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“The Word . . .”

The Problem of Language

The Christ event being necessarily present in the manner of historically conditioned symbol (word and sign) is not present in itself, but in a variety of historically conditioned symbolizations. It is thus absent, even in its being present.¹

Words fail, always fail, for they inscribe the absence they seek to erase.²

MEDIATION AND LANGUAGE

In the previous chapter, we have shown that the scandal of sacramentality derives first from Christ himself, the Word of God made flesh, crucified on Calvary, which St. Paul calls a “stumbling-block” (*skandalon*). Sacraments are visible and tangible, yet they mediate to us the invisible and intangible saving grace of God, which is resident within the material, created order precisely because of the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. Through participation in this mediation, the ecclesial community is both constituted, *made into* the body of Christ called Church, and unmade: fractured, broken, de-stabilized, and stripped of any power

1. Power, *Sacrament*, 58.

2. Taylor, “Unending Strokes,” 142.

or possession it might hold as a body politic. Thus sacrament is a scandal to faith and practice, theology and Church. As God's body/language, sacraments call for participation and must be entered into via language and the body.

In this chapter, we shall begin by establishing sacramental signs/symbols as both part of language—that is, part of the system(s) of signification by which meaning is conveyed—and as the particular language of God's saving grace. An assessment of the relationship between language and sacramental theology would be incomplete without attending to the liturgical movement leading up to and encompassing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which implicitly wrestles with some of the same concerns about language that captivate postmodern thought. In what may at first seem a strange maneuver, we will consider the "death of God" theology of Thomas Altizer alongside the critiques of language which emerge from poststructuralist and postmodern thought, exemplified for us by Jacques Derrida.³ In their own ways, both of these intellectual trends point to the absence of any transcendent guarantee of linguistic meaning. Then, guided by Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, we will demonstrate that the struggle with sacramental language stems at least in significant part from Jesus' instituting words at the Last Supper, his metaphoric speech which ruptures semantic associations and confounds interpretation. This eruptive tendency, which breaks open a plurality of meanings, we call the "de/constructive core" of sacramentality, the "/" indicating a simultaneously de-constructive and constructive movement or tendency.⁴

3. To be clear, we are not attempting to draw a direct connection between Altizer's "death of God" and the crisis of signification characterized by Derrida as the death of the "transcendental signified," nor trace them to some common source or catalyst (though Nietzsche could be cited as a common influence). However, we suggest that these two intellectual impulses, emerging around the same time, share a more or less theological concern for language and the problem of signification.

4. Our point of reference for this use of the "/" (which can be written but not spoken) is Mark C. Taylor's use of it when he writes about "a/theology," which is not, he maintains, simply atheistic, but rather "marks the *limen* that signifies *both* proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority. This strangely permeable membrane forms a border where fixed boundaries disintegrate"; see Taylor, *Erring*, 12. In similar fashion, we employ the "/" in "de/constructive" to indicate the liminal character of sacramentality. When we refer to sacramentality's "de/constructive core," then, something simply or crudely *destructive* is clearly not implied. Instead, as is the case even in a more purely Derridean sense, deconstruction (even without the "/") always refers to a never-ending process of breaking down, or exposing the brokenness of, our certainties and structures of language or thinking, precisely to break open the possibility for a constructive moment "to come." This is the basic argument Simon Critchley makes on behalf of deconstruction in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*.

At the heart of the eucharistic liturgy lies the institution narrative, which echoes Paul's instructions to the church at Corinth (1 Cor 11:23–26) as well as the Last Supper accounts in the three Synoptic Gospels. Beginning with the earliest Gospel account in Mark 14, according to both the biblical text and the words of the Church's liturgy, Jesus takes bread, offers thanks to the Father, breaks it, and gives it to his followers, addressing them with the words "Take it; this is my body" (Mark 14:22). The passage continues: "Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,' he said to them" (Mark 14:23–24). These two statements, taken together as one—*this bread is my body; this cup of wine is my blood*—encapsulate the twofold scandal of eucharistic theology which occupy this chapter and the following: the scandal of the Word and the scandal of the Flesh, which come together in Christ, the "Word made flesh (*Logos sarx egeneto*)" (John 1:14). In the next chapter, we will examine the scandal of corporeality, that of the body, of the flesh, of the paradox of a God incarnate within the materiality of God's own created order. But first, we shall attend to the linguistic, the verbal and the textual: word before flesh. While we do not mean to imply the significance of one over the other, the biblical creation narrative provides our template for beginning with the problem of language.

Before creation, the Word (*Logos*) of God existed: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The writer of the Fourth Gospel, playing intertextually upon the theme and poetic style of the Creation narrative in Genesis 1, observes that prior to the speech-act of Creation, which in scripture is in the first instance a *verbal* act, the Word of God always already exists in and as the eternal communion and communication of the Godhead: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3). God's first interaction with creation, with something *other* than Godself, takes place in an act of speech: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Prior to this moment, scripture tells us, all is abyss, "formless and empty, darkness" (Gen 1:2). Then, into this abyss, God speaks, and in speaking, brings about matter, bodies: celestial, terrestrial, and eventually human. But as Slavoj Žižek has observed, this act of creation is itself a scandal to Godself: "The very notion of creation implies God's self-contradiction: God had first to withdraw into Himself, constrain His omnipresence, in order first to create the Nothing out of which He then created the universe. By creating the universe, He set it free, let it go on its own, renouncing the power of intervening in it: this self-limitation is equivalent to a proper act of

creation.”⁵ This theological conception of the impact of creation on Godself is further evinced, from the standpoint of the biblical narrative, in the inscription of God’s creation as a speech-act. Language—spoken or written—is never *immediate* but always entails *mediation*, and so the distance, the gap between God and that which is *other* than God, the necessary mediation between God and creation, is established in this primal utterance. These two accounts of Creation, that of Genesis and of John’s prologue, set up not a false binary between language and the body, or the priority of the word (language) *over* the body/flesh (matter), but rather capture the irreducible primordially of language, which is also to say, of the mediation effected by all signs.

We established in chapter 1 that sacrament is both symbol and sign. In patristic literature, the Eucharist is *sacra signum* (a sacred sign) and *verbum visibile* (a visible word).⁶ Sacraments, as signs/symbols, are not only a part of language, but are a language unto themselves, which David Power identifies as “the language of God’s giving.”⁷ In his pivotal second chapter, Power offers a detailed analysis of different theories and conceptions of language and how this relates to sacrament in general and liturgical language in particular. After reviewing the sacramental theories of Aquinas, Bonaventure, and the Reformers, Power discusses the work of Rahner and Schillebeeckx (considered above) as examples of contemporary sacramental theologies which cast the sacramental sign as “an act of self-communication, both divine and human, and an encounter in grace . . . [which] works through the symbolic action.”⁸ Observing that “all celebration in its use of words, symbols, and rites involves the interpretation of the tradition handed on,” Power proposes “a theology of sacrament that brings language to the fore,” electing to describe sacraments as “language events.”⁹ Because, as Power puts it, “humans find their dwelling place in language,”¹⁰ if the grace of God is to come to us in and through sacrament—that is, if sacraments are, in Schillebeeckx’

5. Žižek, *Puppet*, 137.

6. See Jenson, *Visible Words*, referencing St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 31. Nathan Mitchell notes “the inherent ambiguity of this metaphor. We think of words as *acoustic* events, not visual ones. To put *verbum* (“word”) and *visibile* (“visible”) together seems transgressive, a mistake. Augustine’s decision to define “sacrament” as “visible word” embodies a metaphoric collision. It suggests that “sacrament” is a ritual experience through which we learn to “see with our ears” and “hear with our eyes.” If the root of sacrament is metaphor, then a new possibility is opened up for us; we may perceive the audible as visible and the visible as audible” (Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery*, 198).

7. This phrase is the subtitle of Power’s book *Sacrament*.

8. Power, *Sacrament*, 56.

9. *Ibid.*, 51.

10. *Ibid.*, 66.

phrase, “the properly human mode of encounter with God”¹¹—then they must meet us within the language-bound world in which we live.

This conception of sacrament as language and language event is a useful point of departure at this stage of our discussion. As we have seen, sacraments are part of the created order, yet point beyond themselves. For their meaning, sacraments rely upon the decidedly pluriform linguistic structures (signs) of their liturgical celebration(s), and the somewhat more uniform material elements (also signs) used in that celebration. Thus we defend Tillich’s assertion that sacraments are not the Holy, but mediate the Holy precisely by delineating the difference between themselves and that which they represent. They are this-worldly artifacts which stand in for, in the absence of, that which is beyond the mundane. As Power reminds us, “The language event of sacrament engages us at the level of the daily, the bread and the wine, the oil and the water, within the time that is the time of living day to day[;] . . . the sacramental presencing of this event interrupts, even disrupts, the flow of daily and historical time.”¹² Power is right to draw attention to another characteristic of sacrament: its location within time. Like language and bodies, time also is part of the created order. Time, which conditions history, is the exact location of this-worldly actions (rituals) and artifacts (symbols) which we experience in and through language and body. However, as language events, sacraments interrupt and disrupt time, just as they erupt and rupture the simple, univocal meaning of language itself. Elsewhere Power writes, “A ritual or sacramental event relates to an event within time past through the capacities and power of language to carry it forward and to allow it to enter afresh into lives, however they may have been disrupted and broken.”¹³ It is precisely this sense of disruption and brokenness to which we wish to call attention and which, we argue, is bound up within the *scandal* of sacrament, the stumbling-block we encounter on our way which interrupts and disrupts our journey toward meaning.

This scandal is not something external to language but is in fact an intrinsic characteristic of language itself. In *The Trespass of the Sign*, Kevin Hart examines the problem of signification in light of the narrative of the fall of humankind in the biblical story of Adam and Eve—a dynamic that Power fails to incorporate into his conception of language. This narrative inscribes not only the fall of humankind from an original state of perfection, but also encompasses the fall of language.¹⁴ According to Hart, Christian

11. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 6.

12. Power, *Sacrament*, 91.

13. *Ibid.*, 75.

14. cf. Žižek, *Puppet*: “We should bear in mind here the central tension of the

theology must concern itself with signs precisely “because it regards God as a presence who, after the Fall, represents Himself and is in turn represented by signs.”¹⁵ In his lucid opening pages, he posits that

the view that language fell with man [is an elaboration] upon a far more persistent theme—that God guarantees the possibility of determinate meaning. The Fall may establish the human need to interpret yet it simultaneously sets firm the limits to interpretation. No longer in harmony with God, this world becomes a chiaroscuro of presence and absence; everywhere one looks, there are signs of a divine presence that has withdrawn and that reveals itself only in those signs.¹⁶

For our purposes, as it relates to signs as well as the question of presence and absence, this specifically implicates the notion of sacrament, for the tangible signs by which this withdrawn divine presence reveals itself in this world are precisely that which we call sacraments. “By dint of Adam’s sin, though,” Hart reminds us, “God is for us an *absent* presence.”¹⁷ The Fall inaugurates, therefore, the brokenness and discontinuity, the fragmentation against which our desires for presence, for *im*-mediacy arise.

However, our systems of signification, our efforts to establish certitude and meaning, our sacraments and sacred symbols are in fact susceptible to the very brokenness that they themselves endeavor to overcome. And so, according to Hart, “From God’s presence we pass to His absence; from *im*-mediacy to mediation; from the perfect congruence of sign and referent to the gap between word and object; from fullness of being to a lack of being; from ease and play to strain and labour; from purity to impurity; and from life to death.”¹⁸ While signs mean, point to, and participate in something beyond the sign itself, according to Hart, “what we *mean* by ‘sign’ is that it is

Christian notion of the Fall: the Fall (‘regression’ to the natural state, enslavement to passions) is *stricto sensu* identical with the dimension from which we fall, that is, it is the very movement of the Fall that creates, opens up, what is lost in it” (118).

15. Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, 7.

16. *Ibid.*, 4.

17. *Ibid.*, 7. This notion of an “absent presence,” or “the presence of the absence” of God disclosed within the sacraments that constitute God’s saving activity in the word, is most fully articulated in Louis-Marie Chauvet’s sacramental theology; e.g., “. . . to consent to the sacramental mediation of the Church is to consent to . . . *the presence of the absence of God*. The Church radicalizes the vacancy of this place of God. To accept its mediation is to agree that this vacancy will never be filled . . .” (*Symbol and Sacrament*, 178).

18. Hart, *Trespass*, 5.

what it is in the absence of its animating presence.”¹⁹ In other words, the distance or gap between the sign itself and its referent—its animating presence, that from which the sign derives its meaning—is the exact locus of the sign’s meaning. The sign *means* by demarcating this difference, by revealing itself as *other than* that to which it points. In the absence of the real thing—the physical, historical body of Christ, which after being raised from the dead, ascended to the Father—sacraments mediate, stand in for, a real presence, which *in the sacred sign* of the Eucharist is (un)veiled as a real absence.

So we encounter the Eucharist first as a *linguistic*—both verbal and textual—*scandal*. In the poetic speech of Jesus at the Last Supper, “take, eat, this is my body . . . my blood,” we are immediately enrapt in the problem of language, in the paradox of a metaphor, to be precise.²⁰ But before we more closely examine sacramentality as a scandal of language and the problem of Jesus’ metaphoric speech, let us pause to consider the problem of linguistic mediation within the context of liturgical language. The twentieth-century liturgical movement, culminating in the Second Vatican Council’s task of translating the liturgy from Latin into vernacular languages, is an embodiment of this wrestling with language, with signs and their meanings, which persistently trip us up and confound understanding. Here we witness a demonstration that liturgical and sacramental language are not exempt by any means from the brokenness, fallibility, and confounding tendency characteristic of all sign systems.

VATICAN II AND LITURGICAL LANGUAGE

The limitations of this project permit no more than an overview of the relevant features of the liturgical renewal and the Second Vatican Council. In the first chapter of *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World*, Catholic theologian Kenan Osborne provides a concise summary of the major contributions of the liturgical renewal, which have contributed to the shape of our sacramental theology as we attempt to figure and refigure it for the third-millennium. He concludes: “Not only was the need for liturgical reform a product of this intense activity [of the liturgical movement], but in official and unofficial ways, liturgical reforms were already taking place prior to

19. *Ibid.*, 12. Explicating Derrida’s thought, Hart continues: “No context can circumscribe a sign’s meaning; the sign’s meaning will alter if repeated in a different context; but the sign is structurally open to repetition: therefore, alterity is a structural feature of the sign” (13).

20. We note the possible objections to understanding Jesus’ statement “This is my body/blood,” or the Eucharist as a whole, in terms of metaphor. These concerns will be addressed in due course.

Vatican II. This change in liturgy, with its call for the use of vernacular language, for more participation by the lay person, for a better understanding of the history of liturgical practices and rituals in the Christian-Catholic tradition was a tremendous catalyst for the revolutionary renewal of the church’s sacramental life.²¹ The revolution, according to Osborne, was the re-location of the interest in sacramental and liturgical theology away from the isolation of the academy and into the practical life of the *ecclesia*. Also significant to our purposes is Osborne’s recognition of the influence of twentieth-century philosophy upon many of the individual Catholic thinkers who contributed to Vatican II: “existentialism, phenomenology, process thought, Marxism, linguistics, semiotics, and postmodern philosophy” all feature prominently, as well as “technological advancement.”²² Osborne summarizes that *subjectivity* (the “return to the subject”), *historicity* (the historical contingency or relativity of truth), and *epistemology* (the limitations of human knowing) comprise the three major implications of these philosophical trends.²³ It is on the basis of this new or renewed emphasis on subjectivity, historicity, and epistemology that the most significant result of Vatican II, at least for the liturgical life of the faithful, emerged: the complete overhaul of the Roman Rite and the translation of the Mass into local vernacular languages.

Today, when one thinks of “pre-Vatican II” Catholicism, the Latin Mass immediately comes to mind. The first official statement of the council was “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (“*Sacrosanctum Concilium*”; hereafter SC), published on December 4, 1963. We are interested in this document for several reasons, which should be outlined. First, as this statement calls for the revision and translation of the liturgy, we expect to glimpse something in this document the council’s conception of religious (broadly) and liturgical (specifically) language. Second, the contention, which lingers even still, that the replacement of the Latin rite with the vernacular Mass destroys the beauty and mystery of the liturgy intrigues us; for even as critics might blame Vatican II for bringing about the “end” of liturgy,²⁴ the council seems to understand the “ends” (*telos*) of liturgy quite specifically, and their intention is to bring the liturgy back into a condition that supports those ends. However, in stark contrast to such nostalgic objections to the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, we shall consider in some detail Catherine Pickstock’s “radical orthodox” criticism of the replacement of the Roman Rite with ver-

21. Osborne, *Christian Sacraments*, 12.

22. *Ibid.*, 15.

23. *Ibid.*, 16.

24. E.g., Drew, “Spirit or Letter?”

nacular Masses, which on the whole we find to be a convincing and accurate proposal accounting for both the challenges of postmodernism as well as the historical tradition(s) of the Church.

In the first article of *SC*, the Council recognizes the need “to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change”²⁵—an acknowledgment that the liturgy, like all signs and sign systems, is indeed subject to change, as well an admission of the historicity (“the needs of our age”) and cultural-contextuality of the liturgy. A key phrase for the council is “full and active participation”²⁶ of the faithful in the liturgy, evidenced by the fact that variations on this phrase are scattered throughout the text of *SC* and emerge as a kind of benchmark by which to determine whether the liturgy is achieving its goal. This “full and active participation,” then, supports and reinforces the *telos* of liturgy, which is the transformation and sanctification of the people of God. In fact, the Council writes that *the liturgy itself* demands this: “all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.”²⁷ The revisions are to be carried out with the understanding that the liturgy is the “source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”²⁸ In other words, as we have already come to understand from Augustine, Dix, and Zizioulas,²⁹ in the liturgy, the Church receives its very being; both the corporate body and individual persons *become* the Body of Christ in and through the liturgical enactment of the Eucharist. It appears thus far that the Council’s vision of the liturgy is at least somewhat historically and culturally fluid, and that to a large degree the locus of liturgical meaning is the congregation.

Toward this end of full and active participation, the Council approved the translation of the Tridentine Mass from Latin into vernacular languages, with the conviction that “The rites should radiate a noble simplicity. They should be short, clear, and free from useless repetition. They should be within the people’s powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation.”³⁰ The implication is, of course, that the existing liturgy is *not* short or clear, is *not* within the cognitive grasp of the people, and might even be characterized by “useless repetition,” thus hindering the congregation’s participation in and comprehension of the Mass. A great em-

25. *SC*, Art. 1, 117, in Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II*.

26. *SC*, Art. 14, 124.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. See chapter 1 of the present work.

30. *SC*, Art. 34, 129–30.

phasis is placed on “clarity,” which we take to mean first semantic and then theological clarity. The laity’s *understanding* of the liturgy is essential. The Council believed “both texts and rites should be ordered so as to express more clearly the holy things which they signify. The christian people, as far as is possible, should be able to understand them easily.”³¹ And so, in what Osborne calls a “watershed for the renewal of the sacraments,”³² in Article 36(B), the translation into and use of vernacular languages is approved: “since the use of the vernacular, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or in other parts of the liturgy, may frequently be of great advantage to the people, a wider use may be made of it, especially in readings, directives and in some prayers and chants.”³³

However convinced and convicted the Council may have been about the legitimacy of these liturgical reforms, they have not passed without critique. The conservative (for lack of a better term) arguments which simply wish to preserve the status quo are largely rooted in a nostalgia that is of no particular interest to us. However, more radical criticisms exist, perhaps the most significant of which is the one offered by Catherine Pickstock in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*.³⁴ *After Writing* is a dense work, and Pickstock’s analyses are nuanced and wide-reaching, touching on Derridean postmodernism, semiotic theory, medieval Christian thought, and liturgical and eucharistic history and theology. A full-fledged engagement with her book would very nearly require its own book-length study. Additionally, hers is to date perhaps the most immediately relevant study to the present work, and as such it shall reappear continually throughout this project, so for now, we shall limit our consideration only to her critique of Vatican II.

Pickstock argues that the basic problem with the liturgical reforms of Vatican II is *precisely* the Council’s effort to simplify the complex structures

31. SC, Art. 21, 126.

32. K. Osborne, *Christian Sacraments*, 17.

33. SC, Art. 36. 130–31.

34. After John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*, Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing* is regarded as somewhat definitive of “Radical Orthodoxy,” which she describes as a “new theological imperative” offering an alternative between postmodernism’s shutting down of rationalist humanism, on the one hand, and its own indisputable nihilism on the other: “Radical orthodoxy . . . has offered a third alternative: while conceding, with postmodernism, the indeterminacy of all our knowledge and experience of selfhood, it construes this shifting flux as a sign of our dependency on a transcendent source which ‘gives’ all reality as a mystery, rather than as adducing our suspension over the void” (*After Writing*, xii). See also the edited volume *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by J. Milbank (et al.), which contains essays by many scholars whose work extends this theological program.

of the Roman liturgy that had served the Church since the Middle Ages. To Pickstock, this indicates a failure on the Council's part to realize that the liturgy's "theological struggle to articulate itself," is *precisely* "the crisis of articulation by which liturgical expression can be seen as a critique of secular modes of language and knowledge."³⁵ Vatican II contributors Jungmann, Bouyer, and others propose the unburdening of the liturgy all that hinders the understanding—again, the "full and active participation"—of the laity. She posits that "The Roman humiliation of the worshipper before God, together with the inclusion of various ceremonial accretions, confirmed [the Council's] suspicion that the Rite contained interpolation from secular court ceremonial and emperor worship, betokening a dubious politicization of the Eucharist."³⁶ But the problem with the Vatican II reforms, according to Pickstock, is that they "ironed-out the liturgical stammer and constant re-beginning; they simplified the narrative and generic strategy of the liturgy in conformity with recognizably secular structures, and rendered simple, constant and self-present the identity of the worshipper."³⁷

Pickstock's account of the inevitable failure of the Vatican II reforms is rooted in her understanding of the Church and its liturgical practice in the Middle Ages. Of the Church's uniquely sacramental and liturgical identity, she reminds us that "it was the Eucharist, rather than any other sacrament, from which all other activities flowed, because . . . for mediaeval thought, the Eucharist gives the Church, the Body of Christ, and as such, the Church alone legitimates politics, and provides the restoration of our genuine being through salvation."³⁸ Furthermore, the Eucharist as such must be viewed against the backdrop of a pervasively liturgical *culture*: "[T]he liturgy of the Middle Ages was embedded in a culture which was ritual in character. This was a time when the Offertory gifts were not disconnected from the produce of every life; indeed, the category itself of 'everyday life' was perforce a thoroughly *liturgical* category. For the community was not something which existed prior to, or in separation from, the Eucharist as a *given* which simply met at regular intervals to receive the Sacrament. Rather, the community as such was seen as flowing from eternity through the sacraments."³⁹ The Mass, in other words, was not simply a textual or theological abstraction, offered as a beneficial or even salvific supplement to the lives of medieval folk, but rather was the basis of medieval life itself. Medieval life and medi-

35. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 177.

36. *Ibid.*, 172.

37. *Ibid.*, 176.

38. *Ibid.*, 147.

39. *Ibid.*, 170–71.

eval identity, both communal and individual, were premised upon participation in the sacramental and liturgical life of the *ecclesia*.

While Pickstock bypasses the accounts of medieval history which focus on the cultural “profanation” of the sacred that emerges out of this deeply liturgical worldview—such as that of Johan Huizinga, who reminds us that medieval religion was an “entirely externalized religion,”⁴⁰ characterized by a “profaning overflow” resulting from an “overabundance of devotional content”⁴¹—her account of medieval theological error (chiefly the nominalism of Duns Scotus), arising from within the Church itself, seeks to explain the basis for this shift toward immanentism and materialism. For this reason, Pickstock refers to “the destruction from within of the liturgical city.”⁴² While she admirably supports her attribution of this “destruction” to Scotist thought, she also acknowledges the role played by the “unique intensification of piety which paradoxically segregated the sacred from the secular, for by concentrating sacrality in a singular and exclusively holy event or place, any location beyond that focal intensity was effectively secularized.”⁴³ In her account, the former leads directly to the latter. However, other viable accounts of the medieval shift from transcendence to immanence, from spirituality to materiality, might be noted as well. Johan Huizinga, for example, places more emphasis on Pickstock’s secondary cause when he writes, “Life was permeated by religion to the degree that the distance between the earthly and the spiritual was in danger of being obliterated at any moment. While on the one hand all of ordinary life was raised to the sphere of the divine, on the other the divine was bound to the mundane in an indissoluble mixture with daily life.”⁴⁴

Observing this thoroughly intermingled liturgical purview of medieval society, Pickstock suggests that the liturgy cannot be simply translated, or indeed translated so as to be simplified, because the liturgy is “as much,

40. Huizinga, *Autumn*, 203.

41. *Ibid.*, 220–21. The more carefully one follows Huizinga’s reading of medieval history, the more apparent the differences between his account and Pickstock’s. In fact, Pickstock all but admits this, albeit in passing, when she remarks: “None of this account is supposed to imply that a liturgical order was perfectly realized in the high Middle Ages; the claim is rather that certain social and intellectual conditions of possibility for such an order were present” (*After Writing*, 157). Huizinga’s history, which unlike Pickstock’s is laden with concrete/practical examples from medieval life, seems much more attuned to, and much more comfortable with, the profane and profaning tendencies that grow out of the highly ritualized and sacralized medieval *zeitgeist*. His work provides additional insight in our literary explorations in Part Two of this study.

42. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 121.

43. *Ibid.*, 147.

44. J. Huizinga, *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 179.

or more a cultural and ethical phenomenon, as a textual one.”⁴⁵ In other words, Pickstock directs us to the truth that the struggle with language is not simply a struggle with textuality or with speech as such, but with the very social and historical contingency of language itself, which is so easily forgotten or simply passed over. She explains:

criticisms of liturgical reform . . . are often dismissed as conservative or nostalgic. But because the Vatican II reforms of the mediaeval Roman Rite failed to take into account the cultural assumptions which lay implicit within the text, their reforms participated in an entirely more sinister conservatism. For they failed to challenge those structures of the modern secular world which are wholly inimical to liturgical purpose: those structures, indeed, which perpetuate a separation of everyday life from liturgical enactment. So the criticisms [offered here] of the Vatican II revisions of the mediaeval Roman Rite . . . far from enlisting a conservative horror at change, issue from a belief that the revisions were simply *not radical enough*. A successful liturgical revision would have to involve a revolutionary re-invention of language and practice which would challenge the structures of our modern world, and only thereby restore real language and action as liturgy.⁴⁶

In light of this illuminating summary of Pickstock’s dissatisfaction with the Vatican II reforms, we realize that her critique is not based upon a reified conception of language that wishes to preserve the liturgy’s semantic content from some bygone generation, somehow protecting it from perversion for generations to come. As Pickstock points out, the Council “failed to realize that one cannot simply ‘return’ to an earlier form, because the earlier liturgies only existed as part of a culture which was itself ritual (ecclesial-sacramental-historical) in character.”⁴⁷ Rather, we suggest that her critique appears to be based upon an underlying belief that liturgical language, *precisely as mediate and imperfect*, is “impossible,”⁴⁸ as it is linked to the originary creative speech of God, which as we have stated above, introduces the very gap between God and creation upon which the necessity of mediation is based. Consistent with Kevin Hart’s reading of the relationship between the fall of Adam and “fall of language,” Pickstock asserts that “liturgical expression is made ‘impossible’ by the breach which occurred

45. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 171.

46. *Ibid.*, 171.

47. *Ibid.*, 176.

48. See Pickstock, *After Writing*, 169–219, esp. 176–92

at the Fall.”⁴⁹ While she never puts it quite in these terms, it seems to us that undergirding Pickstock’s conviction that “liturgical language is the only language that really makes sense,”⁵⁰ is the acknowledgment that language, heightened to its signficatory capacity nowhere more than in sacramental celebration, comes to us as gift from a God who empties and absents God-self *for creation*. It is in this divine *kenosis*, in the linguistic act of creation, by which our capacity for language, and our irreducible mediacy, is given. In the liturgy itself the Church repeats and participates in this *kenosis* when the faithful are called to “offer themselves,”⁵¹ the out-pouring and offering of not only the souls of the faithful but their bodies as well. They present their bodies at the altar to receive the elements into their bodies, even as they are grafted into Christ’s ecclesial Body by their reception of Christ’s sacramental body. All of this takes place within the linguistic structure of the liturgy, not merely as an abstracted textual artifact but, as Pickstock has shown, as a socially-bound and culturally-embedded language event that can never fully be circumscribed by language or comprehended even by the most astute participant.

We have examined the liturgy as one site of our wrestling with the problem of language. Yet, in our postmodern era, the credibility of language itself is called into question. Sign systems collapse. The relationship between the sign and its referent is revealed as not only conventional—the result of social agreement and tradition—but in fact arbitrary. This revelation has been the source of considerable theological anxiety, for as George Steiner reminds us at the outset of *Real Presences*, “any coherent understanding of what language is and how languages performs, . . . any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence.”⁵² So what happens to language, then, when God is understood to be an *absent presence*, “*the presence of an absence*”? How do we make sense of language,

49. *Ibid.*, 177.

50. *Ibid.*, xv.

51. SC, Art. 48 (135); cf. oblation in the 1982 liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church, which puts it thus: “made one with Him, we offer you these gifts, and with them ourselves, a single, holy, living sacrifice.” The congregation along with the gift(s) of the eucharistic elements together comprise the singular offering or sacrifice of the liturgy; both are offered and both are consecrated. In this way, the SEC liturgy admirably portrays the Augustinian truth about the Church receiving, in the Eucharist, that which it is. When the priest says, “the gifts of God for the people of God,” he refers not only to the gifts of bread and wine, but also the gift of *personhood* which, having been consecrated/sanctified, is in the Eucharist offered back to the congregation once again as gift.

52. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 3.

religious, liturgical or otherwise, in a “postmodern” era characterized by the “death,” or at the very least, the *absence* of God?

THE DEATH OF GOD

Keenly aware of the absence of God were the contributors to the “Radical Theology” of North America in the 1960s, who sought to articulate what they perceived as the “Death of God.”⁵³ Radical Theology was less a theological program or “school” and more a general impulse arising during this tumultuous era in Western history.

Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton’s publication of *Radical Theology and the Death of God* in 1966 marks the first expressly theological attempt to account for the experience of the death of God upon the horizon of contemporary life. Like Hegel, Nietzsche and others before them, Altizer and Hamilton attempt to make sense of a world without God—a world which had by that time endured the trauma of two world wars and, with America’s involvement in Vietnam, found itself potentially on the cusp of another. In their introduction, the co-authors lay out ten possible interpretations of what is meant by the “event” of the death of God. We need not catalog them all; a few examples will suffice:

1. That there is no God and that there never has been.
2. That there once was a God to whom adoration, praise and trust were appropriate, possible, and even necessary, but that now there is no such God.
3. That the idea of God and the word God itself are in need of radical reformation. Perhaps totally new words are needed; perhaps a decent silence about God should be observed.

53. Thinkers associated with Radical Theology and/or the Death of God include theologians Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian, and Harvey Cox, biblical scholar Paul Van Buren, and Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein (see Bibliography for selected works). For a definitive collection of essays, see Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Simplifying *ad absurdum*, Paul Tillich is a key theological forebear to the Death of God theologians; followers, who to some degree carry on the mantle of Radical Theology, include Carl Raschke, Mark C. Taylor, Robert Scharlemann, and Charles Winquist. For evidence of the lingering relevance of the kind of thinking initiated by these theologians, see Clayton Crockett, ed., *Secular Theology*. In the UK, the writings of Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson, especially *Honest To God*, caused a similar stir on the cultural landscape, and might be viewed as a British counterpart to the North American “death of God” impulse, albeit from a less academic and more practical and even traditionally ecclesial perspective.

4. That our traditional liturgical and theological language needs an overhaul. . . .
10. . . . that our language about God is always inadequate and imperfect.⁵⁴

So, while the death of God may be understood variously by these thinkers,⁵⁵ ranging from a general tenor of contemporary secular culture to an actual ontic event in the life of God, of particular interest to us is the radical theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer, whose very theological poetics *inscribe* the death of God in such a way that enacts this event within language itself. For Altizer, specifically, the death of God is inextricably bound to Christ’s death on the cross, making his a gospel of profoundly *Christian*, and deeply christological, atheism.

In *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Altizer’s thesis is that a new and radical form of Christianity must be adopted which is free of the tyranny of a judicial God, an originary sacred divine which transcends all time.⁵⁶ If God is to have come in the Incarnation of Christ—the kenotic movement of God from detached divinity into self-annihilation in the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross as the definitive and supreme act of love for the redemption of the world—and if this incarnation is the basis of Christian faith, we must begin to purge faith in Christ from subjugation to the “Christian God.” The atonement, therefore, is essentially the freeing of humanity from God, understood variously as the institutional Church, moral law, the sacrificial system, and so on.

54. Altizer and Hamilton, *Radical Theology*, 14–15.

55. The first book to employ the phrase in its title is Gabriel Vahanian’s *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*, a title which is far more provocative than the book itself. For Vahanian, the death of God is a purely *cultural* phenomenon, marked by the extreme immanentism and secularism that arise in late-modernity. However conservative its claims, the title and subtitle flag up (almost prophetically) two very important concepts for us: that of the *death of God*, and that of a *Post-Christian* age/era/culture. See also Vahanian’s *No Other God*. Interestingly, the death of God, as a movement and as theme for theological thinking, has largely passed into obscurity, having enjoyed an intense but brief day in the sun. The phrase *Post-Christian*, however, has shown more staying power, and continues to be debated and discussed. It has been employed variously to describe everything from sociological interests in declining church attendance in parts of Europe, e.g., Davie, *Religion in Britain* and Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, to theological proposals of something like a Bonhofferian “religionless Christianity,” e.g., Hampson, *After Christianity*, and Cupitt, *After All*, to the more philosophically nuanced thinking of Vattimo, e.g., *After Christianity* and Mark C. Taylor, e.g., *After God*. While we do not take up the theme explicitly here, the notion of “post-Christian sacraments/sacramentality” is a potentially fruitful avenue for further exploration.

56. Altizer, *Christian Atheism*.