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THE SACRAMENTAL INTERRUPTION OF RITUALS OF LIFE

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In this article, I will demonstrate that, although current theological reflection on rituals and sacraments cannot deny the importance of anthropological research, at the same time (and more than before) such reflection must pay particular attention to the Christian specificity of the sacramental praxis. The anthropology of rite and ritual can indeed offer a considerable support to the understanding of Christian sacraments, but it will never be quite able to fully grasp their particular meaning for Christians. I will argue that this particular regard for Christian specificity is not a turning back of theology on interdisciplinary (and interreligious) dialogue – in fact, quite the contrary.

To this end, my point of departure will be a critical assessment of an article by Edward Schillebeeckx in which he traces the contours of his new sacramentology.[1] I will question Schillebeeckx's analysis of the current context. Subsequently I will attempt to make clear that it makes a substantial difference to the way in which theology proceeds when a contextual analysis of detraditionalization is done in terms of pluralization rather than secularization. Theology that proceeds from the latter analysis, such as modern correlation theologies, tends to stress the continuity between Christian belief and context. Anti-modern and (chronologically) post-modern theologians also start from the same analysis but plead for an absolute discontinuity between Christianity and secular context. In this contribution, it is my aim to show that a theology that takes hold of a contextual analysis in terms of pluralization is challenged to adjust its methodological presuppositions. Rather than opting for *either* continuity *or* discontinuity, a theology of 'interruption' paradoxically will consider the relation between Christian faith and contemporary context in terms of both continuity *and* discontinuity.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'RITUALS OF LIFE' AND 'SACRAMENTS'

According to Schillebeeckx, the split between anthropology and theology has resulted in the fact that Christian rituals no longer relate to the day-to-day life of human beings. In this regard, he considers outdated

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faith representations and formulas to be the main cause of people staying away from the sacraments. They leave the church because they feel she no longer succeeds in adequately ritualizing their lives. It is here that Schillebeeckx sets the focus of his new sacramentological project: how can we understand the sacraments today as radically related to, and involved in, day-to-day human life? To answer this question, Schillebeeckx ties into the human (and natural) sciences' study of rituals and rituality (referred to generally as Ritual Studies). Sacraments should therefore be understood first of all in terms of 'ritualization'. This is an anthropological term which asserts that ritual praxis, whether religious or non-religious, is characteristic of human existence and rooted in a complex interplay of bio-physical, socio-biological, psychological, sociological, linguistic and cultural anthropological patterns. Schillebeeckx thus stresses the structural anthropological *necessity* of a Christian sacramental praxis. It is as though he wishes to make clear to those who choose to stay away from such praxis that it is only human to ritualize one's life and that – when properly understood – being a Christian *includes* such participation. In particular, however, Schillebeeckx hopes to find in the diverse disciplines of Ritual Studies the categories to re-assess sacraments in terms of 'ritualization of life'. To this end, he is especially attracted to the definition that 'ritual is *performance*'.

Schillebeeckx thus accentuates the fundamental continuity between the general human structural need for rituality and Christian sacramental praxis, and warns against those who would hold a discontinuity between them.

> A drawback of liturgists and theologians is that they often do not show an interest for what rituality 'in general' is, whereas this, as a structural given, could provide a contribution to their quest for the characteristic significance of their particular ritual traditions.[2]

According to Schillebeeckx, a sympathetic but critical investigation of the results of anthropological research is indispensable to a proper understanding of what goes on, or should go on, in the sacraments. Such a dialogue between theology and anthropology should take place in a reciprocal critical correlation.[3] Only then does it offer theology the possibility to recontextualize itself anew and to adjust the sacramental praxis of the church where necessary. The question remains, however, whether the specific Christian character of the sacraments can indeed be understood and interpreted out of the general structures of ritualizing. In short: what Schillebeeckx is stressing is the irreducible continuity between the human and the Christian. This becomes further evident when Schillebeeckx illustrates his new project and offers a definition of what sacramental praxis means in theological terms:

'In the sacraments, then, lies always a double dimension, an anthropological dimension and a ''theological'' dimension directed

towards God, that *merge together*.'[4] He makes this statement more explicit as follows:

> For Christians, this ritual complex as such is already mediation by God's grace insofar as it is realized in and through the proper performative power of the liturgical performance inspired through Christian belief, and this on a cognitive, emotional and aesthetic level.[5]

Taking insights from Ritual Studies and processing them theologically, the sacraments can then, according to Schillebeeckx, be refreshingly interpreted anew as 'existential–emotive encounters with God'. To Schillebeeckx's credit, he makes clear that in the sacraments theology and anthropology are linked together. On the one hand, generally – anthropologically – speaking, they obey the patterns of ritualizing. On the other hand, at the same time they express the specificity of Christian belief and are a path towards 'encounter with God' and 'knowledge of God'. What is lacking, however, is a further questioning of, and reflection on, the *way* in which these ritual and theological (God-oriented) dimensions go together. What *is* the exact relation between rituality and sacramentality? It is precisely the answer to this that is most needed today. For Schillebeeckx, sacraments are relevant and valuable because they are rituals of life, ritualizing the everyday life of human beings. This I do not dispute. Nonetheless, the question remains: what is it precisely that transforms rituals of life, when practised within the Christian narrative communities, into sacraments? And how can I, theologically, think of this in the most opportune way for our current context?

BACKGROUND TO QUESTIONING THE PRESUMPTION OF CONTINUITY

My question, then, does not pertain to the structural continuity between 'ritualizing' as an anthropological category and the Christian sacramental praxis. Similarly, neither do I contest the fact that theology profits substantially from interdisciplinary research in this regard. More so, it lies at the very heart of the methodological concept of recontextualization which I myself favour.[6] Furthermore, what Schillebeeckx calls the theological dimension (the relation between God and human being/community/world) can reflexively only become clear through an interdisciplinary dialogue with theological finality. It is always as humans and out of the complexity of our human language and life environment that we speak about and to God. On the contrary: it is *precisely* out of such an interdisciplinary dialogue – from the encounter between Christian belief and context – that I ask whether the singular stress placed on the continuity between both is indeed fruitful as a theological and pastoral strategy for today.

One could say that the starting point of Schillebeeckx's reflection is the observation that many (borderline) Catholics no longer participate in Christian rituals because of outdated faith representations and formulas. From a pastoral viewpoint, however, this is not the central problem. One of the biggest problems – at least in my Flemish context – is something else entirely. Sociological data[7] show that while only 9% of the younger generations are in some way or another *committed* to church life and practice, nevertheless 51% of them still get married in church. While only 4% of this generation regularly attend Mass on Sundays (for the entire Flemish population it is 12%), nonetheless the vast majority of babies born (up to 73% as of 1998) continue to be baptized, have their first communion at the age of 7 and are confirmed at the age of 12. The same data show that a lot of the participants at such – still popular – sacramental rituals of life (baptism, marriage, burials) are borderline Catholics, and even non-Catholics participating simply because there are few alternatives outside the Church to celebrate such important life-cycle passages.[8] Given this remarkable discrepancy, sacraments and other Christian rituals, even though still well attended, would appear to function for a lot of participants merely as rituals of life. The Christian narrative and theological dimension seem then to have almost completely vanished.[9] In such circumstances, only the anthropological dimension still functions, separated from the theological dimension of the encounter with the God of Jesus Christ.

Put differently: they work in a *post-Christian* way. Many are not only taking a distance from Christian faith and regular sacramental practice (other than the major life-cycle rituals) because of obsolete imagery and language but rather – and foremost, I would say – because of the processes of detraditionalization which are changing the structure of Flemish society. In this time of individualization and pluralization, resulting from detraditionalization, Christian identity is no longer automatically presumed by birth, but rather involves a conscious choice to be Christian. Structurally speaking, identity today is constructed rather than pre-given or inherited. Seen from the purely anthropological need for ritualizing, it would seem therefore that Christian sacraments are perceived by many participants as available rituals to celebrate life-cycle passages. They are 'commodities' among other rituals – whether profane or from other religious traditions – from among which human beings can choose to ritualize their lives.[10]

Pastorally, therefore, the stress on continuity is *counter-productive*. Of course, theologically speaking, the Christian sacraments ultimately strive towards encounter with God. The celebrations of life in rites and sacraments situate this life with its joys and sorrows, the ordinary and extraordinary, in relation with the God who is disclosed in Jesus Christ as Love. When, however, Christian rituals of life no longer testify to the Christian narrative and the God-oriented dimension, they will have

become, from a theological viewpoint, all too easily *functionalized* – thus reduced to the function and relevance they have for human life and living together. Because Ritual Studies show that human beings need rituality, to neglect this would mean to deny their bio-psychological and socio-biological roots and bring in danger their psychological and social life. Taking this point a little further: ritualizing one's life has a therapeutic impact. However, while it is true that for good psychological and social balance ritualizing inevitably is and works therapeutically, the reverse is not automatically true: those who view rites as merely functional deprive them of their effectiveness, and do not at all manage to evoke their theological dimension. The study of rituality in philosophical anthropology and the human sciences shows that rituals live out of their particular 'incarnation'. Others then radicalize this last track and point to the embeddedness of rituality and tradition, over which participants have no control. Whoever critically and creatively interferes in their constitution and activity, runs the risk of destroying their pre-given fount of sense and meaning. Also such a radicalization, focusing on the pre-givennes and untouchability of our ritual practice, implies from a theological perspective a functionalizing of the Christian sacramental praxis. Here too this praxis is exclusively legitimated from the anthropological maxim that human meaning is always 'incarnated' in already constituted rituals and practices.

Such an anthropological functionalizing of the Christian ritual practice takes on many forms, in Christian as well as non-Christian circles. This applies to so-called progressive trends which state that 'we must make rites because we do not have any (better ones)'. But it also applies to rather conservative tendencies which go on to claim that 'a ritual is something which is completely beyond our control, something structuring our lives, to which we cannot but submit'. Both these positions move exclusively from the anthropological necessity of ritual and situate herein the Christian sacramental praxis. In both cases, rituals become practices that function within a general human perspective, within 'the' anthropological structure of 'the' human being. The Christian narrative framework is then merely a particular filling-in of this structure, a narrative framework which does not really contribute to the core significance and relevance of ritual praxis.

I would not dare to accuse Schillebeeckx of *functionalizing* the Christian sacramental praxis. He indeed pays attention to the theological, God-oriented dimension and develops this from his Jesus-research. But I am left wondering whether his theological method does not work counter-productively. Next to his plea that a sacramental praxis should not be alien to our human existence, will his claim that through this human ritualizing Christians encounter God be sufficiently acknowledged? Can the way in which he is combining the anthropological and the theological dimensions ultimately prevent, then, the theological

dimension from being all too easily forgotten or difficult to situate? Indeed, to many this theological dimension and its accompanying Christian narrativity occur as purely a doubling or a colouring of what is, humanly speaking, already there. This is why, for example, in the pastoral domain of rituals of life the questions sometimes arise as to why the liturgical texts must 'always' be about God or, why readings should come only from the Bible and, why it is not possible to borrow them from other traditions.

ANALYSING THE CURRENT CONTEXT: 'THE SECULAR' FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF PLURALITY

In what follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate that because the context has changed from the time in which Schillebeeckx and theologians of his generation theologized, modern correlation method no longer functions as it should. Theology was considered the fruit of a mutually critical encounter (co-relation) between Christian tradition and the modern secular culture and society in which this tradition found itself. It is not my view that the encounter between tradition and context would no longer function as a motor for recontextualizing, but I do think that its methodological approach should be recalibrated – and this because of the contextual shift from modernity to postmodernity. I will elaborate later on the consequences of this shift for theological methodology. In the next few paragraphs I will examine the ways of analysing the current context.

With what categories then should we interpret the modern context? Most modern and anti-modern theologies, from such authors respectively as Küng, Rahner and Schillebeeckx, or von Balthasar and Ratzinger, start from the premise that the processes of secularization have brought about a split in the pre-modern synthesis between Christianity and culture, between religion and world. The human subject became conscious of its autonomy. It discovered the power of modern reason, science, and technology, and initiated movements of emancipation from whatever could hinder its autonomous self-, and world-, construction. This subject learnt to reflect on its situation, individually as well as collectively, in a secular discourse, and this in respect of the various domains of individual and collective existence, which became functionally differentiated from the (traditional) life-world. It was this human being who, if a believer (because one could live without belief), sought to build relations between this secular construction of meaning and his/her belief. In this regard, modern and anti-modern authors are particularly in disagreement as to what extent the autonomy of the secular should be respected by theology. For modern theologians, modernity was a learning process with which Christians could (and should) enter into fruitful dialogue. For anti-moderns, however, modernity led to human alienation and hubris, both of which theology had to overcome.

In the meantime, the secularization thesis has itself been brought into question. Two of its former protagonists, Harvey Cox and Peter Berger, nowadays distance themselves from it, referring to what they perceive as a large religious revival.[11] The secularization thesis itself, implying the so-called zero-sum theory, stated that modernization consisted of a continually progressing process that would gradually dissipate religion from culture and society. It was claimed that the 'sum' of modernization and religion would always be 'zero': the more religion, the less modernization; and especially the reverse: the more modernization, the less religion. But Cox and Berger today acknowledge that religion survived modernization, even in hyper–modernized places, such as Japan.[12] Instead of a secularization thesis, they now propose a 'desecularization thesis'. Schillebeeckx as well as others[13] also somewhat tend to call upon such a 'desecularization thesis'. Schillebeeckx, for example, doubts whether secularization is a direct cause of the fact that borderline Catholics leave the Christian sacramental praxis (according to him, the problem is, as already mentioned, the Church's unwillingness to revise antiquated faith representations and formulas).[14]

However, I would like to add two notes here. Firstly Berger, remarkably, writes that there are two exceptions to the 'desecularization thesis'. These are, on the one hand, individuals all over the world with Western-oriented, higher education, constituting a kind of international subculture, and on the other hand, Western Europe as a whole, although the situation there is ambiguous. Of course a lot of people have left the Churches, first in Northern European countries and, for some time now, also in the South. Berger speaks in this regard about the formation of a 'massive secular Euro-culture'. All the same he wonders, and here he is supported by European sociologists of religion, whether secularization is indeed the adequate term to interpret these developments. This is because

> a body of data indicates strong survivals of religion, most of it generally Christian in nature, despite the widespread alienation from the organized churches. A shift in the institutional location of religion, then, rather than secularization, would be a more accurate description of the European situation.[15]

Secondly, following from this, whether or not one should interpret the current situation in terms of 'shifts in institutional location of religion' rather than secularization (and probably both remain interesting interpretative keys), one surely may describe it in terms of detraditionalization and individualization, accompanied by a growing pluralization.

The doubts over the secularization thesis thus by no means give grounds for the hope that people who through modernization were driven away from the Christian narrative and communities, but now discover that they are 'incurably religious and ritual', quasi-automatically might return to Christianity – not even if it succeeds properly to renew the

language of faith, as Schillebeeckx asks (which surely is no argument not to engage in this). It appears unwise to me – it would again be giving credit to the secularization *thesis* – to situate the religious revival, including the multifaceted 'religious noise', once again along the same axis with secular modernity and Christianity respectively at the two extremes, and with the religious revival then located closer to Christianity. In my opinion, a perspective of plurality more satisfactorily explains the varied religious (but also non-religious) traditions, movements and life-styles with which we are confronted today, because of our geographical and mental mobility (migration and the media respectively). There are individually, inter-individually and collectively a multitude of ways to experience and give meaning to life and reality, as well as to study, analyse and interpret these – the Christian theological way (in its own varieties) being one of them.

The (Western) methodologically atheistic human and natural sciences have an inalienable but nevertheless specific place in the multitude of those ways in which we look at life and reality. However, the secularism wherein these sciences find themselves situated, and which is structurally bound up with Western (and because of globalization, also world) culture, no longer itself alone determines the dynamics of the context to which the Christian narrative is related. Moreover, through the critique brought on by post-modern thinking, the 'objective observer position', classically presupposed by science and rationality, has been fundamentally questioned and the hermeneutical circles in which they operate have been unravelled. Nonetheless, in a multiplicity of models and theories they remain constitutive for the way in which Westerners, including the Christians among them, have their outlook on life – not least because they have obtained a surplus legitimation through their effectiveness and performance.[16] This is why the sciences (in their development[17]) remain of enduring importance for a theology which recontextualizes itself. But, as has already been said, the context is no longer to be interpreted in terms of secularism alone, neither the role of the sciences any longer in terms of the secularization thesis.

It follows, therefore, that precisely because the current context denotes itself better in terms of plurality than secularity (and the Christian narrative is then seen as situating itself as one of those traditions within this plurality), the most relevant theological question no longer appears to be: how can the Christian tradition be fruitfully involved in a dialogue with modern secularity, resulting in a relevant and plausible modern Christian way of existence. Rather, the question should be: how does the Christian narrative relate to the plurality of religious and non-religious fundamental life options? For modern theology, the modern striving after human freedom and social liberation provided indeed *loci theologici* to recontextualize the Christian belief in a God deeply concerned with the well-being of humankind. There, where more humanity was realized, God

could not be absent. In such theology it was a fundamental presupposition that there existed a continuity between modernity and Christian belief; it was theology's task to correlate the salvific message of Christian faith with the best of modernity's context: 'being a Christian and a modern subject were in line with each other'.[18]

At this point it is significant to speak of both an inner and an outer perspective; on the one hand, *ad extra* the discovery of one's particularity and on the other hand, *ad intra* the examination of what the new pluralistic context, in confrontation with other particularities, means for the development of this particular narrativity.[19] In modern theology both dimensions were, if not undifferentiated, then not thought of as essential. The *ad intra* dimension is the *ad extra* dimension: Christianity allows itself to be criticized and enriched by secular culture, and so wants to become (or remain) acceptable and relevant within this secular culture. Expressed then in modern categories: the particularity of Christianity is formulated such that it is perfectly plausible, and even can be considered a pre-eminent expression of the modern person, culture, and society. In addition, certainly for Flanders and other parts of Western Europe, the effects of the process of pluralization have for a long time been delayed because of the huge majority position that Christian churches still maintained. Culturally and socially (among other reasons, through the phenomenon of 'pillarization'), there long remained an overlap between modern culture and Christian belief. In respect of the distinction between the two dimensions, not so much continuity then but discontinuity would seem to serve as a fruitful theological category. And note: everything mentioned above is the result of an interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy and human sciences, with theological finality.[20]

SUBSTITUTING THE PRESUMPTION OF DISCONTINUITY FOR CONTINUITY?

Thinking in terms of this continuity is characteristic of a particular type of theologizing, borne out of the confrontation with modernity. The loss of plausibility of the modern presumptions of rationality and ideologies, the so-called modern master narratives, has provided critics of this type of theologizing with new ammunition. Anti-modern theologians saw themselves proved right: the 'absolute autonomy' of the subject and the world was evidently a fiction, from which both have suffered greatly. Some of them therefore argue nowadays for a real postmodern theology in the chronological sense: a theology *after* modernity, leaving modernity behind, or at least undoing it from its secular presuppositions. These thinkers, philosophers and theologians alike, read the postmodern crisis of modernity as its failure. This is why they dismiss modern methodological atheism and introduce thought-patterns that lay claim

to a more original relation to God as the point of departure for any reflection on human subjectivity, society and world. About this, I make reference to two currents of thought that, as far as concerns content and method, are independent of each other.[21] Nevertheless, they seem to develop similar strategies: first, Radical Orthodoxy[22], and, second, the so-called *tournant théologique* in recent French phenomenology, of which Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste are two Catholic protagonists.[23]

The point of departure for both theologico-philosophical tendencies is the deconstruction of the secular partner of the modern correlation theology, and thus the failure of the correlationist project. The current postmodern context is reinterpreted in terms of nihilism and loss of meaning. It can only be rescued when it allows itself to be broken open into a more original theo-centred relationship. Here, too, in the thinking strategies of Radical Orthodoxy and French phenomenology, there is no analysis of the present-day context in terms of plurality, other than as relativism, chaos and loss of perspective. The presumption of continuity between secularity and tradition, as held by correlation theology, is replaced by the presumption of discontinuity. Theological discourse stands at odds with the (post)modern human being and its world, and breaks open its condition by immersing it in a theocentric relationship.

RE-CONCEIVING MODERN CORRELATION THEOLOGY

The partner in correlation theology becomes indeed de-constructed when a number of its modern presumptions are falsified by postmodern criticism. Also, the delay of a visible de-traditionalization, owing to the huge majority position that churches a long time wielded, has mostly been done away with.[24] Thinking in terms of continuity or even consensus between Christian faith and modern culture and society is no longer plausible, nor does it work in the pastoral domain. The *modern* correlation method seems nowadays to be a systematic and pastoral counterproductive theological strategy. When one starts from general human structures, it becomes very difficult to arrive at what is particularly Christian – if one has not already identified the latter with the former. After all, the question first arises as to what these general human structures are. In the (human) sciences as well, a methodological plurality predominates of which the results are not always complementary. Certainly in cases where they claim to be normative, it very often turns out that there are many underlying presumptions and hidden interests present. Secondly, starting from an analysis of radical plurality, the first irreducible level on which to base one's reflection is the particularity itself, the specific narrativity of a fundamental life option, whether it be religious or not – the level, thus, of the concrete narrative.

As I said several times already: doing theology in a postmodern context is not giving up the dialogue with the context and, particularly, with the human sciences. It therefore befits the theologian, as Schillebeeckx himself indicates, 'to be extremely critical hermeneutically, and moreover to have a critical eye for what is actually absorbed by theological views in the ethno-anthropological discussion over the Christian-specific sacramental inheritance'.[25] In the meantime it would serve theology's cause well if it would learn not to postpone the theological dimension in its reflection, in the hope that it will be arrived at, as if automatically, through a dialogue with the human sciences. The consciousness of the specific particularity of the Christian faith option places at the forefront – both anthropologically as well as theologically – the faith option of the Christian, the confession that God is involved in human history in Jesus Christ. This is done, not against the presumption that the Christian is a human being (like other human beings), but rather as the irreducible qualification of it. We do not live out of general human structures, but out of our concrete particularities (in which these structures *a posteriori* could be recognized). Put succinctly: it is not as human beings that we are Christians but as Christians that we are human beings, irreducibly so determined by our own Christian narrativity (just as others too are human in their irreducible particularity). It then remains to develop patterns of reflection that permit us to think this irreducible qualification by particularity. Precisely in this regard, the dialogue with the present-day context can also prove to be fruitful.

Both as a descriptive and normative category to envisage development in tradition and theology, the model of recontextualization can be considered as a radicalizing (recontextualization) of modern correlation theology. This is so precisely because, next to the notion of continuity, those of contingency, particularity, otherness and discontinuity gain a place as well. In principle we could then speak of a 'postmodern correlation', to point to the continuity with modern theology as concerns the methodologically anchored dialogue with the context. But perhaps it is wiser to avoid the term 'correlation' altogether. It remains behind as a ghost of continuity, still breathing out harmony and synthesis between tradition and context. Co-relation refers after all to two partners who enter into relation with each other, or stand in relation to each other (even if one would add that this relation is a mutually critical one). In our postmodern context, however, the particularity of the Christian narrative (situated within a plurality of narratives) has become the irreducible departure point of this relation (*ad extra*), while the confrontation with the plurality (i.e., other particularities) at the same time *ad intra* keeps the recontextualizing process going. It is for this reason that we opt for the term recontextualization.

'Everything that comes from above, comes from below', said the Dutch twenthieth-century Protestant theologian Kuitert. This phrase,

applicable to Schillebeeckx's argument, is from our point of view better articulated as, 'everything that concerns itself with what comes from above, comes from below', or 'all speech concerning above, proceeds from below'. But how do we view the relation of this 'from above' with respect to the 'from below'? Which categories can suit this purpose? We propose to think this relation in terms of 'interruption'.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INTERRUPTION – BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

Whoever still holds a perspective of continuity in our context would appear to advance modern secularization: particularly the secularization of the revealed character of the Christian belief in the name of general human religiosity – the human being is an *animal religiosus*. In such a case, revelation can only be thought of as a particular duplication of what already exists on the general human level, often as a narrative interpretation thereof. But theologically this is not convincing. Revelation for a Christian subject points primarily to its embeddedness in a relationship with the God who has made Godself known in history through Jesus Christ. This implies its standing in an answering relationship towards God, to an Other who cannot be reduced to its subjectivity (but note: who can also not be approached or encountered *without* this subjectival individuality). Theology starts from here; the theological dialogue with the context is concerned with an attempt to understand and explain, and to reflect upon it.

The research hypothesis that I would opt for is one which relates thought patterns involving discontinuity with patterns of continuity. This hypothesis rests on the conviction that a too strong prioritization of the one over the other is both theologically and pastorally unproductive. The category of *interruption*[26] can hereby render service to develop such a reflexive exercise. This is because interruption after all has not so much to do with breach, rupture, or discontinuity opposed to continuity, but rather actually presupposes continuity. Interruption 'interrupts' something which goes on, and by doing so challenges, influences and alters this going on. At the same time, however, interruption points out the limits of continuity and makes them more visible. Interruption occurs where discontinuity and continuity meet each other, the one not without the other.

Following along this track makes it tentatively possible to draw a few lines for further reflection. We take again Schillebeeckx's article as our starting point. In the sacramental rituals of life we can now, next to a double continuity, also discern a double discontinuity. We begin first with *continuity*. The first form of continuity is situated in the anthropological basis of the Christian-ritual praxis, in the aspect of 'ritualizing human life'

that can be recognized in each sacrament. In this sense, the Christian sacramental praxis meets the requirements of what in general anthropological terms is called ritualization. Next, and in this dimension of anthropological continuity, we can also discern a Christian-narrative theological continuity. Sacraments lie fully rooted in the Christian particularity; they are not only expressions of it but at the same time constitutive of it. They speak of a God who has revealed Godself in the history of humankind, most fully in the person of Jesus, confessed as the Christ by his disciples. As situated rituals they incarnate the realization of meaning that takes place by the Christian narrative, and they constitute the Christian-specific symbolical space.

However, this double continuity ought to be interrupted. Otherwise the Christian narrative will become either merely a doubling or interpretation of the anthropological level, or merely a narrativity for the sake of narrativity – i.e., a closed narrative of which the reference is trapped within the boundaries of the hermeneutical horizon.[27]

From here we can elaborate on the double *discontinuity*. Of course there is already discontinuity on the anthropological level, inasmuch as rites interrupt and transform everyday life (a celebration, a doctoral promotion, etc.).[28] But the double discontinuity that we want to indicate is to be first thought of with reference to the Christian narrativity and, subsequently (and at the same time) is theological in nature. Thus it will be conceived of, first, as regards the relationship between the general human structures and the theological, and subsequently within the theological discourse itself. It is here that the sacramentality of the ritual-liturgical praxis of the Christian faith communities is to be situated.

(i) First of all, the Christian narrative interrupts the general human structures that are recognized within it when one acknowledges the primacy of the particularity. Where the general human structures show resemblances, precisely there the differences between fundamental life options often become manifest. To put it briefly: 'precisely what different religions and life options have in common makes them different' or, 'what binds them, also divides them'. For example, Schillebeeckx locates the source of Easter in an agricultural spring festival.[29] While this may be true for Easter, as a Christian spring festival it nevertheless differs substantively from similar feasts, because it is radically transformed by a perception of history in which history is divinely interrupted. The appreciation of Easter as originally an agricultural feast can certainly unlock valuable insights into this Christian feast, and indicate the wide extent of this festal ritual, but it can never automatically refer to the Christian ritual confession that Jesus Christ lives. It is at this point that the Christian particularity gives its own irreducible twist to what is considered as the general human structures. Here the hermeneutical space opens up a dimension without which a sacrament cannot be a sacrament. The same can be said of the practices of prayer, ritual periods

(for instance, fasting periods), community celebrations, initiations and so forth. Here too one can claim that what is common to diverse religions makes them at the same time irreducibly distinct. A good example is the case of the three so-called 'monotheistic religions', also perceived as the 'religions of the Book', or 'historically revealed religions'. The way God is worshipped and reflected upon, the ways in which the 'Book' functions, as well as the manner in which God relates to history (including the role of the respective prophets-founders) very specifically differentiates the three.

(ii) Then from the theological perspective: the Christian narrative interrupts the general human structures, not because the account of these general human structures is not true or valid, but because, for the Christian, it is not from there that sacraments draw their deepest significance. It is because they speak of God that they are sacraments. Sacramentality is interruption by God.

As regards this theological dimension, Schillebeeckx in his article picks up a category which he had already developed earlier in his books on Jesus, that is, the Christian contrast-experience: the experience to be confronted with traces of God in our lives, which in the sacramental praxis 'are ritually purified' (Dutch: 'tot ritueel gelouterd'). As contrast-experiences, traces of God can be suitably thought of as experiences of otherness, conflict, irreconcilability, interpreted against the background of the Christian narrative. Moreover: theologically speaking, such experiences reveal the boundaries of the Christian narrative itself – testifying to God's involvement in human history as its condition and its critical limit. As experiences of otherness, they interrupt the ongoing narratives, Christian narratives included. They introduce the God-oriented perspective. God is then, in the first place, not thought of exclusively as operating within narrative, but precisely as the One who always escapes this narrative and to whose escaping the Christian narrative gives witness. The God who interrupts is not a God of premature reconciliation, but on the contrary a God whose trace reveals irreconcilability.

Seen from this perspective, recontextualization is then not purely an anthropological process characteristic of Christian traditions and narratives, but of theological necessity, due to theology's involvement with the God who feeds and interrupts our narratives, yet at the same time, cannot be captured within them. The same holds true for our sacramental praxis and the reflection upon it (for example, about the issue of sacramental presence[30]). Here too, God and God's grace are not tangible, graspable, but are to be thought of in the context of the foundational relationship to the divine Other – a relationship opened within the hermeneutic framework of the Christian narrative, but not reduced to it.[31] In the sacraments God interrupts both our lives and the way we deal with God in our Christian narratives. Likewise we are called to let ourselves be interrupted by God and to interrupt others accordingly.

As incarnations of deep meaning, the Christian rituals anchor the Christian narrativity in the materiality and corporeality of our human existence. So doing they interrupt these from the Christian confession of their creatureliness and of the hope of their eschatological completion – a confession that in its turn is interrupted by the God whom it confesses to be the Creator and Saviour.

CONCLUSION

I am well aware that with these considerations I am not offering any ready-made answers to the deep pastoral and theological problems involved in reflecting upon the relationship between rituals of life and sacraments. But I do hope (1) that I have given indications of the fundamental theological questions which arise in such a reflection; (2) that I have emphasized the relative importance for theology of the anthropological and (human) sciences studies; (3) that I have pointed out the methodological limits of modern correlation theology when one theologizes in a postmodern context; and this (4) because the context is better analysed in terms of plurality and particularity, than (merely) with such categories as secularization and general human structures.

All these considerations support (and rely on) my research hypothesis that although a current theological reflection upon rituals and sacraments cannot deny the importance of anthropological research (or what is collectively known today as Ritual Studies), at the same time (and more than ever before) we must pay particular regard to the Christian specificity of the Christian sacramental praxis. (5) I also hope to have indicated that this is not a withdrawal by theology from the interdisciplinary (and interreligious) dialogue, but precisely the fruit of such discussion.

It is this reflection that has obliged me to draw a brief sketch of a 'theology of interruption', in which continuity is joined to discontinuity and vice versa. (6) From the insight that 'what binds us, also differentiates us', the phrase 'sacramental interruption of the rituals of life' then acknowledges, first, the irreducibly specific particularity of the Christian ritual praxis. (7) Secondly, it calls upon the theological, God-oriented dimension of this praxis, which can be thought of fittingly as (its) interruption.

Notes

1 E. Schillebeeckx, 'Naar een herontdekking van de christelijke sacramenten: ritualisering van religieuze momenten in het alledaagse leven' ('Towards a rediscovery of the Christian sacraments: ritualizing of religious moments in the everyday life'), in *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 40 (2000), pp. 164–87.

2 Ibid., p. 174 (my translation).

3 Ibid., pp. 175–6.

4 Ibid., p. 183 (italics mine).

5 Ibid. (italics Schillebeeckx's).

6 See the first chapter of L. Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 30 (Leuven: Peeters/Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

7 See K. Dobbelaere *et al., Verloren Zekerheid. De Belgen en hun waarden, overtuigingen en houdingen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000).

8 Ibid., pp.117 and 136. This would be true for 80% of the borderline church-involved as well as 45% of non-church-involved (42% for baptism and marriage, 48% for funerals).

9 Some other data: when people were asked to identify themselves religiously, 47.4% of Belgians professed themselves Catholic, 1.2% Protestant and 15.3% simply considered themselves 'Christian' but neither Catholic nor Protestant (see ibid., p. 119). However, the most telling figures that appear are the heavy decline in church attendance (Eucharistic celebration) and increasingly as well in the dwindling number of baptisms and church weddings. In 1967, 52% of Flemish people (for Belgians as a whole, 42.9%) went to Church weekly; in 1998, this was merely 12.7% (Belgium, 11.2%). In 1967, 96.1% of children in Flanders were baptized, in 1998 it was 73%. The 1998 figures for Belgium as a whole are more than 8% lower at 64.7%. The figures for that portion of the population which still opts to marry in Church: for Flanders, 91.8% in 1967, 51.2% in 1998; for Belgium, 86.1% in 1967, 49.2% in 1998 (ibid., p.123).

10 What Karel Dobbelaere has dubbed 'à la carte Catholicism' can certainly be explained in this way. See K. Dobbelaere: *Het 'volk-gods' de mist in? Over de kerk in België. Kerk-zijn in de huidige wereld – 1. Sociologische benadering* (Nikè-reeks: Didachè), (Leuven: Acco, 1988).

11 See H. Cox, 'The Myth of the Twentieth Century. The Rise and Fall of 'Secularization', in G. Baum (ed.), *The Twentieth Century. A Theological Overview* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999); P. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview*, in P. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

12 Cox, art. cit., pp. 135–6.

13 Cf. e.g., P. Post, *Life Cycle Rituals: A Ritual-Liturgical Perspective, in Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 83 (2002), pp. 10–29.

14 Schillebeeckx, *Naar een herontdekking*, p. 165. Post, from his side, questions the theory of the demystification of culture and society, and had already spoken earlier of the fact that 'our culture is full of religion and sacrality, of rites and symbols', and of the 'abundance of ritual', 'resacralization', 'religionization', etc. in our time, see: Post, *Life Cycle Rituals*, p. 20.

15 Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, p. 10. He goes further: 'All the same, Europe stands out as quite different from other parts of the world, and certainly from the United States.'

16 Cultural sociologist Rudi Laermans points out in this connection that the modernization process has gone hand in hand with the 'proto-professionalization' of the life-world. Popularized scientific knowledge is absorbed and results in a medicalization, juridicalization, psychologization, etc. of the life-world.

17 See in this regard Schillebeeckx's reference to the development from a static to a dynamic creative anthropology of ritual and ritualizing. In the former rites were considered as 'not generating' but originating from an irretrievable 'grey past' as a result of which ritual creativity was a contradiction in terms (Schillebeeckx, *Naar een herontdekking*, p. 169).

18 I.e., correlation theology went in search of a consensus between culture and belief: the Christian was just as modern as the average modern person. The modern project was a project where Christians could join with other 'people of good will'.

19 I have elaborated on this in L. Boeve, 'La pertinence de la foi chrétienne dans la société contemporaine: Entre sécularité et pluralité', in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 77 (2001), pp. 441–55.

20 See for this my study *Interrupting Tradition*, next to, for example, my 'Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: A New Opportunity for Theology?', in *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997), pp. 449–68.

21 See also for this L. Boeve, 'Method in Postmodern Theology. A Case Study', in L. Boeve and J. Ries (eds.), *The Presence of Transcendence: Thinking 'Sacrament' in a Postmodern Age* (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia, 42; Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

22 For a brief sketch of what the Radical Orthodoxy movement stands for, see the introduction to J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New*

Theology (London/New York: Routledge, 1999); so too, J. Milbank, 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', in L.P. Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 33–45.

23 See: J.-L. Marion: *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) and *Étant donné: essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: P.U.F., 1997). Marion claims that it is possible to demonstrate phenomenologically (and not just only theologically) the priority of the logic of the gift above the logic of Being. For a sympathetic theological approach to this, see S. Van den Bossche, 'God Does Appear in Immanence After All', in L. Boeve and L. Leijssen (eds.), *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: Fundamental Theological Approaches* (BETL, 160; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), pp. 325–46. For Lacoste, see e.g., J.-Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et absolu: Questions disputées sur l'humanité de l'homme*, (Paris: P.U.F., 1994).

24 Cf. the three titles of the European Value Study research reports on Belgium (all edited by, among others, Jan Kerkhofs and Karel Dobbelaere). The first, reporting on research carried out in the year 1981, was titled *De stille ommekeer: oude en nieuwe waarden in het België van de jaren tachtig* ('The silent transformation: old and new values in Belgium for the 1980s'), (Tielt: Lannoo, 1984). In this, the figures demonstrated the de-traditionalization that was creeping in. Belgium was slowly moving away from its classic Roman Catholic character. The title of the second volume made an even clearer point: *De versnelde ommekeer: de waarden van Vlamingen, Walen en Brusselaars in de jaren negentig* ('The accelerated transformation: the values of the Flemish, Wallonians and Brusselers for the 1990s'), (Tielt: Lannoo, 1992). Belgium de-traditionalized faster than ever. The title of the third book, *Verloren zekerheid: de Belgen en hun waarden, overtuigingen and houdingen*, ('Lost certainty: The Belgians and their values, convictions and attitudes') indicates that the de-traditionalization process is nearing its realization (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000).

25 Schillebeeckx, *Naar een herontdekking*, p. 175.

26 For an alternative rendering of this concept, see my article, 'God Interrupts History: Apocalyptism as an Indispensable Theological Conceptual Strategy', in *Louvain Studies* 26 (2001), pp. 195–216.

27 But as already stated: there is no discontinuity without continuity; otherwise one risks degenerating too easily into escapism.

28 Schillebeeckx, *Naar een herontdekking*, p. 183.

29 Ibid., p. 173.

30 See L. Hemming on Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of transubstantiation: 'After Heidegger: Transubstantiation', in Boeve and Leijssen (eds.), *Sacramental presence*, pp. 299–309. Thomas preserves Aristotle's physics but at the same time interrupts it, placing it in perspective.

31 See in this connection L.-M. Chauvet, 'The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence', in Boeve and Leijssen (eds.), *Sacramental presence*, pp. 236–62.