentalist understanding of verbal inspiration would make this possible. Perhaps God does not speak to people in verbal language but only in inchoate preverbal impressions. This would mean that all language about God is simply human language arising from a process of *overextension*. Yet several factors suggest that this is too simple an understanding. For one, a growing number of philosophers, linguists, and cognitive scientists suggest that language in fact shapes cognition—that the categories available through our language shape our thoughts and

⁴⁵ An example of the former is the social analogy for the Trinity: too great an insistence on God's three-personedness without recognition of the metaphorical character of this assertion creates tritheism. An example of the latter is the term *hypostasis*, which at least in contemporary English has no other meaning than what God has three of and Jesus has one of; the original Greek terminology was more obviously metaphorical in its cultural context.

⁴⁶ Lee, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 65.

even perceptions and that there is no preverbal universal “language of thought.”⁴⁷ In any case, if words are not separate from material physical experience but a part of it, there is no reason to dismiss the possibility of God speaking to humans in words (through mystical experience, or dream, or even the inspired words of another person) any more than in emotional or sensory experience. Brown notes that the idea of artistic “inspiration” is not limited to painters and sculptors; poets, too, often assert that their metaphors come to them from somewhere.⁴⁸ We need not posit the plenary literal inerrancy of scripture to consider that the inspiration of scriptural authors was at least in part in the mode of verbal language.

While we might be reticent about asserting categorically that any particular biblical image or metaphor is the *direct* product of revelation,⁴⁹ the idea that humans seize on our limited experience to understand concepts God means for us to grow into understanding more broadly is nonetheless attractive. Perhaps the best example is the classic Johannine statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16): while human cognition allows us to understand this only from our experiences of creaturely love, divine love is always something more.

If we understand liturgy as an event in which God speaks to us—both in verbal language and, more broadly, through sign and action—our comprehension of what it is God says to us in sacramental encounters is doubtless always an example of underextension. “This is my body,” says the incarnate and risen Word of God; and we understand this in specific ways based on our own experience of bodies. Like the child whose only experience of an egg is a chicken egg, we

⁴⁷ This is a moderate form of the classic Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—although there are still many scholars who would disagree, notably Steven Pinker. For a readable, popular introduction to current psychological research suggesting that language can shape thought, see Benjamin K. Bergen, *Louder Than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

⁴⁸ Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 45.

⁴⁹ A helpful study of biblical metaphors for God from a cognitive perspective, particularly the metaphor of Father, is Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve E. Sweetser, “Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor,” *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 3 (January 2005): 207–238.

have no way to conceive precisely what language used this way can mean. And so we return to the process of overextension, drawing on other experiences to construct new metaphors that communicate something of what we have encountered in the presence of the holy One.

Sacramentality: True Symbols in Word and Sign

By the word [*dabar*; *logos*] of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath [*ruach*; *pneuma*] of his mouth. (Psalm 33:6)

In the verse above the psalmist asserts the participation of God's Word in the creation. Although it is less obvious in translation, he or she also asserts the participation of God's Spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek a single word serves for both *breath* and *spirit*, and so Christians may well see in this psalm verse an image of the trinitarian activity of the one God. While the relationship in liturgy between the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit has often been a point of contention, the second half of the twentieth century produced significant convergences. If Eastern Christians still tend to speak in terms of an independent mission of the Spirit and Western Christians of the single mission of the incarnate Word, both are able to recognize the full involvement of the triune God in the sanctification both of the eucharistic elements and of the faithful.⁵⁰ The classic doctrine of the unity of the actions of God *ad extra* is helpful in this—as is Irenaeus' old, appealing metaphor of the Word and the Spirit as the two hands of God.⁵¹

Imagining the intimate connection between the Spirit as breath of God and Christ as Word can help illuminate the material character of all communication. Far from being disembodied, words are in fact *made* out of breath—or gesture, as in the case of sign language, or ink, as with written text. In any case, there is no communication without materiality.

Chauvet's insistence on considering gesture, posture, and movement under the category of

⁵⁰ See Edward J. Kilmartin, "The Active Role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Sanctification of the Eucharistic Elements," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 225–253.

⁵¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV.0.4, 5.6.1.

language is apropos: human words are always embodied words.⁵² The dichotomy between a structuralist like Saussure, who prioritized spoken language, and a poststructuralist like Derrida, who prioritized written language, masks the deeper truth that all words are material.⁵³ For Christians this understanding of the materiality of language is underscored by the Johannine identification of the incarnate Jesus as the Word of God: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (John 1:14). As Brown writes,

it is easy to jump to the conclusion that only the physical or material can function sacramentally, and so in the case of the incarnation it must be Christ’s ‘flesh’ that accomplishes such mediation, pointing to the divinity that lies behind the fleshly appearance. But the author of the Fourth Gospel by identifying word and flesh demonstrates that word can equally be conceived in sacramental terms. Words are more than sounds; they are signs or symbols pointing beyond themselves, mediating the reality into which they draw us.⁵⁴

If the spoken word has a certain priority over the written word in Christian liturgy, this is not because it is any less material; it is, rather, because liturgy is always an event in which the eternal God addresses us here and now. The elements of worship—water, wine, bread, oil, lights, clothing, people, words—do not rest static but are handled and employed so as to speak in the present moment. The turn in liturgical studies toward considering liturgies as events rather than as texts on pages has been immensely valuable in this regard. Yet it is also important to avoid the opposite pitfall of devaluing words in favor of an exclusive focus on nonverbal actions. To do so would continue to reinforce the paradigm that assumes that words are discontinuous with the rest of physical reality—a paradigm that rests on a dualistic view of mind as separate from body. Words are in fact an inherent part of the communicative ritual event; and the entirety of that event is a potential arena for the encounter with the God who has promised to be present.⁵⁵

⁵² Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 3.

⁵³ See Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 44.

⁵⁴ Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 52.

⁵⁵ See Second Vatican Council, “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” 1963, 7: “Christ is

This encounter surely takes place in the reading of scripture. It can also take place in preaching; in the language of prayer; and in the language of song. Brown argues that “a good preacher’s words [can] act just as sacramentally as an image: to draw the listener into an experience of the God who is always present and ready to address us.” He suggests this occurs most effectively when preaching allows scriptural images and metaphors to come to imaginative flower through disciplined, creative rhetoric.⁵⁶ Beyond sermons, the prayers of the liturgy—particularly in traditions with authorized texts—serve as loci of proclamation of the church’s faith.⁵⁷ And the prominence of hymnody in congregational life and its power to stir the spirit and linger in the memory suggests that hymn texts, too, can convey God’s presence in worship.⁵⁸

The capacity of material symbols to signify—to speak the Word—is also bound up tightly with words. As Augustine puts it, “the word is joined to the element and the result is a sacrament.”⁵⁹ Kevin W. Irwin has drawn attention to the way words shape and constrain the nearly infinite range of meanings associated with such symbols as water, bread, and wine.⁶⁰ While remaining richly multivalent, these symbols thus take on a specifically Christian meaning: as Lathrop puts it, the symbol is “juxtaposed” with the proclamation of the crucified and risen

always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister . . . but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt. 18:20).”

⁵⁶ Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 110.

⁵⁷ Kevin W. Irwin’s discussion of euchology—that is to say, the texts of prayer—is quite helpful. See *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 176–207.

⁵⁸ See Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 73–109. Here, as an Anglican, I differ from Irwin whose Roman Catholic viewpoint leads him to deemphasize hymnody in eucharistic liturgy in favor of the classic antiphons and psalms—which of course can also surely serve as such loci for the encounter with God (*Context and Text*, 236–253).

⁵⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Treatise on the Gospel of John*, LXXX, 3, trans. Paul F. Palmer, in *Sacraments and Worship* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1957), 127–28; reprinted in Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Sacraments and Worship: The Sources of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 2.

⁶⁰ Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology*, 143–44.

one.⁶¹ In this way a material symbol can become an “enacted metaphor.”⁶² Whether the medium is spoken word, gesture, or a combination of word and action is not the central issue, for all can create the cognitive metaphorical connection: THIS IS THAT. “Symbols function no differently [from words]. Whether spoken, acted, or painted, drawing bread close to body and wine to blood must continue to shock, even as it establishes a more integrated account of reality.”⁶³

Avis proposes a continuum of metaphor, symbol, and myth (in the non-pejorative sense): metaphors give rise to symbols, which when incorporated into narratives become myths.⁶⁴ The combination of all these elements gives rise to a worldview. By this accounting, Christian sacraments like baptism and eucharist can be seen as enacted metaphors for what liturgists commonly describe as the “paschal mystery,” the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which Christians see as the hermeneutical key to all existence. As Robert F. Taft puts it, “this single root metaphor of the paschal mystery [is] the disclosure, to those who will enter it in faith, of ultimate reality, the final and definitive meaning of all creation and history and life.”⁶⁵ The death and resurrection serve in turn as a metonym for the entirety of Jesus’ human existence: incarnation, public ministry, preaching, teaching, healing, suffering, death, resurrection, appearances to his followers, ascension, sending of the Holy Spirit, and glorious return.⁶⁶ The human being Jesus is for Christians the definitive revelation of God. Thus Christian belief and practice can be characterized as a series of interlocking metaphoric, symbolic, and mythic

⁶¹ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 97.

⁶² Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 9.

⁶³ Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 20.

⁶⁴ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 93–134.

⁶⁵ Robert F. Taft, “What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses,” in *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2nd revised and enlarged ed., NPM Studies in Church Music and Liturgy (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1997), 243. The phrase “root metaphor” seems to have arisen in the work of philosopher Stephen Pepper; it entered ritual studies through Victor Turner and was used by George S. Worgul in *From Magic to Metaphor: a Validation of Christian Sacraments* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). The common use of “paschal mystery” stems from Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962; originally published as *Das christliche Kultmysterium*, Pustet, 1932).

⁶⁶ On the paschal mystery as the central element of the *kerygma* and the “point of departure” for theology, see Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 156–161.

understandings forming a worldview that mediates and organizes the experience of what it means to be a human being in the universe.

In describing sacramental practice as metaphorical in this way it is crucial to remember that that metaphor can be *true*; there is no such thing as “mere” metaphor, for metaphor is how human beings understand the world. More than this, though, I propose that liturgical theology—if it is to be *theology*—must insist on the priority of God’s speech over human speech. Christian faith is faith in God’s revelation. While “bottom-up” approaches can be useful in making Christian practice intelligible to a wider audience and in cross-cultural and cross-religious studies, theology is always grounded in God’s prior “top-down” self-communication.⁶⁷ It is the trustworthiness of God that allows Christians to say confidently that these metaphors are true.

From this perspective, Christian liturgy can be understood as an encounter with the God who speaks: the same God who spoke all things into being at the creation, who speaks at all times and in all places for those with ears to hear, and who has spoken the definitive Word made flesh in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. Liturgy is hardly the only place in which God speaks. Its claim is a more modest one, but still a bold one: liturgy is a *reliable* place in which God speaks.⁶⁸ There are others—especially the pages of scripture and the face of the neighbor, particularly the neighbor in need—and indeed the entire universe is “permeated by the grace of God.”⁶⁹ But liturgy is what Robert Taft calls a “privileged ground” in which, as Luther says, God

⁶⁷ This is the limitation I find in the method of Worgul in *From Magic to Metaphor*. Worgul’s characterization of sacraments in metaphorical terms is perceptive and convincing, but he prioritizes anthropological method to such an extent that revelation can easily be missed, as when he suggests that “[a]n anthropological understanding of ritual fills the theological gap on the issue of ‘how’ the *res et sacramentum* comes about and functions” (152). Surely for Christians it is always the action of God through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that fills that gap.

⁶⁸ See Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: I. Theology*, 97, on the untenability of the claim that liturgy is the *only* source for theology, and Taft, “What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses,” 242–43, on liturgy as a “privileged,” though not the only, ground of encounter with God.

⁶⁹ Karl Rahner, “Considerations of the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 166. The model of sacraments, scripture, and ethics as a triad of core elements of the Christian life is Chauvet’s: see *The Sacraments*, 19–66.

faithfully speaks to the church and the church responds in prayer and praise. It is God who first enables us to speak to God. The entire endeavor is laughable otherwise; but through faith it becomes possible.⁷⁰ This is faith in its twofold meaning, as in Paul's ambiguous use of *pistis Christou* throughout his epistles: it is both "faith in Christ" and "the faithfulness of Christ," both the church's trust and God's trustworthiness.⁷¹

God's promise to be present in the church's liturgy is not grounded in a single proof-text. Edward J. Kilmartin has appropriately pointed out the weakness of relying on the Matthean "where two or three are gathered" as a guarantee of sacramental presence.⁷² Rather, the guarantee is found in the very character of God whose faithfulness is attested in a texture of promises woven throughout scripture and history.⁷³ M. Daniel Findikyan has demonstrated such an understanding of sacramentality in the many Armenian prayer formulae that call upon God to act according to God's "unfailing word." The onus for efficacy here is completely on God:

From the perspective of the Word-Sacrament discourse, this prayer assigns full authority to the "unfailing Word" of the Lord and not to some obligatory lexical formula of consecration which, it is alleged, must be pronounced incantation-like to assure the validity of the Sacrament. Instead, the prayer gives voice to the church's faith in none other than the Lord himself, who, by his "unfailing word" has made specific promises to mankind that the Lord cannot but fulfill.⁷⁴

The emphasis on faith in this perspective calls to mind Taft's image of Michelangelo's famous painting in the Sistine Chapel. Taft describes liturgy—understood in the broadest sense, as God's self-communication in Jesus Christ—as the event that bridges the gap between God's

⁷⁰ Reinhard Meßner defines the object of liturgical study to be faith in God's action in the world: "Was ist systematische Liturgiewissenschaft? Ein Entwurf in sieben Thesen," *Archiv Für Liturgiewissenschaft* 40 (1998): 260–63.

⁷¹ A recent collection of essays exploring the state of the discussion of *pistis Christou* in New Testament studies is Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, eds., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010).

⁷² Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: I. Theology*, 352n10.

⁷³ See, e.g., Matt. 7:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; John 15:7; James 5:16; Lam. 3:22.

⁷⁴ M. Daniel Findikyan, "The Unfailing Word in Eastern Christian Sacramental Prayer," in *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Studies in Church Music and Liturgy: Essays in Honor of Paul F. Bradshaw*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2004), 183.

finger and Adam's, between God and humanity. The initiative lies with God who chooses to make Godself known—not inexhaustibly, which is impossible for us, but fully and reliably insofar as it is possible and needful for us. Because the gap always exists, we understand God only through metaphor. Yet that metaphor—expressed in words as well as images, gestures, signs, and actions—can indeed be *true*, through God's grace.

Conclusion: An Anglican Contribution to the “Plurality of Particularities”

Michael Aune has noted that liturgical theologians can be tempted to create liturgical theologies without adequately grounding them in the particular lives of actual worshipping communities.⁷⁵ Because Aune's caution is well taken, I want to conclude by situating my project more firmly within my own liturgical tradition. Thus as Aune concludes his own essay with a brief case study illustrating a “hermeneutic of contemporaneity” in Lutheran liturgy, I will suggest that there is something worthwhile about the particular charism of Anglicanism that can be both its most endearing and (especially to critics) its most infuriating quality: its tolerance for ambiguity. This “hermeneutic of multiplicity” can be characterized as doctrinal fuzziness or even obfuscation. But from a more appreciative point of view, it can also be seen as a reverence for mystery: an appreciation for both the power and the provisionality of human language, expressed in the disinclination to commit to a single metaphor to explain the transcendent.⁷⁶

The hermeneutic of multiplicity is at work in Thomas Cranmer's famous prose style, with his characteristic love of doublets. Cranmer never uses a single word when two will do: “comfort and succor,” “bless and sanctify,” “offer and present.”⁷⁷ It is at work in the epicicles of 1549—

⁷⁵ Michael B. Aune, “The Current State of Liturgical Theology: A Plurality of Particularities,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 53, no. 2–3 (2009): 209–229.

⁷⁶ Some feminist theologians have identified ambiguity as a valuable component of sacramentality: see Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: a Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 39–40 and elsewhere.

⁷⁷ All from the communion prayer of 1549. Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30–31; spelling modernized. Later Anglicans would retain

which, though it disappeared from England in 1552, made its way through nonjuror rites into the American prayer book tradition—which rather uniquely invokes both Word *and* Holy Spirit, bringing to mind Irenaeus’s image of two hands and in some ways foreshadowing the ecumenical convergences of the twentieth century.⁷⁸ And it is at work in the words for administering communion. The 1549 prayer book suggests a more Catholic or Lutheran view of Christ’s presence; the 1552 book replaces this with a memorialist or receptionist formula. But the 1559 version simply merges the two: “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life; and take and eat this, in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thine heart by faith with thanksgiving.”⁷⁹

The various theories that have dominated Western understandings of eucharistic presence—Roman Catholic conversion, Lutheran presence “in, with, and under” the elements, Zwinglian memorialism, Calvinist receptionism—all invoke different spatial metaphors to explain how believers encounter Christ.⁸⁰ Each offers its advantages, highlighting certain aspects of the eucharist while deemphasizing others. Yet they are mutually incompatible when understood literally. While Anglicans have at times come close to endorsing or rejecting one theory or another, as a whole the tradition has avoided making definitive pronouncements. The broad scope for interpretation in the 1559 formula is illustrative of the Anglican hermeneutic of multiplicity: there is always more than one possible metaphor at work for what God is doing. If

Cranmer’s fondness for doublets, as in the General Thanksgiving of 1662 (composed by Bishop Edward Reynolds): “we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving kindness to us, and to all men.” Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer*, 268.

⁷⁸ Paul V. Marshall, *Prayer Book Parallels: The Public Services of the Church Arranged for Comparative Study*, vol. 1, Anglican Liturgy in America (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1989), 364–365. The Word/Spirit epiclesis remains in both eucharistic prayers of Rite I in the current 1979 book. It also appears in Rite II in the formula for supplemental consecration on p. 385.

⁷⁹ Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 137. The formula for the administration of the cup is similar.

⁸⁰ The phrase “in, with, and under” does not seem to appear in Luther’s actual writings as far as I know, but he does use each of the three prepositions in various places, and the combined phrase is often used in Lutheran explanations of the eucharist. A fuller analysis of the image schemas involved in these four theories of eucharistic presence would be an intriguing future project.

this inevitably reflects the exigencies of political maneuvering in an established state church, it also reflects a tradition that, when at its best, asserts that God's self-communication in liturgy is real while being comfortable with describing that reality in more than one way.

A classic formulation of the Anglican trust in God's mysterious self-revelation is a simple four-line poem alternately attributed to John Donne and to Queen Elizabeth I.⁸¹ Fittingly, it finds the ground for that trust in God's incarnate Word:

He was the Word, that spake it;
He took the bread and brake it;
And what that Word did make it,
I do believe, and take it.

It is Jesus, the Word made flesh, who is God's word spoken to us in word and sacrament. The self-communication of God can never be precisely defined. But it can be grasped through metaphor. This grasping is partial, always, to be sure. But it is reliable enough to live by.

⁸¹ Lavonne Neff, *The Gift of Faith: Short Reflections by Thoughtful Anglicans* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2004), 121. For a discussion of manuscript tradition and authorship, see Elizabeth I, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 47n1.