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Postmodern Soundings

Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THIS first chapter is to gain a greater understanding of the “riot of diversity”¹ that has been called postmodernism. The following overview is geared to the particular postmodern problematic facing contemporary discourse on sacramental presence, and in this sense is meant to be a preparation for the question of how postmodern thought is made productive for the Christian tradition by contemporary theology. In this, as we have already seen, Heidegger’s relationship to postmodernism will be accented insofar as his critique of Western thought emerges as an important catalyst for postmodern sacramental theology. At the end of this first chapter, we hope to have facilitated an adequate understanding of the key elements at stake in any construal between postmodernism and the Christian tradition, and to have adequately set up the following chapters’ more thematic treatment of sacramental presence.

The plan for this chapter is as follows. After a brief outline of some of the rudimentary characteristics of postmodernism, we shall turn to a more detailed genealogical examination by recounting the key moments, or “turns”—and their contemporary interpretations—which have brought us to the postmodern turn, beginning from the alleged high point of the Western tradition. We will chart a path from this high point through the “nominalist turn,” the “turn to the subject,” and the “phenomenological turn,”

1. Schmitz, “Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,” 233.

citing various contemporary interpretations of these turns along the way, and making preliminary connections between these turns and the theme of sacramental presence. This path will highlight the key moments leading from the medieval synthesis through to modernity and postmodernity. Upon completion of this selective genealogy, we will then turn to evaluate its relationship to contemporary Christian theology, accenting the diverse ways the latter's tasks are construed *vis-à-vis* the Heideggerean problematic. In all of this, we hope to provide an introduction to the general milieu of ideas informing the theme of sacramental presence in order to adequately frame the thought of Chauvet and Boeve.

Postmodern Soundings²

Any commentator of postmodernism faces the daunting task of attaining a manageable working definition of the term. It is perhaps helpful to begin by perusing a few preliminary descriptions of postmodernism, in order to acquaint ourselves with some of its basic characteristics, but also to illustrate the very postmodern observation that one should speak of postmodernisms rather than Postmodernism.³ What makes postmodernism such a nebulous term is its complex history and distinctive characteristics, factors which give rise to any number of not necessarily complementary interpretations. In order to offer an interpretation of postmodernism, one must make infinitely delicate judgments in regard to the whole raft of intellectual history that precedes it.

Be that as it may, we may nevertheless briefly catalogue some of the more elementary characteristics of postmodernism. In certain respects, postmodernism resists definition,⁴ as it is less a body of positive doctrines than it is a series of fundamental critiques. Kevin Vanhoozer follows Jean-Francois Lyotard in calling postmodernity a "condition" rather than a "position."⁵ Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives," something he explains as being precipitated pri-

2. This section owes its bearings to K. J. Vanhoozer's excellent overview of postmodern themes in his "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity."

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. Vanhoozer and Neville Wakefield both point to how postmodernism resists definition. The former explains how "postmoderns resist closed, tightly bounded 'totalizing' accounts of such things as the 'essence' of the postmodern" (*ibid.*, 1). The latter draws attention to how postmodernism "is neither an homogenous entity nor a consciously directed movement. It is something much more ill-behaved, nebulous, elusive, de-centred and de-centring." Wakefield, *Postmodernism*, 1.

5. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 4.

marily by the “crisis of metaphysical philosophy.”⁶ For Lyotard, this crisis is represented by a loss of confidence in the great narratives of reason. “The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative [philosophy] or a narrative of emancipation [politics].”⁷ What Lyotard refers to here is the particular aporia of modernity already pointed out with such force by Nietzsche, that of the perceived impossibility of grounding the particular in the universal, something which can also be expressed in terms of the non-identity of the signifier and the signified. The response to this metaphysical crisis of representation is not therefore another “position”—another fixed, universal account of how the world works—but is rather a “condition” characterized by suspension, deferral, and openness.

This condition of being-without-confidence, and therefore being compelled to perpetually defer reason’s aspirations to commensurability with its object can be described in many ways. Neville Wakefield describes the unstable vacuum created by the loss of objective standards of rationality: “The universe once again becomes unsteady as we find that we have built structures (whether born of rationalist positivism or apocalyptic fatalism), that are too rigid, too coherent and too explicatory to survive in a world of flux.”⁸ He construes this situation as “a phase marked by a new sort of promiscuity in which the various strands of human activity jostle, intermingle, and exchange amongst one another.”⁹ Instead of the existence of a single, unitary, “master” narrative that provides meaning, the pursuit of meaning becomes something of a free-for-all between competing positions and interests with no ultimate arbitrator. James C. Livingston uses the following phrases to characterize postmodernism: “emptiness of self,” “absence,” “loss of self,” “the movement toward silence,” “the unrepresentable,” “the crisis of legitimation.”¹⁰ He notes postmodernism’s subsequent emphasis on “the discovery of difference, diversity, and pluralism.”¹¹ The twilight of certainty means that dimensions once dismissed as irrelevant or unworthy of consideration all suddenly become equally worthy of consideration, given the relativizing of the standards of traditionally privileged modes of discourse.¹²

6. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

7. *Ibid.*, 37.

8. Wakefield, *Postmodernism*, 1.

9. *Ibid.*, 41.

10. Livingston and Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 494.

11. *Ibid.*, xv.

12. Vanhoozer speaks here of the “return of the repressed.” Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 16.

It becomes respectable to intellectually pursue anything “from the margins.” As we will see, the greatest casualty of postmodernism is metaphysical discourse. Schmitz points out how “postmodernism has rendered ontological discourse (understood as metaphysics) problematic and raised its problematicity to the issue of the nature of philosophy itself.”¹³

To close this section, we will briefly consider the effect of this demise of ontological discourse on four classical metanarratives, as told by Vanhoozer. Vanhoozer claims that there are four major metanarratives towards which postmoderns are incredulous: those of reason, truth, history, and self. First, characteristic of a move away from certainty, postmoderns embrace “reason” rather than “Reason.”¹⁴ Rationality is limited, contextual, and relative. Human thinking “is always *situated* within particular narratives, traditions, institutions, and practices.” Second, this produces an account of truth that directly challenges the fundamental philosophical aspiration of modernity, “namely, the project of mastering natural reality in a comprehensive conceptual scheme.”¹⁵ Any assertion of absolute truth belies little more than hidden ideology and the will to power (Foucault, Nietzsche). Third, this version of truth expands to inform postmodern conceptions of history. Here, any all-encompassing attempt to interpret the universal meaning of history is impossible. There is no single “big story,” only infinite “little” ones. History is not linear and logical, but is marked by discontinuities, discrepancies, chance, and reversals. Fourth, selfhood itself is consequently de-centered in such a world. “The postmodern self is not a master of but subject to the material and social and linguistic conditions of a historical situation that precedes her.”¹⁶ The self is a shifting, open-ended amoeba adrift in an equally shifting sea.

With this, we conclude our preliminary sketch of the fundamental themes of postmodernism. The next section begins a more focused genealogy of the “turns” leading to postmodernism, with particular reference to themes directly relevant to the conceptual scaffolding surrounding postmodern accounts of presence.

13. Schmitz, “Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,” 246.

14. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

16. *Ibid.*, 12.

“Turning” Towards Postmodernism

In Vanhoozer’s opinion, the “postmodern turn” “is as much a turn *away from modernity* as a turn to something else.”¹⁷ In most cases, it is also a turn away from the classical Christian tradition. Postmodernism generally understands itself as transcending both Christianity and modernity, and in Heidegger’s case, sees the essence of the two as more or less the same. Our quest to understand postmodernism must thus begin in the alleged high point of the tradition whose eventual rupture would inform the directionality of the progressive movement towards the so-called postmodern condition.

The Analogical Imagination

St. Thomas made integrating and synthesizing various strands of thought from various traditions an art form, all in the name of the basic principle that all reality was God’s reality, and that all could therefore find a place in the great symphony of existence. Thomas is famously known for using Aristotle to safeguard the difference of creation, and is often seen to be in some discontinuity with the more Platonic Augustine. However, recent studies have emphasized the Platonic and Patristic dimension of his theology, and have sought to uncover the more Augustinian, or participatory dimension of his thought, something largely obscured by neo-scholastic interpretations of Thomas.¹⁸ Be that as it may, what Thomas’ realism enabled him to do was affirm that created forms were not simply static copies of divine forms, but in a crucial way possessed their own unique identities and essences not simply capable of being dissolved into the deity. “In place of the Great Chain of Being [of Platonism],” explains von Balthasar, “there emerges the rounded, ordered cosmos closed in on itself in which every individual thing possesses its worth and dignity and no single thing—including inert and dead matter—is permitted to be dispensable to the whole.”¹⁹ Thomas, wishing to avoid any cosmic or pantheistic merging of man with the divinity, follows Aristotle in affirming the reality of created forms. But this is not to say that Thomas simply left the world to itself, so to speak. Von Balthasar asserts

17. *Ibid.*, 5.

18. See, for example, Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d’Aquin*; te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*; Dauphinais et al., *Aquinas the Augustinian*; Venard, *Thomas d’Aquin, poète théologien* (3 vols.); in positive reference to Venard’s work, see Milbank, “On ‘Thomistic Kabbalah’”; Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2; Schindler, “What’s the Difference?”

19. Balthasar, “Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” 381.

that Thomas “knew nothing of a natural final goal of man that pertains to the nature of the creature as such . . .”²⁰ The world still “participates” in God but it does so according to a structure of analogy:²¹ while the world cannot claim a univocal “identity”²² with the divine, it can nevertheless claim an analogical similarity, on the basis that all that *is* is derived from God and therefore in some way bears his trace and image. There is thus for Thomas a *desiderium naturale visionis* at heart of creation—which means that there is nothing neutral or autonomous about creation—but in the sense of an Augustinian restlessness:²³ nature, however much it displays order and form, is nevertheless missing something of crucial importance.

Twentieth-century scholarship would refer to this achievement of Thomas as the “real distinction.” Von Balthasar views Thomas’ “definition of esse and its relation to essences” as his “major creative achievement.”²⁴ The real distinction, or what Heidegger would later rework as the “ontological difference,” is described by Graeme Nicholson as “the difference between what there is and the being of what there is, the difference between beings and being—on the one side, all that exists, on the other, the very existence of what exists.”²⁵ There are two essential things going on in the real distinction as Thomas is said to have understood it. First, existents have their own immanent act of existence (*actus essendi*) apart from their participation in the general form of substance—for example, an individual horse is an instantiation of “horseness” (a large, hoofed mammal, etc.) but *this* horse is not for all that simply “horseness” itself; it is a particular and unique actualization of the idea of horse. Gilson suggests that Thomas follows Aristotle here in affirming that beings (*esse*) are not simply the univocal instantiations of Being (*esse commune*), or pale, deficient images (like Plato’s shadows on the

20. Ibid., 383–84. See also Lubac, “*Duplex hominis beatitudo*.”

21. “Analogy, whatever else may be said about it, is something in the process of human understanding of the real world about us that allows created things to be and be seen as representations of God in a way that respects the total otherness of God.” Walsh, “Divine and the Human,” 339.

22. In his history of modern metaphysics, von Balthasar uses the word “identity” to describe any metaphysical system that collapses the distinction between worldly being and God by claiming a direct approach to God—whether this be via the “metaphysics of the saints” or the “metaphysics of spirit”—that bypasses the created distance between the two by an inflation of mystical or spiritual experience. See Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*. A similar argument is made by Martin Buber in his *Between Man and Man*.

23. Schindler develops this idea in his “Restlessness as an Image of God.”

24. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 4:393.

25. Nicholson, “Ontological Difference,” 357. Heidegger famously described the ontological difference as the difference between *Being* and *beings*.

wall), but are in fact the only way in which Being is ever itself actual.²⁶ Being is only made actual in the existent, and therefore each existent is an actually existent reality in and of itself.²⁷ The particular being, while participating in universal Being (as noun), is in fact the only way in which Being-as-noun is actualized, that is, through being-as-verb—to be.²⁸ This allows a clear first affirmation that the world itself is not God and neither is it an extension of God. The existent has its own unique act of existence wholly outside the “grid” of divine Being: “God can no longer in any way be regarded as the being of things . . .”²⁹

But in the second aspect of the real distinction Thomas adds something that goes beyond Aristotle. Pace Aristotle, Thomas does not thereby give an absolute status to the particular act of existence: the “intelligible form alone does not suffice to account for the actual existence of things.”³⁰ For Thomas, unlike Aristotle, substances cannot exist in their own right, even if their operation is immanent in the sense just defined.³¹ Gilson suggests that this is because Thomas’ Christian intuition made him affirm the fact that the existence of substance was contingent rather than necessary,³² and therefore that the act of existence relied on the act of existence of a greater being, without for that matter being reduced to it. Schindler explains that “if existing substances, however, are not responsible for their own being, there must be some act beyond the act designated by form, in other words, a ‘trans-formal’ actuality.”³³ The difficulty comes in trying to explain how the first reality (the genuinely unique and non-reducibility of the act of beings) can “fit” inside the second reality (the overarching and greater reality of the absolute act of being) without thereby being dissolved in the latter. Schindler notes a temptation here to re-conceive of the relationship between immanent and absolute act by returning to a Platonic schema in which the existent is merely a deficient instantiation of *esse commune*, rather than its genuine

26. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 160. “The solid block of Aristotle’s substance is here to be found in its perfect integrity, and Thomas Aquinas will never attempt to break it up” (159–60).

27. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 5:619.

28. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 160. “Thomas reminds us that the noun ‘being’ is derived from the verb ‘to be,’ which means the very act of existing.”

29. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 4:393.

30. Schindler, “What’s the Difference?” 603.

31. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 160.

32. Gilson asserts here that it is unlikely that Thomas could have reached this intuition without the help of divine revelation. *Ibid.*, 160–61.

33. Schindler, “What’s the Difference?” 603.

actuality.³⁴ By contrast, Thomas is said to have avoided the possible univocalism, pantheism, or dualism risked here through an *analogical* notion of participation, built on the introduction of a third term—God—wherein the dynamic of Being and beings is understood as the image of the divine in a unique, and distinct creational realm. If God is invoked, Being and beings no longer need to be explained in and of themselves. Their contingency is based on a God who has created them freely and established their finite realm in his image via exemplary causality. “Participation,” therefore, does not have to mean a univocal collapse of everything into the One, but rather a world of beings analogically primed for expressing God’s image in each one’s unique act of existence within the creaturely realm. So, for example, man participates analogically in the divine Being in two ways. First, he participates by way of his human nature—statically, one could say—inasmuch as he is (ontologically) *that kind of being* whose essence it is to be the image of God in a particularly human way, and second, he participates—dynamically, one could say—insofar as *this particular man* in his own particular act represents an absolutely unique instantiation of the general ontological image of God. Creatures’ participation never involves a going outside or beyond their own level, so to speak, and therefore never binds God to our analogous existence.³⁵ All participation, all imaging is via the pure mediation of Being, expressed in its concreteness in the particular existent.

The analogical structure that therefore emerges in Thomas’ thought attempts to do justice to both Aristotle and Plato: “The doctrine of analogy arises from a synthesis of two topics, the one of Aristotelian inspiration, that of the unity of order by reference to a primary instance, the other of Platonic provenance, that of participation.”³⁶ Thomas does not want an eternally closed-in world of essences tending automatically to their respective intra-cosmic ends, nor a world where what *is* is simply a deficient copy of a greater reality. Rather, “the Thomistic insight into the non-subsistence of being allows a full integration of the metaphysics of participation while at the same time ‘leaving room’ for the genuine positivity of difference: of the

34. *Ibid.*, 604.

35. “[T]hings do not participate directly in God in the sense that would make God in fact the being of things . . .” Schindler, “What’s the Difference?” 608; “[A]lthough things participate in *esse commune*, God does not participate in *esse commune* but rather the reverse, *esse commune* is that way in which created things participate in God.” Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism*, 192. Thus, as Hemming continues, “God is not one of the things that are, God cannot be understood, words cannot contain God, and no name can lay hold of God. In this sense God is beyond being” (195).

36. Montagnes, *Doctrine of Analogy of Being*, 23.

variety of essences within the existential order, and of the variety of material instances within the essential order.”³⁷

Within this analogical structure, causality becomes an important component for how it all “works.” First, because God is “off the grid,” so to speak, the fundamental way he relates to his creation is via efficient causality. Creation, as non-subsistent being, depends on a cause outside of itself. This is so because “the effect would not be if the cause were not.”³⁸ But it is also in the nature of causation—as it relates to determinate form—for the effect to bear some resemblance to its cause. “The determination of forms must be reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe, which order consists in the variety of things.”³⁹ Thomas thus goes on to conclude that God must be the exemplar, as well as the efficient cause of all that is. All that *is* is patterned on God as exemplar, and therefore has a dimension of formal causality. All that *is* possesses a certain “thingness” according to which it tends. And all of this means that God is also the final cause of all that is, insofar as things are naturally “loaded” towards the divine inasmuch as it represents the cause and sustaining of their being: “every creature endeavors to acquire its own perfection, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness. Therefore, the divine goodness is the end of all things.”⁴⁰ This system of causality would provide the rationale for Thomas’ theology of the sacraments, where efficient, formal/exemplar, and final causality form the basis of the principal and instrumental causality encountered in our introduction. As efficient cause of all that is, God is therefore the principal cause of grace in the sacraments. But because the media of the sacraments has its own formal and exemplary causality, it can be swept up in the process of grace as an instrumental cause.

This is Thomas’ infrastructural vision. Thomas posits an analogical foundation for discourse on God and man alike. His synthesis allows a way to speak about the essences of things (a “science,” if you will) and a way to continue to relate all of this *more* intrinsically to God. It allows a sacramental theology where signs can be actual causes of grace, and not just empty signifiers. Hans Boersma argues that “such an analogous or sacramental approach is the very best we can do with respect to a God who, on the one

37. Schindler, “What’s the Difference?,” 612.

38. *ST I* q. 44, a. 1, ad. obj. 2. Walsh asserts that “efficient causality is the dominant and most pervasive member of the pattern [of causality]” (“Divine and the Human,” 337–38). This is because it “provides the primary reason for the absolute transcendence of God over all being, as we can experience and categorize it” (*ibid.*, 338).

39. *ST I* q. 44, a. 3.

40. *ST I* q. 44, a. 4.

hand, is our creator and who, on the other hand, infinitely transcends us.”⁴¹ But the history of ideas would have other ideas.

The Nominalist Turn

Nominalism can be described as the loss of an analogical imagination, of course with all the attendant cautions against oversimplification. According to a common contemporary genealogy, the process begins with Scotus, Ockham, and Suarez’s cutting loose of the particular from the mediation of the universal, and thereby collapsing the analogical distinction between God and man into univocity. According to von Balthasar, Scotus conceives being as a formal concept rather than a reality;⁴² Milbank and Pickstock speak here of “logical ‘realities’ rather than ontological actualities . . .”⁴³ Milbank argues that “because he [Scotus] rejected the view that *esse* as such was an effect of divine creation (rather than a thing’s existence in this way or that) already thought that infinite and finite causes could collaborate within a single univocal field of operation.”⁴⁴ Boersma puts the consequence of this in simple terms, asserting that “what Scotus did is make the created order independent of God.”⁴⁵ As for Ockham, he is accusing of developing potential applications of this *esse univocum*, specifically, conceiving of the relationship between grace and nature as extrinsic, asserting the absolute freedom of God, eliminating any natural desire for the supernatural, and therefore rendering theology non-contemplative, fideistic, and purely practical.⁴⁶ Suarez is another link in the nominalist chain and—according to Kerr’s explanation of Gilson’s critique—is the author of “essentialism,” inasmuch as he held that “the actions that we see in the world and in which we engage issue not from the ‘existence’ but from the ‘essence’ of the agent in question.”⁴⁷ Suarez is thus accused of instantiating a purely natural metaphysics that asserts a purely natural end for the human being, and thereby makes Revelation extrinsic. The cumulative effect of Scotus, Ockham, and Suarez, was their instrumental role in helping to sink substantial foundations for what would become modern philosophy (in its various forms), and in conditioning the neo-scholastic approach to this philosophy.

41. Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 74.

42. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 5:16.

43. Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 5.

44. Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 93.

45. Boersma, “Accommodation to What?” 3.

46. *Ibid.*, 20. See also Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 94.

47. Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 54.