POSTMODERN SACRAMENTO-THEOLOGY RETELLING THE CHRISTIAN STORY

The neologism “postmodern sacramento-theology” is meant to indicate the basic sacramental structure of religious life, thinking and activity as a point of departure for theology. From this contribution, one should not expect a “sacramental theology” or a “theology of the sacraments” but a specific perspective from which to theologise as such. Every expression about God, whether in word or deed, needs to be called sacramental and thus submitted to sacramento-theological reflection to the degree that it is inscribed in, and realises the mutual involvement of human beings and God. Thus considered, every theology is sacramento-theology, and sacramentology is no longer only, or mainly, a single theological discipline, but an essential feature of the fundamental or systematic theology to be set forth momentarily.

The term “postmodern” indicates the resolute contextual footing that this theology pursues, rooted in the conviction that Christian faith, and the Christian tradition, always bear a context from which they can never be separated. It is only thanks to a context that Christian faith can take form and be handed down through the centuries. Tradition, as movement through time, can be described as a process of recontextualisation which must be renewed each time there is a shift in context or “horizon of understanding”¹. Often when contextual sensibilities shift, the dominant form of tradition loses plausibility, bringing forth experiences of alienation. It is only by seeking a new relation between the received tradition and the changed context that lost authenticity can be regained². From such a perspective, the adage *philosophia ancilla theologiae* remains valuable today for a theology which understands itself as *fides quaerens intellectum*. As the reflective clarification of a general contemporary sensibility, philosophy and the human sciences provide theology with contextually plausible models, patterns and strategies for thought, and a vocabulary for

* Revised version of a paper presented at the 52th Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, June 5-8, 1997, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It presents the main lines of an interdisciplinary research project at the Faculty of Theology, K.U.Leuven.

1. So E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Mensen als verhaal van God*, Baarn, Nelissen, 1989, p. 35; for the development of tradition as a “fusion of horizons”, see pp. 59-63; ET: *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. J. Bowden, London, SCM, 1990, pp. 40-45. Schillebeeckx owes this theory to H.-G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1960.

2. For this whole paragraph, see L. BOEVE, *Erfgenaam en erflater. Kerkelijke tradities binnen de Traditie*, in H. LOMBAERTS – L. BOEVE (eds.), *Traditie en initiatie. Perspectieven voor de toekomst*, Leuven, Acco, 1996, 43-77; *Kan traditie veranderen? Theologie in het postmoderne tijdsgewricht*, in *Collationes* 26 (1996) 365-385.

recontextualisation. As the critical consciousness of a context, philosophy is often of particular value for clarifying the experiences and effects of alienation which accompany a paradigm shift³. This is certainly the case for what is sometimes called the *postmodern* critical consciousness.

The programme to which the expression “postmodern sacramento-theology” refers can thus be described as follows: engaging in a reflection, from within the Christian tradition, on the possibility of being related to the sacred under contemporary conditions which involves a redefinition of the transcendent in the postmodern context. In the following, I attempt to outline this programme. To begin with, I will explore the basic structure by which theologians have until now articulated the sacramentality of existence. This must include some attention to the integration of modern sensibility in recent decades. I will then turn to the postmodern critique of the modern master narratives which to a significant degree also applies to the Christian narrative. After an analysis of postmodern critical consciousness, I will sketch the opportunities for recontextualising theological reflection on the sacramentality of life. This last point constitutes the meaning and sense of a “postmodern sacramento-theology”.

I. THE SHIFT FROM A PREMODERN TO A MODERN OUTLINE OF (SACRAMENTAL) THEOLOGY

1. *The Persistence of the Premodern Sacramento-theological Structure*

In spite of the reception of modern elements into theology and Christian praxis, especially after Vatican II⁴, the prevalent sacramentological interpretation of symbols and rituals used in the celebration of the Christian sacraments has remained virtually premodern. The underlying idea was that the holy or the sacred constituted a realm of its own, transcending the

3. Cf. L. BOEVE, *Bearing Witness to the Differend: A Model for “Postmodern” Theologizing*, in *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995) 362-379, esp. pp. 363-368. For the notion of “paradigm shift”, see Hans Küng’s reception of Th. Kuhn, in H. KÜNG – D. TRACY (eds.), *Theologie – wohin? Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Paradigma*, Gütersloh, Mohn, 1984; ID. (eds.), *Das neue Paradigma von Theologie. Strukturen und Dimensionen*, Gütersloh, Mohn, 1986; ET: *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, Edinburgh, Clark, 1989; and H. KÜNG, *Theologie im Aufbruch. Eine ökumenische Grundlegung*, München – Zürich, Piper, 1987.

4. In order to regain the theoretical credibility and practical relevance of Christianity in Modern times theologians have often sought a rapprochement with a range of modern ideas. Generally speaking, they have tended to reshape theology in accord with the modern turn to a subject-centered worldview. Concretely, this meant leaving behind more Scholastic thought-patterns, and entering into dialogue with Kant and Hegel, existentialism and personalism, Marxism and neo-Marxism. The systematic theologies of Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Johann Baptist Metz, and Hans Küng are the offspring of such endeavors.

mundane, and that this source of wholeness is accessible to us through the enactment of ritual gestures, images, and words.

An unspoken but defining feature of this sacramentology, or more generally, sacramento-theology, is a neo-Platonic cosmology, or onto(theo)logy. According to the latter, all creatures are ordered by the quality of their being, and can thus be located on a continuum flowing from God (πρόοδος / *exitus*) and returning to God (ἐπιστροφή / *reditus*). The fundamental idea here is that of the *analogia entis*, a consequence of the emanation of beings from an original being. Although mediaeval theologians highly nuanced this neo-Platonic scheme (e.g., from the perspective of a theology of creation stressing the *creatio ex nihilo*), it remained the basic paradigm for understanding the relation between God and the world⁵. In theological epistemology, this neo-Platonic framework formed the foundation of theological knowledge. It is in light of this scheme that Thomas Aquinas' perspective on the analogy has been generally received. According to Aquinas, we can justly attribute to God such "simple perfections" as goodness, wisdom... which are attributes borrowed from human experience and expression, because these perfections, according to the *analogia entis*, exist preeminently in God already before creation: "Whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of the order that creatures have to God as to their source and cause in which all the perfections of things pre-exist transcendentally"⁶. To be sure, negative theology does nuance the pretensions of this claim, but within the neo-Platonic scheme this does not change the definition of the onto(theo)logical foundation it implies. The logical order which human experience discovers to be discontinuous, because there is no univocity in speech about God, nonetheless reaches God, because that discontinuous *logical* order rests on a continuous *ontological* order. Within a neo-Platonic framework, the being of that which is caused depends first on the being of the cause, or source: hence, understood from the neo-Platonic basic paradigm, there is a background "logic of the same"; ultimately theology is necessarily a homology. In this perspective, theological truth is supported by ontology. This same principle also holds for sacramentology: "The sacramental event can be understood in neo-Platonic terms as the illumination of the single hidden origin in the "being, living and thinking" of contingent beings, an illumination through which these same beings become transparent to the primordial ground which shines through them"⁷. More specifically,

5. That this could be the case for Thomas Aquinas follows from the study of F. O'ROURKE, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, Leiden, Brill, 1992.

6. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 13, art. 5 (ed. Blackfriars in conjunction with London, Eyre & Spottiswoode – New York, McGraw-Hill, Vol. 3, trans. H. McCabe, 1964, p. 53).

7. G. DE SCHRIJVER, *Experiencing the Sacramental Character of Existence: Transitions from Premodernity to Modernity, Postmodernity, and the Rediscovery of the Cosmos*, in J. LAMBERTS (ed.), *Current Issues in Sacramental Theology*, Leuven, Abdij Keizersberg – Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, 1994, pp. 12-27, esp. 13; = *Questions Liturgiques* 75 (1994) 12-27, p. 13.

sacraments function as events which bring believers into harmony with this origin, and do so in a reality which possesses a general sacramental structure because of the driving force which extends from the God-origin to beings, and of the transparency of those beings towards the God-origin. In such a context, sacramental grace is defined according to a causality-scheme: sacraments institute harmony with the origin. Sacraments, as means of divine salvation for humankind, are not only the signs (*signum*) of grace but also what exercise or realise it (*causa*). It is in the sacrament itself, which “causes/realises what it signifies”, that grace comes to us⁸. Sacraments stand in the *exitus* from God and they lead back toward God (*reditus*). According to Thomas Aquinas, God is the *causa principalis* of the grace which occurs in and through the sacraments (which can thus be defined as *causae instrumentales*). Only God, he says, can produce grace – “as fire warms by virtue of its own heat”. “For grace”, he concludes, “is nothing else than a certain shared similitude to the divine nature”⁹. Sacraments are the instruments by means of which God produces grace¹⁰. Their original impetus comes forth from God.

As I have already mentioned, such premodern thought patterns continue to determine sacramentology and theology in general even after Vatican II. I refer, for example, to the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar¹¹, and to the penetrating study by Georges De Schrijver on the crucial role played by *analogia entis* in von Balthasar’s thought¹². The same principle is also operative in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger¹³. For Ratzinger is convinced that the dialogue between Judeo-Christian biblical faith and

8. This point is worked out in L.-M. CHAUVET, *Symbole et sacrement. Une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne*, Paris, Cerf, 1990, esp. pp. 13-49 (chapter 1: “Critique des présupposés onto-théologiques de la sacramentaire classique”); ET: *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1995, pp. 7-45.

9. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 62, art. 1 (cf. n. 6, Vol. 56, trans. D. Bourke, 1975, p. 53). See also art. 2: “considered in itself grace perfects the essence of the soul in virtue of the fact that this participates, by way of a kind of likeness, in the divine being. And just as it is from the essence of the soul that its powers flow, so too it is from grace that there flow into the powers of the soul certain perfections called the virtues and Gifts, by which those powers are perfected so as to achieve a further fulfillment in the acts proper to them” (p. 58). Sacramental grace adds something over and above the grace of the virtues and the Gifts, “namely a special kind of divine assistance to help in attaining the end of the sacrament concerned” (p. 59).

10. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 53-54: “this is the way in which the sacraments of the New Law cause grace. For it is by divine institution that they are conferred upon man for the precise purpose of causing grace in and through them.... Now the term ‘instrument’ in its true sense is applied to that through which someone produces an effect”.

11. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. Fächer der Stile*, Einsiedeln, Johannes, 1962; *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. Im Raum von Metaphysik*, Einsiedeln, Johannes, 1965.

12. G. DE SCHRIJVER, *Le merveilleux accord de l'homme et de Dieu. Étude de l'analogie de l'être chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (BETL, 63), Leuven, University Press – Peeters, 1983.

13. See, e.g., J. RATZINGER, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie*, München, Wewel, 1982.

Hellenistic (neo-Platonic) philosophy has been providential. Greek thinking has an eternal value for Christianity because it helped to establish its original form. In Ratzinger's neo-Platonic and Augustinian vision of the world reality possesses a binary, polar, structure which is fundamentally asymmetrical and hierarchical¹⁴. The world radiates from a more real and more intelligible reality, from which it came forth and to which it returns. Our world is said to be sacramentally structured in the sense that it points transparently to the eternal. In this connection, Ratzinger speaks of the "sacramental grounding of human existence": "in the illumination of the world towards its eternal basic foundation, the human person also experiences who he or she really is: someone called by and to God". Sacraments aim consequently at the "Einfügung in den durchgottete Kosmos"¹⁵.

2. *The Integration of Modern Sensibilities*

Many modern theologians have reacted against this theology of the "transcendence" of the holy and have rejected its premodern dualist, static, and ahistorical conceptions looking for approaches that are more attentive to modern sensibilities. Yet here too, and despite modern accents, there often is an important, implicit neo-Platonic onto-theological premise. Methodologically, many theologians in one way or another enter into dialogue with contemporary philosophy and human sciences. The anthropological foundation of the sacraments is one of the most prominent outcomes of this endeavor: they are often explained as rituals pregnant with individual as well as collective meaning. But theological legitimation of this move is frequently carried out by recourse to (rejuvenated) classic ontological schemes.

The theology of Karl Rahner, for example, which undertakes a unique and successful dialogue with modern philosophy and anthropology¹⁶, rests precisely on such a scheme. Rahner's transcendental theology presents a dynamised and subjectified (or personalised) reflection on the relation between God and humans in a fundamental way, thus opening a place for both the human experience of freedom and the sacramental event¹⁷. Still, the self-communication of God as grace-filled presence

14. See L. BOEVE, *Kerk, theologie en heilswaarheid. De klare visie van Joseph Ratzinger*, in *TT* 33 (1993) 139-165 (with a summary in English), esp. pp. 147-149 and 160.

15. J. RATZINGER, *Die sakramentale Begründung christlicher Existenz* (Mietinger Kleinschriften), Freising, ²1967, pp. 18-19 (my translation).

16. Cf., e.g., K. RAHNER, *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Freiburg, Herder, 1976, pp. 35-36; ET: *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. W.V. Dych, New York, Crossroad, 1984, pp. 24-25: "The Interlocking of Philosophy and Theology".

17. For a concise account of Rahner's sacramentology and its promise, see L. LEIJSEN, *Rahner's Contribution to the Renewal of Sacramentology*, in *Philosophy & Theology* 9 (1995) 201-222.

appearing to a fundamental human autonomy must be understood within the framework of neo-Platonic onto-theology: attempting to conceptualise the ontological essence of the self-communicating God, Rahner writes “that in this self-communication, God in his absolute being is related to the created existent in the mode of formal causality [in contrast with the efficient causality in which something caused is distinguished from the cause], that is, that he does not originally cause and produce something different from himself in the creature, but rather that he communicates his own divine reality and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfillment of the creature”¹⁸. God’s self-communication, God’s grace, is for Rahner an inner, constitutive principle of humanity given freely by God. Wherever people open themselves fully to God, the sacramentality of the whole of existence – the self-communication of God to the whole of existence – comes to light. In this connection, the sacraments are “nothing else but God’s efficacious word to man, the word in which God offers himself to man and thereby liberates man’s freedom to accept God’s self-communication by his own act”¹⁹. Hence Rahner’s modern sacramentological approach is carried out against a background which remains primarily classic.

Somewhat stronger accents of modernity can be found in the work of theologians who no longer focus on the human subject as such, but instead begin from its social and radical-historical rootedness. Still more than others, these theologians see rituals and symbols no longer as merely rendering the holy present in its salvific immediacy, but, in line with the modern conception of time, as the germinal break-through of a fullness that is yet to come – this is the full realisation of God, humans, history and the world respectively: in short, the advent of the reign of God on earth, whether or not tempered by an eschatological proviso. As opposed to what may be considered the de-historicised and spiritualised concept of grace in more traditional theologies, these theologians stress the this-worldliness, historicity and materiality of Christian salvation.

18. RAHNER, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (n. 16), p. 121. In the next paragraph Rahner situates the ontological foundation and legitimation in the transcendental experience of the order of every finite being toward the absolute being and mystery of God. As such, transcendence, in a first movement toward the creature, underpins the transcendental movement toward transcendence.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 390. On the sacrament as “real symbol”, see *Überlegungen zum personalen Vollzug des sakramentalen Geschehens*, in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. X, Einsiedeln, Benzinger, 1972, pp. 405-429, esp. 422-423; ET: *Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event*, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIV, trans. D. Bourke, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, pp. 161-184, esp. 177-178. Rahner here attempts to revise the causality-model in which the sacraments have been conceived (“sacraments cause what they signify”): the grace for which the sacrament stands is distinguished precisely where the individual person takes up the freedom and free choice which God has bequeathed to him or her, such that he or she is thus brought to the fullness of human personhood.

One of the most important theologians in this respect, Edward Schillebeeckx²⁰, points out that “modern believers can trace a forerunner of divine salvation in freedom which is realised in socio-political action. Here the divine reality proves itself to be a *reality*, as the one who wills good and opposes evil, the liberator from alienation. Thus the history of human liberation can become a ‘disclosure’ in which man learns to recognise God as the one who wills the *complete* liberation of man”²¹. In this sense, “orthopractic” human love “becomes the *sacrament* of God’s redemptive love”. Rather than leading immediately to harmony, this love leaves us restless, “so long as salvation is not realised universally and completely for each and every individual”²². But despite this restlessness, already in today’s experiences of human love and liberation, even in conditions of suffering, guilt, and death, there appear fragments of eschatological joy. From this perspective, Schillebeeckx situates the sacraments as “anticipatory, mediating signs of salvation, that is, healed and reconciled life”²³. The sacraments and the liturgy are essential elements in the living relationship to hope for eternal salvation and redemption. They are prophetic forms of protest against the unredeemed character of history and they call for a praxis of liberation. “So if it is rightly performed”, Schillebeeckx continues, “there is in Christian sacramental symbolic action a powerful symbolic potential which can integrate politics and mystics (albeit in secular forms). In remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ which was brought to a triumphal conclusion by God – as promise for us all – in their liturgy, Christians celebrate their particular connection with this Jesus and in it the possibility of creative liberation and reconciliation in our human history”²⁴.

Johann Baptist Metz relies on the commemorative-narrative dimension of the sacraments. For him, they are the privileged locus of the narrative tradition concerning the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*. By means of their narrativity, sacraments enable people to participate in dangerous and subversive but at the same time liberating memories of the fact that there is hope and a future for all. In this way, they also mobilise energy for acts of liberation²⁵. “Perhaps the ceremonial-ritualistic

20. This applies especially to Schillebeeckx’s later writings, beginning in the 1970s, and not to his first sacramentological writings.

21. E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. J. Bowden, New York, Crossroad, 1989, p. 814 (ET of *Gerechtigheid en liefde. Genade en bevrijding*, Bloemendaal, Nelissen, 1977).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 834.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 836.

24. *Ibid.*

25. See also F. SCHUPP, *Glaube – Kultur – Symbol. Versuch einer kritischen Theorie sakramentaler Praxis*, Düsseldorf, Patmos, 1974, esp. p. 258ff. (Teil 2: “IV. Symbol und Aufklärung”). Schupp enters into dialogue with Kant’s “Critique of Judgment” and representatives of the Frankfurt School on the possibility of rehabilitating symbols and sacraments (the biblical-symbolic potential of reconciliation) anamnestic-anticipatorially in the light of a social praxis.

aspect in the sacrament does not elucidate clearly enough that sacraments are also macro-signs of salvation narratives". Metz continues: "It is probably of major importance to elaborate more explicitly the basic narrative structure of the sacrament – not only with a view to theological clarification of the relation between word and sacrament, but especially also with a view to Christian praxis itself: in this way the sacrament can possibly be related to narratives of life and suffering and in them be explained as salvation narrative"²⁶.

Yet despite their attempts to embrace modernity, the approaches of Schillebeeckx and Metz have their weaknesses. It has been argued, e.g., that Schillebeeckx has failed to distance himself from a premodern conception of reality. In a study on the theological premises of Schillebeeckx, De Schrijver points to such an ambivalence in his thinking. While Schillebeeckx does recontextualise ethical praxis in line with modern developments, this seems not to have occurred on the theoretical level. Despite his modern hermeneutical perspective, he ultimately maintains a worldview in which God is still the highest being. This leads De Schrijver to the observation that "Schillebeeckx's vision of our processes of experience and explanation of the world is directed ultimately to the experience and recognition of a God who makes himself known to us as the God of salvation by means of a salvation history. God is the highest 'object' of human experience, however much His immediate inclination toward us is comprehended only according to the medium (or means) of our creaturely dependence"²⁷.

For his part, Metz, at least after 1985²⁸ and in accord with his resolute option for a narrative-practical approach, seems to have left no room for posing the classic metaphysical questions. On a more reflective-theoretical level, he goes no further than an affirmation that the history of suffering

26. J.-B. METZ, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, Mainz, Matthias Grünewald, 1977, p. 185; ET: *Faith in History and Society. Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. D. Smith, New York, Seabury Press, 1980, p. 208 (translation corrected).

27. G. DE SCHRIJVER, *Hertaling van het Christus-gebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?*, in E. KUYPERS (ed.), *Volgens Edward Schillebeeckx*, Leuven – Apeldoorn, Garant, 1991, 53-90, esp. p. 82 (my translation). Where Schillebeeckx "concerns himself with the mutual relationship between God and the world", De Schrijver feels compelled to "raise questions. In my opinion, such points reveal a style of thought taking very little account of the Enlightenment legacy of a cleft between old and new religious worldviews.... A revision of the manner in which God, person and world relate to one another, and with which modern cosmology and philosophy are occupied, is apparently not on [Schillebeeckx's] agenda. Still, one might wonder how meaningful many Christians of today will find a God who is the primordial source of the world outside of the world, and who lets himself be known only as gracious presence and creative power. Some might well propose that the old philosophical theism must now be considered untenable in an age when many have begun to discover a world-immanent piety far removed from classical theism" (pp. 78-79; my translation).

28. Cf. J.-B. METZ, *Unterwegs zu einer nachidealistischen Theologie*, in J.B. BAUER (ed.), *Entwürfe der Theologie*, Graz, Styria, 1985, pp. 209-233.

comprises dangerous memories which, when spoken out, recall us of God's universal salvific will (which would then underpin the subjectivity of all). Instead of elaborating a truly systematic theology, Metz contents himself with presenting challenging theological intuitions, such as "interruption"²⁹.

Perhaps for reasons to be explained within modernity itself, a sacramento-theological recontextualisation in full discussion with modernity has not yet been fully completed. Nevertheless, a number of modern accents have been introduced including historicity, this-worldliness, the primacy of praxis, futurity, attention to suffering: all of which have been remarkably promising stimuli for fruitful theologising. Nonetheless, theologians remaining firm and explicit in their commitment to a premodern sacramental structure ignore or rule out these modern intuitions. The result is a stark divide in the theological landscape between modern and antimodern³⁰.

II. THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT: MODERN MASTER NARRATIVES AND CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Our definition of "postmodernity" focuses on the manifest loss of plausibility of the so-called modern master narratives (as well as the erosion of the reactionary antimodern narratives). According to Jean-François Lyotard³¹, this is due to the emergence of "counter-examples" which have made it clear that modernity could not fulfill its own promises.

29. Cf. J.-B. METZ, *Unterbrechungen. Theologisch-politische Perspektiven und Profile*, Gütersloh, Mohn, 1981. Elsewhere I have pointed out how Metz's intuitions in fact stand in need of further reflective clarification, as would become clear were he to enter into dialogue with the critical voices of postmodern thought. Cf. L. BOEVE, *Lyotard's Critique of Master Narratives: Paving the Way for a Postmodern Political Theology?*, in G. DE SCHRIJVER (ed.), *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Ground* (BETL, 135), Leuven, University Press – Peeters, 1998, pp. 296-314. One dialogue partner certainly promising considerable insight and stimulus would be the postmodern, language-pragmatic philosophy of Lyotard. But Metz is resolute in his refusal of all such dialogues. Cf. J.-B. METZ, *Wohin ist Gott, wohin denn der Mensch?*, in F.-X. KAUFMANN – J.-B. METZ, *Zukunftsfähigkeit. Suchbewegungen im Christentum*, Freiburg, Herder, 1987, pp. 124-147, esp. 141; and *Die Verantwortung der Theologie in der gegenwärtigen Krise der Geisteswissenschaften*, in H.-P. MÜLLER (ed.), *Wissen als Verantwortung. Ethische Konsequenzen des Erkennens*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1991, 113-126, p. 122.

30. For an overview of these theological positions, cf. D. TRACY, *On Naming the Present*, in *Concilium* 25 (1990), no. 1, 66-85. Tracy distinguishes modern, antimodern and postmodern theologies, and then sketches the first two positions in contrast to one another.

31. Cf. J.-F. LYOTARD, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Minuit, 1979; ET: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington, Manchester, University Press, 1984; *Le différend*, Paris, Minuit, 1983; ET: *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G. Van den Abbeele, Manchester, University Press, 1988; *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance 1982-1985*, Paris, Galilée, 1986; ET: *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. D. Barry, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Moreover, such examples often support the idea that those promises themselves stood in our way³². Lyotard analyses all master narratives under either of two main types. On the one hand, he identifies narratives of rationality and technology which aim at complete transparency and thereby at an unlimited mastery and use of reality. On the other hand, he examines master narratives of emancipation which promote a utopic image of some human fulfillment, then develop on that basis a critical relation to the past and the present, and finally unfold a strategy for realising utopia. An example of the first type is Hegelian idealism which would legitimate all knowledge of nature, society and state by situating it in the development of the life of the Spirit (*Geist*), and also scientific positivism, with its many and diverse reductionisms (evolutionism, sociobiologism...), all of which offer us a conclusive explanation and an efficient course of action. Illustrations of the second type of master narratives include the different societal ideologies from the 19th and 20th centuries which reflect what is considered to be the ultimate aim of the human person and society: individual freedom for liberalism, complete solidarity for communism, or general welfare for capitalism, etc. Master narratives display absolute, universal and cognitive pretensions, and reduce everything to the inner definition of a single narrative³³. And it is precisely these pretensions that appear to be false. Insofar as premodern narratives also remain active in modernity, they share in these characteristics. Pre-modern narratives have likewise reduced everything into what is defined solely or ultimately according to a single master narrative.

The loss of plausibility in master narratives is coupled with a growing consciousness of: (1) the fundamental plurality of the postmodern condition, (2) the radical particularity and contextuality of one's own narrative, and (3) the irreducible heterogeneity which emerges in the midst of that

32. Cf. LYOTARD, *Le différend*, pp. 257-258, no. 257. As Lyotard points out: the speculative principle that all that is rational is real and vice versa (Hegel) has since been refuted by Auschwitz; the Marxist historical-materialist teaching that every proletarian is a communist and vice versa was discredited in Berlin (1953), Budapest (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Poland (1980); the liberal parliamentary ideal of democracy of the people, for the people and by the people was struck a blow by the events of May 1968 in Paris; the different versions of economic liberalism arguing that the free market of supply and demand could insure general welfare were contested by the economic crises of 1911, 1929 and 1974-1979. The alleged fulfillment of all these promises has brought us nothing but blood and misery.

33. From Lyotard's perspective, all of this can also be said of the Christian narrative. Consider the following summary list of master narratives: "the Christian narrative of redemption of the Adamic fault (*la faute*) by love, the *Aufklärer* narrative of emancipation from ignorance and servitude by understanding and egalitarianism, the speculative narrative of the realisation of the universal Idea by the dialectic of the concrete, the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation by the socialisation of labor, the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty by the techno-industrial advancement" (*Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, p. 47; my translation).

plurality and which precipitates a specific contemporary critical consciousness.

(1) The fundamental plurality of the postmodern condition follows from the experience that each perspective seems to have equal legitimacy and worth, even if they are nonetheless incompatible. This basic experience presents itself across an extremely diverse range of domains in the human life-world: politics, economy, leisure, forms of personal and communal relationships, art, education, science... There is no longer a universal perspective, there are no all-encompassing patterns of integration possessing universal and objectively determinable validity. Each claim to universality and totality is unmasked as the absolutisation of what is in reality a particular point of view. "Henceforth truth, justice and humanity are plural"³⁴.

(2) Insight into the fundamental plurality of our postmodern condition simultaneously reveals that all discourse and narrative are necessarily particular and contingent. This holds even for our "founding" narratives in which we ourselves, our community, and our history are described and redescribed. Not even a narrative of plurality exceeds the limits of a specific context. There is thus no universal perspective, no fixed kernel, no irreducible substrate of truth to be expressed, not even if one were to grant that such a claim would always have to be renewed or revised with each new shift or change in context³⁵.

The decline of the master narratives does not mean the end of narratives that institute and support the integration of individual and collective identity. Narratives continue to be told, and identity is still established. But insofar as they are conscious of plurality and contingency, these narratives can no longer maintain their former pretensions to complete transparency and unqualified pursuit of clarification and mastery. They no longer present themselves as founded in reality or somehow representing "what really is". Their plausibility means *contextual* plausibility. The multiplicity of particular narratives relativises the possible pretensions of each narrative, but without leading to radical relativism – for this standpoint still lays claim to the position of general observer. Since we cannot abstract from our own narrative, it must be that all other narratives will *not* hold equal worth to us. We are always rooted in a context, and our reflectivity is context-bound: we take distance in the midst of our attachments and rootedness.

(3) Consciousness of both irreducible plurality and undeniable particularity arise from our confrontation with irreducible otherness, and thus from the experience of conflict, since plurality necessarily entails conflict.

34. W. WELSCH, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim, VCM, 1987, p. 5 (my translation).

35. An incisive account of this particularity and contextuality can be found in the work of Richard RORTY, particularly in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, University Press, 1989.

In the encounter with another discourse or narrative, which by definition constantly resists reduction to our own discourse or narrative, there appears an unconquerable fundamental heterogeneity which in turn points inexorably to the limits of our own narrative. It is a sensitivity to this experience and what it implies that prevents us from falling back into hegemony ever again, or at least keeps us vigilant against the constant tendency of all narratives to do so. This sensitivity can also motivate a critical evaluation of contemporary hegemonic narratives, which forget or ignore otherness, either by enclosing it in a single narrative or by excluding it entirely.

If plausibility is necessarily contextual plausibility, then the present Christian narrative may no longer be capable of offering orientation and integration in a plausible way. Up until now, this narrative has most often answered the challenges of our condition by grafting itself onto modern master narratives of emancipation (which have now become implausible), or by hardening itself into an antimodern Christian narrative still embedded in premodern frameworks. According to the first response, Christian love is identified with striving for human freedom and liberation; according to the second, we rather meet an ontologically secured hegemonic Christian narrative of absolute truth. But both narratives suffer from a loss of plausibility since they too easily maintain a pretension to universality, cognitivist description, and hegemony. Because of their lack of unconditional openness for otherness, they fail to conceive of themselves as radically particular and contextual narratives figured on the field of irreducible plurality.

III. POSTMODERN SACRAMENTO-THEOLOGY

Still, this need not mean the end of the Christian narrative as such. A shift in context does imply a loss of plausibility, but it also represents a challenge to renew the effort of recontextualisation, to look for a new relation between the received tradition and the changed context. In post-modern cultural-philosophical reflection, it may happen that the theologian finds a new impetus to interpret the Christian tradition in such a way that within a context of plurality it again inspires people who are searching for integration and orientation, but now without falling prey to the hegemonic schemes of master narratives. This implies that the Christian narrative becomes reflectively aware of its own particularity and contextuality, and that it reconceptualises its claims to universality and comprehensiveness. This leads us to the following considerations: (1) first I intend to deepen the sense of the critical thought-patterns specific to our new context and thus available for theological recontextualisation; (2-3) then I will sketch the outline of such a recontextualisation.

(1) As I have noted, the postmodern consciousness of radical plurality has led diverse authors (for example, Lyotard, Derrida, Levinas, Foucault³⁶) towards an increased sensitivity to “alterity”, “otherness”, and “heterogeneity”, to what is “different”, or “that which cannot be made one’s own without negating it”. In Lyotard’s vocabulary, this is designated by the “différend”³⁷ and, in the aesthetic realm, the “sublime”³⁸. A reflection which takes as its point of departure this sharpened sensitivity to “heterogeneity”, if it is consistent, inevitably comes to the understanding of its own particularity, limitedness, and contingency. The plot of a narrative of difference and otherness becomes itself interrupted by an irreducible heterogeneity. In his “language pragmatics” in which he considers human existence as grasped in language, Lyotard presents us with a schematic representation of this situation. A brief look at it gives a vivid illustration of much of what is involved in a thinking of radical heterogeneity and alterity.

For Lyotard, multiplicity is not a static but a dynamic reality. He attempts to clarify this by examining what takes place during the act and process of speaking where one sentence follows another. This sequence does not simply transpire by design. After a certain sentence “A” (already belonging to a specific order of sentences: descriptive, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory, etc.), in principle, numerous sentences can follow and all according to the nature of the discourse-type which regulates the “linking” of the sentences. Examples of such discourse-types include narrative, argument, prayer, education, and humor. What is specific to plurality, according to Lyotard, consists in the fact that the many discourse-types are heterogeneous and incommensurable with one another without any single one of them enjoying any special privilege. All discourse-types possess an equal right to provide the conditions for linking one sentence to the next. All that is assured is *that* a sentence always follows (even silence is a sentence) but not *which* sentence follows. This means that there always occurs a moment of indeterminacy between two sentences. Every sentence arouses an immediate expectation; every new sentence implies an “event”. The nature of the new sentence which is to fulfill the expectation aroused by the former sentence is always contingent. Two sentences are thus separated by an elusive moment of relative nothingness. This, however, can just as well be called absolute fullness in the sense of a moment of irrecoverable heterogeneity, or difference: unutterable, inexpressible, irreducible, in short, an “event”.

36. All of whom, insofar as they privilege difference over identity, side with Heidegger against Hegel.

37. Cf. LYOTARD, *Le différend* (n. 31) and *Judicieux dans le différend*, in Id. et. al., *La faculté de juger*, Paris, Minuit, 1985, 195-236.

38. J.-F. LYOTARD, *L'inhumain. Causeries sur le temps*, Paris, Galilée, 1988; *Leçons de l'analytique du sublime*, Paris, Galilée, 1991. ET: *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991; *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. E. Rottenberg, Stanford, University Press, 1994.

Understood in this way, plurality implies conflict, irreconciliation, even irreconcilability. Regardless of how it may be considered, each choice for a specific sentence to establish a link unjustly resolves a conflict (a “differend”), at least insofar as other, diverse but equally legitimate possibilities are also at hand. In other words, the link established between a previous sentence and this specific new one prevents a link actualising other, no less justified possibilities. In the absence of a meta-language or an all-encompassing discourse-type, it is therefore impossible to adequately fill-in the created expectation. No single sentence succeeds in totally expressing the multiplicity of possible linking sentences, or better still, the moment of indeterminacy, of heterogeneity. Here we see the post-modern disavowal of the modern ideal of self-grounding thought worked out in a theory of language: according to Lyotard, no single sentence is capable of pronouncing at the same time its own being-event. The feeling of “it happens” cannot be contained in words, in a sentence. Nor can it be mastered hegemonically. What Lyotard calls the “sensibility for the impossible sentence”, can itself not be stated, but only referred to. One can only bear witness to it; or better still, one *must* bear witness to it. The sense of the event demands witnessing. Moreover, it mobilises action against any hegemonic, totalising discourse that proclaims itself to be the privileged master of all links between sentences. Such a pretense weakens, forgets or even rejects the event as event.

For Lyotard, it is the task of philosophy to bear witness to the event of heterogeneity³⁹. Contemporary philosophy would then need to fashion its discourse so that its structure expresses an openness to otherness, though of course the particularity of any philosophy always threatens to close it again. For in its attempt to express the inexpressible (or the fact that there is something inexpressible), philosophy necessarily reduces or betrays it. On the other hand, this is also precisely the moment in which philosophy comes up against its own particularity and thereby points beyond it, to the fact that something always escapes it. Lyotard adds that it is certainly

39. Lyotard himself does so in a two-fold manner. We have just illustrated his language-pragmatic approach; in addition to this, he also develops a postmodern aesthetics of the sublime, in which the sublime is conceptualised as an analogue to the event of heterogeneity. Essential for a postmodern aesthetics is the irresolvable tension between the impossibility of rendering the un-presentable in sentences, colors, sounds, and images and the strong sense that this must nonetheless be done. On this, see, among many others, *Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que c'est le postmoderne?*, *Post-scriptum à la terreur et au sublime*, and *Note sur les sens de “post”*, in *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, resp. pp. 11-34, 105-115, and 117-126; and also *Réécrire la modernité*, *L'instant*, Newman, *Le sublime et l'avant-garde*, *Quelque chose comme: “communication... sans communication”*, *Représentation, présentation, imprésentable*, and *Après le sublime, état de l'esthétique*, in *L'inhumain*, resp. pp. 33-55, 89-99, 101-117, 119-129, 131-139, en 147-155; as well as *Anima minima*, in *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, Galilée, 1993, pp. 199-210. A specific, partial study of Kant (on the *Critique of Judgment*, paragraphs 23-29) can be found in *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime*.

conceivable that other discourses might also carry out this task of bearing witness⁴⁰.

In short, a particular narrative cannot fully present the fundamental heterogeneity accompanying it (the ultimate which cannot be mastered or grasped), while at the same time heterogeneity can only be referred to within the limits of this particularity. Even though heterogeneity constantly escapes particular speech, it is only within this speech that the “other” can be spoken about. Heterogeneity, then, can no longer be referred to in terms of “presence”, but only in terms of a “present absence”. Heterogeneity cannot become present in thinking, language, signification, symbol or ritual, but it also cannot be postulated as simply absent. It can be evoked only as absence made present. In this regard, the “other” and the “self” cannot find each other in a higher identity; heterogeneity is in fact precisely that which in principle makes such identity impossible.

(2) Such a dynamic thought pattern, characteristic of postmodern critical consciousness, offers opportunities for a recontextualisation of theology. The tension created by the constant and inevitable escape of heterogeneity from each particular attempt to give it expression can serve as the basis for a reconceptualisation of the dialectical relationship between transcendence and immanence, a relationship that is fundamental for the Christian tradition. The interwovenness of transcendence and immanence comes to expression in the dynamic interplay between the event breaking up the narrative and the narrative’s witness to that event. The transcendent event repeatedly breaks open the immanence of the narrative, while precisely that immanence can, in the effort of bearing witness, define itself in view of that event. Accordingly, the relation between transcendence and immanence is not bi-polar, i.e. considered to be two opposed layers into which all of reality is divided. Instead, transcendence is clarified as an ineffable moment of disruption or interruption in the midst of the immanent reality (of language).

This way of understanding transcendence is theologically fruitful and can prevent theology from becoming hegemonic. It dispossesses theological reflection of the possible pretense that it has made God comprehensible and given a place within the immanence of reality. God is revealed anew in every event of heterogeneity – an event which, for theology, can be defined as the event of grace –, but without implying a localisation of God. The framework of postmodern reflection no longer permits us to think of

40. Lyotard himself claims that one such discourse would be “Jewish thought”; cf. *L’inhumain*, p. 86. For his understanding of what he calls “Jewish thought”, cf. *Heidegger et “les juifs”*, Paris, Minuit, 1988 (ET: *Heidegger and the Jews*, trans. M. Andreas, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990) and *La terre n’a pas de chemins par elle-même* (in *Moralités postmodernes*, pp. 95-102). In both of these texts he calls “Jewish” that which is conscious of the (often forgotten) alterity breaking into one’s own autonomous projects.

God as occupying a localised position or site. In the event of grace, God becomes known as un-represented, hidden, ungraspable and incomprehensible, at the same time opening up an expectation of a God who will come as the limit of, and break into, (worldly) time⁴¹. In this way, theology takes leave of the classical pattern of "homology".

Reconceptualising the relationship of transcendence and immanence is not only promising where it points to a new theological epistemology, but also where one attempts to recontextualise reflection on the sacramentality of life. Here, too, transcendence no longer denotes a premodern, neo-Platonic "presence", or a modern, as it were Hegelian, "identity". In the postmodern context of plurality, transcendence is conceived of in accordance with the event of heterogeneity which confronts us with the particularity and contingency of our own (Christian) engagement with reality. Transcendence, as event, interrupts and disturbs the on-going particular narrative, challenging this narrative to open itself to the heterogeneity which breaks through in that event. The religiously experienced and interpreted relationship to the transcendent can thus no longer be conceived as premodern "participation" in salvific presence, or as modern "anticipation" of the ultimate identity. The Christian narrative which has become conscious of its own particularity and contingency can only adequately relate to the transcendent when it (1) *opens up itself*, cultivating a sort of contemplative openness into which the transcendent as interruptive event can enter, and (2) *bears witness* in a non-hegemonic way to the transcendent with the help of its own, always fragmentary words, images, stories, symbols and rituals⁴². The sacramentality of existence does not offer us insight into some underlying foundational order, legitimating the existing narrative. Nor does it provide the redemption manifestly lacking in an unredeemed world. On the contrary, it opens up precisely that unredeemedness, that moment of interruption, to which no hegemonic narrative does justice. This sacramentality points towards neither an ahistorical ontological depth inviting human similitude, nor a history whose fulfilment is insured through a process of maturation, but instead towards the undermining of such self-assuring human constructions.

In this respect, the postmodern sacramental perception of time no longer reflects a premodern eternal continuum, in which the actual "now"

41. Cf. L. BOEVE, *Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: New Opportunities for Theology?*, in *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997) 447-466.

42. The radicality of negative theology functions as the methodical presupposition of all speech about God. Negative theology functions not purely as supplement to positive speech about God which it then submits to criticism and thus correction. In principle, negative theology problematises (with an eye to God's excess) all speech about God, in a sense preceding it and encompassing it. On this, see L. BOEVE, *Postmodernism and Negative Theology: The A/Theology of the "Open Narrative"*, in *Bijdragen* 58 (1997) 407-425; also K. HART, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge, University Press, 1989.

ceases to be. Nor is sacramental time embedded in a modern perspective of progress that cancels the “now” in function of the future. Rather, sacramental time is the time of the interruptive, apocalyptic “now-moment” (“kairos”), the event which opens up the particular and contingent, placing it in the perspective of the transcendent God, but without nullifying or cancelling its particularity and contingency. The event of grace, or the grace of the event, consists in precisely this: self-enclosed narratives are opened up, and this openness is remembered, experienced and celebrated. Living by this openness to what happens, narratives lose their hegemonic characteristics and become truly “open narratives”.

(3) When “sacramentality” is understood as the interplay of contemplative openness for the event of heterogeneity and the evocative bearing witness to it, then being a Christian can be most adequately described in terms of “sacramental life and thought”, and theology as sacramentology, in a double sense: as reflection on sacramental life and thought on the one hand, and as expression of this sacramental life and thought, on the other. Theology, too, reconstructs itself along the lines of an open narrative, standing in the contemplative openness for what happens and bearing witness to this interruptive event. More specifically, a postmodern sacramentology is then aware of the “interruption” or “disturbance” of the particular narrative through a confrontation with the open non-hegemonic Jesus-narrative. Christian praxis as “*imitatio Christi*” will in this regard be focused on the option for the other, especially the excluded other, as a concrete incarnation of the Other⁴³.

Sacramental celebrations, as moments of condensation of sacramental life and thought, are ritual gatherings where the fundamental faith convictions and insights of the Christian tradition are articulated metaphorically and expressed in symbols and symbolic actions. The basic metaphors of Christianity which concern both creation and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are actualised in a testimonial and narrative way as the interruption and claim by God, summoning us towards conversion, openness and bearing witness. In a Christian perspective, the incarnation stands as the concrete marker of God’s active involvement in the history of humankind. The paschal mystery (crucifixion, death and resurrection) forms the ground of hope for wholeness on behalf of a saving God, even in the experiences of unredeemedness, the hiddenness of God and God’s “present absence”. In each of the sacraments, in a particular way, this “dangerous memory” is commemorated.

43. In this regard, a postmodern theology of the “open narrative” can be considered an authentic recontextualisation of late-modern political theology (see n. 29).

CONCLUSION

In the postmodern context the Christian narrative can regain contextual plausibility only by recontextualising and reconstructing itself as an open narrative. In this regard, it must be able to take distance from premodern and modern ontological foundations, as well as from the modes of legitimation offered by modern philosophies of history. The sacramentality of life, clarified and celebrated in the sacraments, is no longer considered as participation in a divine being, nor anticipation of a self-fulfilling development, but as being involved in the tension arising from the irruption of the divine Other into our human narratives, to which the Christian narrative testifies from of old. Sacramental living and acting thus presuppose the cultivation of a contemplative openness, and testify in word and deed to that which reveals itself in this openness as a trace of God. It goes without saying that such a recontextualisation will have serious consequences for Christian self-awareness, and that such a sacramento-theological structuring of human existence has implications which go beyond a theology of the sacraments.

SUMMARY

- I. The Shift from a Premodern to a Modern Outline of (Sacramental) Theology (327-334)
  - 1. The Persistence of the Premodern Sacramento-theological Structure (327-330)
  - 2. The Integration of Modern Sensibilities (330-334)
- II. The Postmodern Context: Modern Master Narratives and Contemporary Critical Consciousness (334-337)
- III. Postmodern Sacramento-Theology (337-342)
  - Conclusion (343)

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