INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY CONFERENCE SERIES

The Ooze of God's Spirit: Liquid Sacramentality for a Liquid Age

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This essay explores the concept of sacramentality, so central to Roman Catholicism and other strands of Christianity, in a liquid age. Historical reflections on the elastic nature of this concept, lead to reflection about the contemporary trend towards increased ritual invention and the phenomenon of "liquid ritualization." Two brief case studies of ritual invention are presented to illustrate how such invention is filling in the gaps for theists and others where established rituals do not exists. These examples raise the question of theologizing about such liquid ritualization. In the end, the author turns to the concept of *sensus fidelium* to suggest that contemporary sacramental practices are too stolid and inflexible, and that an adequate sacramental theology in this liquid moment must recognize the fluidity of God's own self-communication and the need for more ambidextrous reception of that self-communication.

Introduction

The religious tradition, too often homogenized under the label of "Christian," is anything but homogenous. As a Catholic-Christian, baby-boomer cleric with an admitted inclination to be a provocateur, I find the label of "Christian" as problematic as it is useful.

The celebrated biblical scholar Raymond Brown shattered the univocal nature of emerging Christianity in a book that impertinently touted the multiple "churches" that the apostles left behind (Brown 1984). Patristics scholar Robert Wilken dissuades us from thinking about Christianity as born in uniformity and evolving into pluriformity. The opposite was true: Christianity was born in diversity and in many ways became more uniform (Wilken 1971). As a colleague once reminded me, Jesus' name was posted in three languages on the cross. Christianity was anything but univocal in its origins.

While pluriform to its roots, emerging Christianity from its backwater origins to the present day has also been marked by certain key, reoccurring practices; from such practices beliefs and doctrines evolved. Rather than falling into unhelpful binaries when interpreting Christian origins and development,[1] it is possible to recognize reoccurring dynamics in Christian "traditions" without homogenizing them. In the language of Paul Gilroy, there are detectable "flows" (Gilroy 1993, 16 *et passim*) in Christian practices and beliefs that mark this religious tapestry across time and territory. One of those flows concerns the centrality of the body to this religion.

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1 E.g., in the field of liturgical history scholars are sometimes classified as "splitters" and "lumpers." In that vein Robert Taft has criticized liturgical historian Paul Bradshaw as being too much of a "splitter," an approach Taft believes makes it difficult to generalize about past liturgical practices (Taft 1994).

Auli Vähäkangas, Sivert Angel and Kirstine Helboe Johansen, eds. 2019. Reforming Practical Theology: The Politics of Body and Space. IAPT.CS 1: 153–159
DOI: 10.25785/iapt.cs.v1i0.66
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The Body and Sacramentality

The lynchpin that flows across Christianity's often bifurcated approach to the body is the early belief in what came to be called the incarnation, i. e., that God in Jesus took on a human body. This "Word became flesh" (John 1:14) assertion theologically implicates the bodies of all other human beings, and even the very material nature of the cosmos. This integrating teaching recognizes not only that God took on a specific human form in the Palestinian peasant history known as Jesus, but that in the birth of Jesus divinity wed with all of humanity as well as with the created cosmos. Thus, incarnation is not only defined by the embodiment of God in Jesus, but by a Christian belief in the embodiment of God in humanity (Kelly 2010) and even in all of creation (Francis 2015). In the Catholic-Christian tradition this is sometimes called the "sacramental principle," i. e., a belief that everything in the created world has the potential for revealing God (Himes 2014).

Intimately related to this belief in incarnation is a persistent yet diverse engagement in sacramental practices. While the language of sacramentality does not exist in the early community, practices later identified as sacramental were present from the beginning.[2] Two cardinal practices, reported in the New Testament and recognized as "sacraments" by virtually all Christians today, were baptism and Eucharist. Besides these pivotal practices literally hundreds of other practices in emerging Christianity were considered "sacraments." Defined by Augustine (d. 430) as a visible sign of an invisible grace or as a "visible word" (*Tractatus in Evangelium Johanni* 5.6 and 80.3) the bishop from Hippo himself designates over 300 visible actions as sacraments (Couturier 1953). This sacramental elasticity continued through the early middle ages. Thus, Ambrose (d. 397) could consider the washing of the feet as a sacrament (*De Mysteriis* 6:31–33), Pseudo-Dionysius (fl. ca. 500) acknowledged the consecration of an altar as a sacrament (*De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 4:12), and Peter Damian (d. 1072) listed the anointing of a monarch among the sacraments (*Sermo* 69). Such sacramental plasticity wanes in the 12th century in the west, however. Especially influential is the formulation of Peter Lombard (d. 1160) who, in the 4th book of his famous *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, restricts the number of official sacraments to seven (Finn 2008). The 16th century reformation becomes even more restrictive reducing them to two.

While Lombard's restricted definition of sacrament continues as the official position of the Roman Catholic Church today, and the 16th century reformation has confined most Protestants to only a doublet of sacraments, the late 20th and early 21st century has witnessed a creeping sacramental plasticity within our ecclesial bodies and an explosion of such plasticity in other belief systems and faith arenas. A key crack in the seven-fold sacramental system for Roman Catholics appeared in the documents of the Second Vatican Council that, not without some controversy, multiple times employed that language of "sacrament" to reference the church itself (cf. Doyle 2015). The Belgian Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (d. 2009) was an important voice in pushing sacramental boundaries. His influential *Christus, sacrament van de Godsontmoeting* (1959, in English appearing as *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* in 1963) was already anticipated in his 1952 work *De sacramentele heileconomie.* Another prominent voice of the era was the German theologian Karl Rahner (d. 1984), whose emphasis on the primacy of the "liturgy of the world" over "the liturgy of the Church" (cf. Skelley 1991) provided an implicit critique of the official sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church, and gave fresh impetus for reclaiming the foundational nature of the previously mentioned "sacramental principle." More recently, Pope Francis' lyrical encyclical on the integrity of creation (Francis 2015), points to a broader sacramental vision when he speaks of the entire world as "a caress of God" (no. 84), considers the world a "divine manifestation" (no. 85) and hymns the "sacredness of the world" (no. 85) that not only manifests God but is actually a "locus of [God's] presence" (no. 88).

From Elasticity to Liquidity

While there has been some theoretical movement in the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding a more elastic understanding of sacramentality, our official sacramental repertoire remains quite stilted. Such stolidity is symbolic of my Church's official teachings (or lack thereof) about

2 The New Testament speaks of *musterion,* sometimes defined as a divine secret in the process of being revealed. It does not have a strong connection to cultic actions in the New Testament. When Jerome (d. 420) translated the Greek New Testament into Latin, 8 times the language of *musterion* was replaced by *sacramentum.*

marriage, sexual orientation and gender identification. However, as is often the case, ritual practice outpaces sacramental theology; the former has something to teach the latter, another case of praxis informing and challenging theory.

In his celebrated 2000 publication, the Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman deemed the current era one of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000). While previous periods in history had certainly witnessed a cycle of sometimes radical disintegration and renewal, Bauman argues that the current modernity is different. Whereas the "solids" of a previous era (e. g., monarchy) were deconstructed but replaced by new solids (e. g., communism in Russia), in this modernity melting solids are not being displaced by new and improved solids. Rather, the state of commerce, relationships, education, society and even self-identity are characterized by liquidity, deregulation, liberalization and what Bauman calls "flexibilization": constantly poised for change. This state has come about through the "radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose or to act" (Bauman 2000, 3).

While Bauman does not believe that liquid modernity generates a demand for religion and—according to the insightful analysis of Kees de Groot—does not leave room for religion except for fundamentalism (de Groot 2008, 281), there are yet those who champion forms of liquid religion and even liquid church. Well known to practical theologians is the work of Pete Ward, who believes this liquid moment is an opportunity to promote a new way of being church within contemporary culture (Ward 2002). His vision of a more diffuse, less institutionalized form of Christianity—conjoined with his concern about youth ministry—emphasizes the importance of existing networks already present within contemporary society (Ward 2002, 41–42). These might include Christian support groups, bible study, music festivals, or other youth activities. De Groot has a different image of what liquid church could be: one that he asserts takes the work of Bauman more seriously. His approach to "liquid *koinonia*," which he believes is worthy of empirical study, attempts to value momentary types of community in which people take part in various degrees (de Groot 2007, 189).

A parallel reality to the rethinking about liquid church is the phenomenon that some have deemed "liquid ritualizing." As presented by William Arfman, liquid ritualizing is characterized by an openness to ritual transfer (Arfman 2014, 23). In the current moment, in which the role of tradition has been radically altered to the point that sociologist Anthony Giddens claims that we all live in post-traditional societies (Giddens 1994, 56), the boundaries between rituals have become increasingly permeable. According to Arfman, ideas freely seep, ooze and flow from one tradition to another. While not new, Arfman contends that there is an overabundance of ritual transfer today (Arfman 2014, 4). The ritual dynamics research group at Heidelberg University elucidates by suggesting that "ritual transfer is what happens when the context of a rite changes. To deal with such contextual changes, elements of rites from other traditions will be adapted" (Arfman 2014, 21).

What Arfman considers ritual transfer Catherine Bell labels "ritual invention" (Bell 1997, 223ff). While it might seem counterintuitive to some, rituals cannot only be invented, they can also be conceived for a single used and never repeated (cf. Grimes 1992, 24). Bell agrees with Arfman that while ritual invention is not a new phenomenon, the freedom people now feel "to eschew any claims for ritual antiquity may be relatively unprecedented" (Bell 1997, 225).

Ritual Invention, Transfer and Liquidity

For almost four decades I have had the opportunity to teach presiding to ordination candidates in the Roman Catholic Church. Such courses are designed to nurture embodied skills, dynamic spiritualities, contextual awareness and theological/liturgical competence in seminarians as they assume responsibilities for leading faith communities in the celebrations of the sacraments and other official rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. Because these candidates have come from multiple contexts and countries, and preside in a myriad of languages, there is clearly a level of improvisation and adaptation, e. g., a student from Peru, whose overseas training experience was in Taiwan, presides at Eucharist in a classroom in Chicago, preparing for ministry in Nepal: an actual case. At the same time, because there is an expectation that ordination candidates will acquire competency in leading the official liturgies of the Roman Catholic Church, there is little explicit ritual invention occurring in such presiding courses at Catholic Theological Union.

Over the past few years, however, I have also had the opportunity to team teach a somewhat parallel course to M.Div. students at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. This much more religiously (though not culturally) diverse population—Muslim, Buddhist, Agnostic, Disciples of Christ, Baptist, Hindu, etc.—has moved us to retitle the course from "preaching and presiding" to include "ritual leadership and speaking." The culminating requirement for this course is that each student is required to design and enact a 30 minute ritual around what is broadly defined as some "life-cycle event." In these summative performances, ritual invention, transfer and liquidity abounds. We have experienced, for example, a Confucian wedding between two women, a Buddhist post-abortion healing ritual, the dissolving of a congregation, a (re) naming ceremony for a transgendered person and a death with dignity ritual. The two M.Div. candidates who created and led the renaming ceremony and death with dignity ritual have given me permission to reference their work here, and I am very grateful to A. Tonks Lynch and Luke Allgeyer for allowing me both to witness the enactment of these rituals and for their generosity in supplying me with complete texts of their work.

A (re)naming ceremony:

The (re)naming ceremony created by A. Tonks Lynch is situated in the Methodist tradition, contextualized in a local congregation—Wesley UMC—that has "a larger than average number of participants that are gender, romantic, and/or sexual minorities." The main ritual actor is Evelyn Wade (a pseudonym), who has volunteered in the church's program for homeless youth and regularly participates in community worship. Over time Evelyn questioned her assigned male at birth (AMAB) identity, and began to identify as trans. It is this evolution that has led Evelyn to request a (re)naming ceremony. An outline of the ceremony follows:

Welcome

Scripture (Luke 21: 7–20) read by Evelyn Wade

Reflection by A. Tonks Lynch, that focuses on the Jesus of the gospels who spoke and laughed and prayer with every kind of person, who invites us into a relationship with him, and empowers us to see the sacred in everyone we meet

Litany of Affirmation

Evelyn: We are …
All: our bodies, our minds our hearts.
Evelyn: We are …
All: one and many, dissimilar and unique, all of us made in the sacred image of God.
Evelyn: We are …
All: connected, community, covenanted to each other.
Evelyn: Loved and loving, we are most sacred when we are living as our fullest selves.
All: Amen.

Prayer Circle: The community is invited forward in body or in spirit into a circle. Now is the time to raise our hearts, offer our joys and concerns as a community, and welcome Evelyn Wade into her new name among old friends. If you are unable or unwilling to participate, please remain seated and cross your arms across your chest in an "X."

Sharing the Elements of Communion: If you do not wish to receive the bread and cup, simply cross your arms across your chest in an "X." In the United Methodist Church, we practice an open table. Anyone who wishes to receive may do so, no matter creed or affiliation. We practice communion by intinction, in which we are given a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

Invitation to Share Signs of Peace.

Death with Dignity Ritual:

Luke Allgeyer explains that the genesis of this ritual is the recent development in six states (including his home state of Montana) to legalize assisted suicide. Allgeyer, who identifies with the Lutheran tradition, chooses to reference this ritual around a last meal as "medically-informed self-elected exit of life." Recognizing a ritual gap here, as did Lynch and so many of their other classmates, Allgeyer constructed this ritual employing the framework of a Lutheran service of Word and Sacrament. It requires "a presider, a sufferer, and at least one attendant…. This construction, however, uses six different attendants."

Gathering
Lighting of candle as prayer is read:
Presider: Let us pray (prayer adapted from official Lutheran pastoral source)
All: Amen.

Word

Sufferer: A reading from Matthew 11:28–30
Presider: We will now begin mixing the bread to be eaten together.
[A bowl is passed from attended to attendant as ingredients are added, but not mixed.]

Attendant 1: *Water* to represent the waters from which we were created; let it symbolize our thanksgiving for the gift of the spirit as we remember our baptism, and the life-giving waters that flow in the desert.

Attendant 2: *Honey* to represent the sweetness and goodness of life, the smiles we share and the people we love; let it symbolize the moments of health and happiness, and the feeling of God's grace.

Attendant 3: *Salt* to represent the sweat and tears of suffering, the helplessness felt by family and friends; let it symbolize the connection between the joy and pain, for we would not taste the sweet if it were not for the salt.

Attendant 4: *Baking soda* to represent all the things that lift us up; let it symbolize the promise of life to come and the end of suffering for all.

Attendant 5: *Oil* to represent those things that were never accomplished, promises unkept, and goals unachieved; let it symbolize those things that will always remain apart from us, just as the oil and the water will never mix.

Attendant 6: *Flour* to represent the substance of life: the memories that make up who we are, give us shape and fortify our spirits. Let it symbolize the connections between us all, between us and God, between us and death. As the grains of wheat are gathered from the scattered stalks of the field and formed into one loaf, so are we gathered together into one through the love of God.

Presider: These ingredients, though different, are each necessary in order to create a loaf of bread. So to, in life, are the many and various aspects of our lives—the painful and the joyous, the gifts and the suffering, the times of certainty and the times of uncertainty—all come together to create this life that we experience.

[Sufferer mixes the ingredients together as Presider reads from Ecclesiastes 3:1–8]

Presider: Let us pray (prayer adapted from official Lutheran pastoral source)
All: Amen.
[Bread is placed in oven to bake.]
Presider: As we wait for the bread to bake, a reading from First Samuel [7:7–12]
[Sufferer proclaims the reading]
Presider: In Hebrew, the name Ebenezer means "stone of help." Thus far has the Lord helped you through your suffering (name). Let this rock of help offered here be the finally act of assistance necessary for you to fine strike down your suffering.

[Sufferer mixes the powder and the water. The bread is retrieved from the oven. If more time for baking is required, there can be the sharing of memories, recitation of more Bible verses, etc.]

Presider: Ecclesiastes reminds us that for everything there is a season, a time to live and a time to die. The gospel gives us hope that death is not the end.

[Presider takes the glass containing the cocktail and holds it up to Sufferer.]

Presider: (Name), do you know what this will do when you drink it?

Sufferer: I do. It will kill me.
Presider: (Name), are you sure that you want to drink this?
Sufferer: I am

Meal

Presider: Let us share a final meal together.

[The bread is distributed as each person tears off a piece and passes it to the next person. All eat in silence. When everyone has finished, the candle is blown out by Sufferer.]

Presider: As you drink this, go in peace, and go with God.

[Sufferer drinks.]
Presider: Let us pray (prayer adapted from official Lutheran pastoral source)

Sending

[All Gathered sing the hymn "Come Though Fount" as Sufferer begins to lose consciousness.]

Liquid Theologizing and the *Sensus Fidelium*

These two examples of ritual inventiveness and transfer underscore a perceived gap in the ritual repertoire of key segments of Christian traditions. Rituals serve many needs and purposes. As strategies for meaning making, they have a particular role in confronting danger and the impending chaos such danger intimates. As noted above, this era of liquid ritualizing is not the first time in human history that believers or even Christians are reimaging and inventing rituals. At the same time, there is an overabundance of ritual transfer and ritual invention in the current period, exposing what could be considered a growing ritual and meaning-making vacuum in the face of the impending chaos of this liquid age.

What is not here in overabundance, however, is theologizing about this demonstrably felt ritual void—especially as a flow across established religions such as those that comprise the Christian family. For Roman Catholics, as with some other Christian Churches, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to theologize in view of this ritual blossoming that acknowledges this phenomenon as a fresh breathing of the Spirit, and at the same time positively links it to central practices and beliefs. Doing so is essential if such practices are not to be dismissed as shallow fads, but instead recognized as fervent expressions of faith. This requires engagement with the incarnational nature of the church, the "sacramental principle," and our richly polyphonic tradition of sacramental practices and theologies in varied, even liquid ways.

One valuable key for establishing this linkage for Roman Catholics is our dogmatic teaching around the concept of *sensus fidelium* (Lat., "sense of the faithful). This ancient and largely unexplored belief received particular affirmation for Roman Catholics at Vatican II (1962–65). It is specifically *Lumen Gentium* that addresses the topic of the *sensus fidelium* when it teaches that "the universal body of the faithful, who have received the anointing of the holy one, cannot be mistaken in belief" (no. 12). *Lumen Gentium* offers this teaching in light of its previous yet infrequently invoked assertion that the "holy people of God has a share … in the prophetic role of Christ" (no. 12). From this prophetic perspective one can define the *sensus fidelium* as "a basic means of understanding the faith and as such exercises a truth-finding and truth-attesting function that has as its special characteristic that it takes into account the faithful's experience in the world" (Rush 2009, 2).

While not something apart from the Church's magisterium, this gift of the faithful does not spring from the magisterium but is rooted in the divine invitation through Christ to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). This invitation is sacramentally inscribed on the bodies of the newly baptized as the minister announces their welcome into God's holy people, and chrismates each, recalling Christ's anointing by the Holy Spirit as priest, prophet and king.

The Canadian theologian Jean-Marie Tillard (d. 2000), developed an understanding of the mutual interplay between the teaching magisterium of the church, the people of God and theologians: not as one of opposing forces but rather as an exercise of communion, in which each has something to contribute (Tillard 1992, 113). Noting that the role of the faithful is not simply one of blind obedience, and that the faithful have a responsibility to discern what is best for the church from their unique perspective and given their particular "talent," Tillard remarks "that a magisterial declaration in which the *sensus fidelium* does not recognize what is good for it is *a priori* very awkward or even suspect" (Tillard 1992, 112).

A burgeoning *sensus fidelium* of Christians—including Catholic Christians—is that our current sacramental practices and theologies are too stolid, inert, and inflexible. On their own volition, Christians are engaging in liquid ritualizing and theologizing that is undoubtedly shocking to many ecclesial leaders. For example, de Groot describes one Roman Catholic who, during televised Eucharist has her own private ritual:

> I always put a piece of bread ready and hold the bowl with the bread in it during the consecration. So during communion at least I take part "symbolically." It does not bother me whether or not this is legitimate in the eyes of the official church. It is to me, and, after all, that is what counts (de Groot 2008, 287).

"What counts" goes to the heart of the question. Too often" what counts" for ordinary believers does not count in official teaching or practice. It is certainly one of the factors contributing to the mass exodus of folk—especially the young—from mainline churches, without their abandoning of spirituality, belief, ritualizing, or even God. Without eschewing official sacraments—be they enumerated as two or seven—the Christian tradition is polyphonic in embracing a wide ranges of sacramental practices and beliefs: case in point, the most famous Western doctor of the Church, Augustine. This is not pandering, this is pondering what is real in people's lives. Christians in general, and Roman Catholics in particular, need to liquidize our sacramentality in practice and teaching to demonstrate an acute understanding that God's spirit cannot be boxed in a tabernacle or shelved until some duly deputed minister summons that Spirit through an officially sanctioned ritual. To paraphrase Arfman, it is God's Spirit that freely seeps, oozes and flows in and between our lives, in and between our rituals. Christians do not create sacramentality, we recognize it. Hopefully with more liquefied lenses, we will be better prepared to acknowledge both the fluidity of God's own self-communication, and to encourage the ambidextrous reception of that self-communication by all who are created in the image of such divine fluidity.

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