"Questioning the Primacy of Method: On Sokolowski's Eucharistic Presence"

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Method without truth, form without content, representation without real presence, names without things—these are the false antinomies which Eucharistic Presence helps us to dissolve.

From its title one might expect that Robert Sokolowski’s recent theological work treats only the Eucharist.\(^1\) Not surprisingly, the praise it has received from reviewers focused mainly on this aspect of the book.\(^2\) In fact the scope of Eucharistic Presence is far more comprehensive, for Sokolowski uses the mystery of the Eucharist to illustrate a kind of thinking that challenges some of the most basic presuppositions of contemporary theologians. While his reflections on the Eucharist are profound, his broader proposal concerning what he calls a “theology of disclosure” addresses a fundamental problem in contemporary culture and raises central questions about the nature of theology. Sokolowski’s theology of disclosure takes on modern culture’s questioning of the validity of appearances and modern theology’s skepticism regarding God’s real appearance in the Eucharist. In order to appreciate its full scope and significance, this multifaceted work needs to be explored on many levels. My argument will therefore proceed in four steps: (1) by examining the problem of appearances that modern culture has created in our understanding of the natural and political world; (2) by showing how Sokolowski’s theology of disclosure responds to modernity’s skepticism regarding appearances of the real; (3) by elaborating and offering a critique of some of the principal theses regarding the Eucharist in Sokolowski’s book; and (4) by contrasting Sokolowski’s concrete approach to the self-disclosure of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist with the methodological distanciation that is prominent among many contemporary Christian theologians. I conclude with some remarks calling for a reappraisal of the role of method in theology.

I.

Appearances do count for something. In certain situations a raised eyebrow or a furtive glance evinces an ineffable quality. Rendered into verbal discourse, such a gesture loses the full expressiveness which it originally communicated. An appearance of this sort bears meaning in a manner that cannot be separated from the appearance itself, for the way something comes to presence is brought to light in the expression itself. In the words of Lévinas, an expression that appears in such an appearance manifests the presence of being not simply by drawing aside the veil of the phenomenon.\(^3\) When asked what he meant when he wrote “three leopards sat under a juniper tree,” T.S. Eliot is reported to have replied, “I mean ‘three leopards sat under a juniper tree.’”\(^4\) Eliot recognizes the density of poetic language but also, by analogy, that not all concrete forms of manifestation are reducible to one another. What he meant when he said “three leopards sat under a juniper tree” simply could not have been paraphrased.

Yet the modern world claims that appearances deceive. Since the advent of modern science in the sixteenth cen-


tury, distrust in appearances has become a commonplace.\textsuperscript{5} Although himself no skeptic, Galileo Galilei defended what would evolve into a fundamentally modern stance by arguing for a sharp distinction between nature’s primary and secondary qualities. Although his motives may have more in common with ancient Pythagoreans than with many twentieth century scientists, Galileo put his trust only in the shapes, numbers, and motions which could be detected by the eye and manipulated into mathematical formulae.\textsuperscript{6} Because they admitted of no known mathematical treatment, tastes, odors, and sounds were relegated to the category of secondary, subjective qualities. This separation of subjective qualities, from those capable of mathematisation, writes Stillman Drake, was a decisive step in the removal of man from his traditionally central place in the entire scheme of things.\textsuperscript{7} Galileo initiated a modern tendency to view the truth of the visible world with suspicion by conceiving of an idealized, self-contained, and logically precise theoretical screen.\textsuperscript{8} Or, in Husserl’s words: “Immediately with Galileo, then, begins the surreptitious substitution of idealized nature for prescientifically intuited nature.”\textsuperscript{9} In Galileo’s wake, appearances of the non-idealized, “objective” world were well on their way to becoming mere appearances.

While scientists today may no longer share Galileo’s predilection for a purely visual theorization of nature, we moderns are still heirs to his distrust of appearances. Unless our bare perception of an event in the natural world is accompanied by a complex, non-intuitive explanation, we fear that we have not gotten to the bottom of things. Non-technical views are thought of as “superficial,” which literally means “skimming the surface.” Faith in the power of the scientific viewpoint compels us to take our distance from the appearance as appearance. If we really want to understand the world, we need an explanation that will unmask the illusion of what we perceive with our own eyes. This confidence in the complexity of what transpires below the veil of appearances leads to a gradual diminishment in the significance of the life world. The deleterious consequences of this development are manifold. Actions are thought of as mere choices; public virtues, private intentions; thoughts, neurological activities; loves, emotions; personhood, psychological states.

David Bohm, a noted, albeit controversial physicist, characterizes scientific explanations as “abstractions.”\textsuperscript{10} Even though Bohm accepts the correspondence of the mind’s knowledge with the reality it reflects in some qualified sense and even though he ultimately rejects any dualistic separation of the order implied in the world from the visible, “explicate” order of which the mind is conscious, Bohm’s initial characterization nonetheless accords with the general phenomenon we have been describing.\textsuperscript{11} In the hands of a less organismic thinker than Bohm, the widespread assumption that science—and science alone—offers us a necessary critical distance from reality is suspect. What is problematic about this characterization is not the claim that the scientific abstraction is valid only within a certain degree of approximation (that point would have been conceded almost immediately by any ancient observer of nature) but the insistence that views of reality are just that—mere views, single vantage points, isolated snapshots. The non-technical perception needs to be augmented by an appeal to an indeterminate whole beneath the appearances. We live, as Heidegger once said about our technological age, in an epoch in which the world appears in a picture frame.\textsuperscript{12}

The mass-marketing of recent computer technology confirms the secondary quality of appearances. We can now communicate valuable information worldwide through a net-


\textsuperscript{8} A more rigorously philosophical account of the significance of “Galilean science” for the establishment of the modern worldview can be found in E. Husserl, The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 23-59.

\textsuperscript{9} E. Husserl, The Crisis of the European Sciences, 49-50.

\textsuperscript{10} David Bohm, Causality and Chance in Modern Physics (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 164-65: “...we are led to understand nature in terms of the inexhaustible diversity and multiplicity of things... As a result no particular kind of thing can be more than an abstraction from this process, an abstraction that is valid within a certain degree of approximation... Such an abstraction evidently cannot represent an absolute truth; for to do this it would have to be valid without approximation, unconditionally, in all possible contexts, and for all time. Hence, any particular theory will constitute an approximate, conditional, and relative truth.”


work whose ironic label suggests it consists of ether. What is really ethereal about the new information highway, however, is not its capacity for sharing countless, fragmentary bits of information but the sheer invisibility of what it accomplishes. Perceived technological progress solidifies the idea that what really matters is not apparent to the naked eye. Marriage proposals and formulae for neutron bombs arrive instantly over the Internet, yet we are too technologically advanced to pause to reflect on the location and nature of these messages while they are being communicated.

An analogous distrust of appearances has emerged in the domain of public action. What does it mean to act responsibly in our world? Clearly such a broad question admits of no single answer; however, the sheer size and arbitrary character of our contemporary social groupings seem to place limits on meaningful social action. Social intercourse increasingly becomes defined by highly arbitrary arrangements, e.g., as users of a World Wide Web, as citizens in a modern nation-state, as members of a peculiarly drawn voting district, as inhabitants of a residential bedroom community whose outward appearance is replicated throughout the nation. By itself, the bloated size of the polis may not provoke distrust, but a sense of alienation does arise when we feel that we belong to groups which reflect little, if anything, beyond the sum of our individual choices to participate.

So far we have postulated that a distrust of appearances accompanies modern views of both nature and society. There is likewise a close parallel between modern science’s bracketing of the natural phenomena and political science’s mode of social analysis. The modern science of politics assumes we are uneasy about the difference our actions make. An idealized theoretical filter drawn from the social sciences is needed to gauge properly the effectiveness of political action. Social programs that claim to promote the common good must first be tested according to an abstract scientific standard in order to screen out the interference of the personal prejudices and ideological biases that taint the pre-scientific life world.

The strictures of modern political life make it very difficult to understand the precise manner in which meaningful human action is always poised between necessity and contingency. Even when we have a common sense understanding of how we should act, there is still an underlying anxiety that our actions by themselves lack meaning. A rather lengthy citation from Robert Sokolowski’s first work in theology sheds some light on the matter:

This felt uneasiness is reflected in two opposite ideological extremes: some simply deny that there can be anything like agency or responsibility, while others trivialize action. Not being able to act, they make a virtue out of compulsion and say that the pathetic gestures they are reduced to are in fact what we should call human action. Action is equated with being in motion—whether emotionally, spatially, or verbally—or with idle, symbolic gestures that determine nothing, or with rhetorical performances. This oscillation between ideological extremes, between the deterministic and the romantic, is related to an interpretation of reason as overly “mathematical,” as detached from appraisal and choice in the world in which we live: over against such mathematical reason, “responsibility” is left either to lurch willfully from one thing to another or merely to implement the questionable, inevitable designs of thought.

The scientific theorization of nature compels us to view our own actions in the same terms. The anxiety of modern political life is related to the deep-rooted confusion over how anything meaningful can manifest itself. Understood deterministically, personal self-determination must capitulate to the scientific calculations of the social planners. This we sense the minute we walk into the office of any rationalized bureaucratic office. Understood romantically, human action is a concatenation of affective gestures and public-relations stunts. This we encounter whenever a screen or music idol is allowed to muse aloud in the media or a political “spin-doctor” disseminates well-calculated verbiage. In either case, the appearance of human qualities worthy of universal admiration is obscured by our contra-

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\(^{12}\)For two very similar diagnoses motivated by very different political aims, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 363–66; and Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 208, 282: “The danger of an exclusively technical civilization, which is devoid of the interconnection between theory and praxis, can be clearly grasped; it is threatened by the splitting of its consciousness, and by the splitting of human beings into two classes—the social engineers and the inmates of closed institutions.”


dictory ideas about whether action can express anything more than arbitrary choices.¹⁶

Perhaps no one approached the ambiguity of modern political and social life as unapologetically as Niccolò Machiavelli. According to Machiavelli, a prince must know, as everyone does, that it is laudable to keep good faith and live with integrity. Nonetheless, Machiavelli writes, “the experience of our times shows those princes to have done great things which have had little regard for good faith, and have been able by astuteness to confuse men’s brains, and who have ultimately overcome those who have made loyalty their foundation.” Machiavelli refused to grant ideal republics a normative role in politics. Living politically, i.e., what was thought by Aristotle to be a distinctively human contribution to the real, is thereby reduced to the craft of dissimulation. Machiavelli’s “ideal” prince has no choice but to disguise his character well “and to be a great feign er and dissembler.” When political action no longer needs to be guided by natural necessities, the prince acts as “a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.” Machiavelli is advising his prince to manipulate appearances so that others trust in him.¹⁷

The modern principle of distrust ing appearances becomes a prerequisite for able statecraft. “Spin-doctors” are a logical consequence of a political principle that first gained acceptance in the theoretical domain in the modern period, even though such skepticism about the constitution of the real is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. The ancient world had its skeptics, and even Socrates induced a distrust of appearances of a sort. Nor has modernity’s own methods for distrust ing appearances eliminated the pre-scientific need to question authorities. If anything, the opinions of scientific experts and social planners now command as blind an acceptance as any religious or social tenet in pre-modern society. Yet modernity problematizes the perceptiveness of common sense and questions the wisdom of a theoretically unaided perception of appearances in a way that was never imagined in the ancient world.¹⁸ Allegedly post-modern attacks on scientific rationality or perspectival neutrality seem only to have added to the general climate of cynicism.¹⁹ Bare observation and effective moral action based upon a firm grasp of what is most essential about the real emerge as quaintly quixotic quests. Any serious attempt to grasp the real presence of God in the Eucharist must first come to grips with modernity’s deep-rooted skepticism about the real.

II.

I would like to introduce Sokolowski’s second work in theology, Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure, against the backdrop of modernity’s problematization of appearances. The title and the subtitle point to the dual aims of the work. On the one hand, Sokolowski advances certain specific claims about the Eucharist. On the other hand, he is also making an original and far-reaching proposal about “a style” of Christian theology that still has not been taken seriously enough by our contemporaries. While the two aims cannot actually be separated, I would like to examine Sokolowski’s proposed “theology of disclosure” before introducing his eucharistic theology in order to show how the entire work serves as a response to the problem of appearances.

It would be misleading but not false to say that the theology of disclosure represents the application of Sokolowski’s philosophical investigations in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology to the problems and questions of Christian the-

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¹⁸“Common sense” has a largely pejorative meaning in modern thought because it is identified with a consciousness that has not yet made the differentiation between personal prejudice and the value-free realm of theory. There is, however, an older, more social sense of the term, of sensus communis, which was also recognized in the modern era by the humanist Vico, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, and Henri Bergson. For these thinkers common or communal sense is a somewhat fluid pedagogical ideal which reflects the basic moral sensibilities of the society but still must be adjusted to new situations. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1972, 3rd, expanded ed.), 16-24.

ology. It is far more elucidating, phenomenologically speaking, to say that the theology of disclosure examines the way theological things appear (11ff., 174ff.). As we have just seen, modern thought has the tendency to treat the presentation of something in an image as a mere appearance, a deficient manifestation of an unseen mental entity modern philosophers think of as a mental representation, idea, or concept. Classical modern epistemology has the tendency to lock these ideas in our minds as in a cabinet. The relationship between the ideas trapped in our heads and the imaged world of appearances becomes a problem for the philosophy of mind, one which by definition begets unending further reflection. With its Cartesian dualism, modernity takes bodies as mere appearances of minds. With its Galilean science, it relegates smells, tastes, sounds, and any other non-mathematizable phenomena to secondary qualities. With its reduction of the body politic to the merely political, it induces a fundamental distrust of responsible social action. None of these modern developments brings us any closer to appearances as appearances.

Sokolowski's investigation of the way things manifest themselves in the world aims to retrieve the presence of the real. Bracketing (but not ignoring) the epistemological skepticism of modern philosophy, he proposes a return to the things themselves. Following Gadamer, he suggests that the image that appears before the mind constitutes an increase in being (Seinszuhang) of the thing. The focus is on the concrete appearance as such rather than an idealized mental representation. Allowing something to be recognized in an image can actually bring us closer to grasping its defining characteristics. With the proper distinctions about how the thing does and does not display itself in the image, we may even be able to intuit what is essential about it.


Consider a concrete example. Michelangelo's Last Judgment recalls for us the reality of a final judgment upon our souls in a different way than a word processor recalls from a hard disk a file containing the Greek text of the Nicene Creed. The difference between the two senses of representation is not based merely upon the way that the representation on the wall of the Sistine Chapel appeals to our personal sense of artistic taste. Nor can the difference be confined to the way the two modes of presentation may or may not exercise our imagination. Presentational differences uncovered by a theology of disclosure are never merely subjective or merely psychological. One reason Michelangelo's image has been preserved through the centuries is because it represents more than his particular viewpoint on the matter. What the artist images in a painted form enriches our apprehension of the very identity of an eschatological judgment as this reality is already known to us in other presentations of Christian faith. A formal study of the fresco techniques which Michelangelo employed may or may not help us to understand the reality of final judgment; however, taken as a dramatic presentation of Christ's lordship over death above and below the realm of the living, we are actually presented with a fuller picture of final judgment when we attend to Michelangelo's fresco. 22

The example of the Last Judgment shows that a theology of disclosure supplements but does not contradict what other forms of theology would establish as true from within the domain of faith. Its starting point is phenomenological rather than ontological, and the phenomenological approach opens up rather than replaces the ontological. 23 Unlike the speculative propositions which theology also needs to affirm regarding the being of Christian realities in themselves, the theology of disclosure describes these realities as they manifest themselves to us. A theology of disclosure studies "the identity of objects as given through a manifold of appearances" (22) and seeks to un-

22 Not surprisingly, some modern art historians suspect that the semblance of a circular motion in the Last Judgment may actually depict a merely Neoplatonic philosophy of emanation and return. This questioning of the disclosure of the Christian realities is hard to square with the overtly eschatological themes that arise in Michelangelo's poetry, particularly in the madrigals dedicated to Vittorio Colonna. Cf. Marcia B. Hall, "Michelangelo's Last Judgment: Resurrection of the Body and Predestination," Art Bulletin 58 (1976): 91.

cover the distinct displays of theological realities in each appearance. Each level of manifestation intensifies the identity of the thing (23). Whenever a divine reality is displayed in a particular image of faith, it becomes, so to speak, more itself. In other words, the greater the variety of displays of a single reality, the more we can establish its self-same identity in the displays. By examining the manifold of displays which Christian faith provides in Scripture, in the theological tradition, and, above all, in the sacred action of the sacraments, a theology of disclosure verifies that "[t]he greater the being of the thing, the greater its powers of display, the greater its eidos" (23).24

The theology of disclosure therefore meets the modern problematization of appearances on its own terms. Sokolowski aims to turn modernity's radical suspicion of appearances to the advantage of a theology of disclosure:

... just as Plato's philosophy arose in response to the challenge of the Sophists, so a positive and deeper understanding of appearances can arise in response to the misunderstanding of appearance that stands at the root of modernity. (182)

The theology of disclosure starts with appearances because modernity has challenged us to come up with a better account of them (184). Whereas modern theology has often accepted this challenge by aligning itself uncritically with one or another icon of modern thought (e.g., Kant, Hegel, Marx, or the history of religions), Sokolowski uses Husserl's project of returning to the things themselves like a scalpel to cut through modern philosophical dogmas and allow the real modes of presentation of the God of Christian faith to come to the fore.

Like Balthasar, Sokolowski is calling for a recovery of the visible forms of God's appearance in concrete manifestations. Visible forms are not abstractions, for their splendor and radiance admit of a perceptible measure.25 One could easily mis-

understand the mode of inquiry which he adopts. His approach focuses more on the "formal modes of presentation" than the disclosure of distinct things (200). Distinctions regarding forms of presentation help us to grasp the Christian way of apprehending the manifestation of the divine as well as its relation to and difference from other forms of sacred manifestation. By prioritizing the unique ways in which God discloses himself in worldly forms, a theology of disclosure can show that "the divine glory is not merely a supreme version of worldly beauty" (206), for in it the dramatic art and action of God are revealed. Just as Balthasar opens his trilogy with the analogy of beauty, Sokolowski shows that "[t]he beautiful is not the merely aesthetic: it is the admirable, and it completes the good and the true" (207). The theology of disclosure dislodges the concrete forms of God's own glory attested to in the Christian tradition from the theoretical abstractions erected by scholastic and modern theology alike.

It might seem that a theology of disclosure ignores or gives short shrift to theology's anthropological dimension. Is there any room in this project to speak of a subjective experience of what has been disclosed in concrete forms? In fact, there is. Sokolowski's insistence upon the objectivity with which the phenomenological approach allows appearances to appear is tempered by his recognition that we ourselves are "datives of manifestation" (9, 144, 158, 193). In Husserlian terminology, theological anthropology studied under the ministrations of a theology of disclosure entails a "shift of interest from what is manifested to the modes of its manifestness and to the acts which manifest it."26 An act which manifests manifestation is also a disclosure, but to study that act as a disclosure requires a shift from the "world" to the clarification and articulation of the web of beliefs that constitute the world. In other words, a theology of disclosure also takes its own determination of the manifestation of disclosure as a theme. It surveys not only God's disclosure in the world but also modes of presence and absence in "non-worldly, world-constituting subjectivity."27 In its critique

24It should be kept in mind that when Sokolowski uses the term eidos, he aims to preserve the etymological connection with looking and viewing. The eidos (Lat. species) is taken to mean primarily the "look" or "view" that things present to us rather than, as is often assumed, an invisible, unviewable "idea" that stands above or behind things (cf. 183).

25This "measure" could be considered an aesthetic measure if one understood by that the measuring of the distinct appearances in relation to each other so that together the parts disclose the beauty of the whole. For Christ, the form of every form, the measure is the very immeasurability of his person. Cf.


27Ibid.
of modern psychologizing trends, a theology of disclosure acknowledges the appearance of manifestation itself, an acknowledgment that might be termed the objective genitiveness of disclosure. This does not rule out, however, that the minh, the "to me" of manifestation, which in Husserlian and Heideggerian philosophy seems to be a declension from manifestation itself (the nominative), can also be adequately thematized.\textsuperscript{28} Below I will return to the role of the dative of manifestation in Sokolowski's eucharistic theology. For now let it suffice to say that Balthasar also seems to adopt a similar approach to Christian anthropology when we consider the creation of men and women in the image and likeness of the Creator as "God's own speech."\textsuperscript{29}

Another objection that might be raised to the theology of disclosure is that the singular emphasis on God's real presence is unwarranted. What role, if any, do symbols and symbolic modes of disclosure play in this theology? Again the objection can be met if one has a proper understanding of the theology of disclosure's distinct approach to the problem of appearances. To cite a text that is representative of contemporary views, when Susanne Langer writes that "a concept is all that a symbol really conveys," she pinpoints the problems and possibilities in the post-Kantian conception of the symbol.\textsuperscript{30} Langer expresses the widely accepted notion that from symbols we visualize private abstractions in our minds which are then cloaked in a vestment provided by our own particular imaginations. Symbols, in her view, allow us to create our own meaning out of the world by abstracting from the concrete presentation of the real into a private mental realm. Sokolowski, on the other hand, recognizes that this view of symbolism differs dramatically from

\textsuperscript{28}Cf. Thomas Pruffer, "Husserl, Heidegger, Early and Late, and Aquinas," in ibid., 75: "Husserl anticipated Heidegger's shift to the praxis of manifestation and hiddenness over the dative of manifestation, over the minh, the 'to me,' which seems to be a declension from the ego, the 'I,' but which Husserl himself reverses to the status of that out of which the ego comes about, the ego as the center of responsibility and as the recipient of objectifications." Sokolowski's own understanding of the dative of manifestation is closely allied to that of Pruffer and is elaborated in his book, \textit{Presences and Absences: A Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 128, 170-71.

\textsuperscript{29}Das Ganze im Fragment: Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1963), 264-68.


the view of "the Fathers of the Church and for the ancient world generally," for whom "a symbol did not only signify something; it also was thought to participate in that thing and make it concretely present. The symbolic [in the ancient world] was not contrasted with the real" (188-99).

Sokolowski does not separate real from symbolic modes of presentation. The theology of disclosure aims to retrieve traditions more original than scholastic and modern devolutions from the Greek term \textit{symbolein} (literally, "to throw together"). Since the ancient world took the symbolic to represent "that which is thrown together" in the sense of an encounter or real participation of two realities, it felt the interpenetration of the symbolic and the real quite keenly. A theology of disclosure advocates a return to a participatory sense of real presence in symbolic manifestations, a theme which has been often obscured by the subjectivizing tendency of modern thought. By establishing the objectivity of perceptible, aesthetic form as well as the rich diversity of nature's forms, a theology of disclosure makes an essential contribution to a retrieval of the notion of symbolic participation in the real.\textsuperscript{31} To advocate a step beyond the modern solution does not however entail jettisoning the modern problematic. One cannot simply restate what the ancients or the Fathers said about symbols, Sokolowski argues, without addressing the genuine philosophical issue raised by "the modern move into a purely formal sense of the symbolic" (200).

What does Sokolowski mean by the term eucharistic presence? It is well known that recent philosophy has questioned the validity of pure presence as a philosophical category, and by some accounts the sacramental presence defended by the Catholic tradition would seem to be closely allied to what Heidegger named "the ontological constitution of metaphysics."\textsuperscript{32} Jean-Luc Marion has countered this deconstructionist critique by proposing in his treatment of "the eucharistic site of theology" a non-idolatrous event that occurs, \textit{pace} Derrida,

\textsuperscript{31}For a modern, i.e., anthropologically centered interpretation of liturgical symbols which does not ignore participation with divine realities, see Kevin Irwin, \textit{Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology} (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 145-46.

“outside of the text.” He contends that the Eucharist’s cruciform form of kenotic love belies the identification of the divine with the highest or most perfect presence on the pre-Heideggerian screen of being.33

Unlike Marion, Sokolowski does not aim to cross out the being of God nor is his theology of disclosure as prophetic in decrying the idolatries of traditional metaphysics. Sokolowski treats as “one of the benefits we can draw from modernity” a “sharper distinction between ontology and phenomenology” (193). Whereas ancient thought treated the appearances of things and their substantial forms together, modernity tends to separate the two altogether. Sokolowski defends the distinction even while strongly rejecting their separation. In spite of this catholic approach to the history of philosophy, it cannot be said that Sokolowski’s proposal defends the pure presence pilloried by the deconstructionists and those theologians influenced by their critique of ontotheology.34 A theology of disclosure attends to both presences and absences but not through a speculative mediation of their difference. Following Husserl, Sokolowski maintains that our perception of a thing is accompanied by empty intentions which anticipate absent parts (22). A cube, in this view, is not the sum of its profiles and sides but the “identity in and through a manifold of manifestation” (23). By attending to appearance and its modes of presentation, we can recognize that presences and absences are mixed in unanticipatable ways.

Recognition of absences is not, therefore, just a prolegomenon to the elucidation of presence. For example, not all absences in the presentation are the result of the vagueness on the part of the viewer. Philosophical analysis can elucidate distinctions which allow us to differentiate between absences that can still be brought to light because they remain obscure simply in their presentation to us and absences that cannot because they are actually appropriate to the manifestation itself.35 Presence as a determination of a deliberate and proper philosophical analysis cannot be said to be pure since presencing arises out of a play of its own determination and the “unmathematic, anonymous [i.e., absent] awareness we have of presencing before we turn it to philosophical”36 Presence and absence belong together, and their commingling in and behind the phenomena is itself a theme for philosophical analysis. A theology of disclosure therefore provides the resources for questioning totalizing notions of presence. Such questioning recognizes that philosophical concepts alone do not bring anything to presence, for genuine theoria can shed light on the coming to presence of things only if thought does not prejudice the matter at hand by seeking to impose the distillation of a pure presence. In other words, unless one engages a theology of disclosure with a rigorous attention to the displays themselves, then even the thematization of presence can become a conceptual overlay.

Sokolowski employs the interplay of presence and absence in Eucharistic Presence (194–95). With regard to the Eucharist, presentational analysis can identify the real presencing as well as the “provocative ambiguity” regarding the voice speaking during the recitation of the words of institution (158). The recognition that absence is not just a subjective, mental quality can shed light on the relationship of absence to the notion of transcendence. Biblical belief intensifies the natural absence of the divine, e.g., with talk of the “hidden God” of Israel. As datives of this presence and absence, we “are exposed to a kind of absence and transcendence beyond those we encounter in our worldly involvements” (195). The doctrine of faith could be deepened by a consideration of the biblical God’s radical absence from the world.37 Christian eschatology could benefit from a more intensive analysis of the absence of the things for which we hope in faith (Heb 11:1). These are just some of the topics relating to absence which a theology of disclosure could investigate.

To summarize this section, Sokolowski’s theology of disclosure addresses the modern problematization of appearances while still adopting a critical stance towards the standard responses of modern and “post-modern” culture. A theology of disclosure can meet some of the objections that might be posed

36Ibid., 154-55.
to it by contemporary Catholic theologians, i.e., that it ignores the anthropological dimension of theology, that it privileges real over symbolic modes of disclosure, and that it favors an ontology of pure presence. In what follows I turn to the specific recommendations for a eucharistic theology which follow from this new style of thinking theologically.

III.

Sokolowski introduces Eucharistic Presence by reviewing the articles of Christian faith which are especially significant for his study (1-3). These are, in effect, the theological realities which a theology of disclosure will bring to our attention. Significantly, he focuses not so much on the affirmation of God’s mere presence in the Church’s confession of faith but on what Balthasar would call die Handlung, the Christian belief that God’s action has been performed for us within human affairs. The life, death, and Resurrection of the incarnate Son comprise the central and culminating element in God’s “emploiment” in human history. The deliverance of the Jews from slavery in the Old Testament and the celebration of the Jewish Passover meal proclaim God’s saving action on behalf of his people even before the earthly ministry of Jesus commences. Whether or not the Last Supper was an actual Passover meal (Sokolowski leaves this question open), in it “Jesus transformed the bread and wine that were part of the ritual of the meal into an expression of himself in his death and Resurrection” (2). This feast transforms the Exodus of Israel into an anticipation of what occurred in Christ. By instructing his disciples to repeat what he did at the Last Supper, the divine action of Christ’s death and Resurrection becomes reenacted throughout the world. The eucharistic feast we celebrate today is not a merely symbolic gesture or a mere memory of what took place almost two thousand years ago. The sacramental representation of the one action of God in Christ makes palpably present to all who participate in it the grace-filled reality of becoming children of God (Rom 8:16-17).

How does a theology of disclosure allow the palpable presence of God’s one action in Christ to manifest itself? One of the most penetrating analyses in the book is the treatment of the words of institution spoken by the priest. All too often we think about the words of institution as a dramatic presentation of what happened at the Last Supper. If, in an effort to adopt a more personal style, the priest establishes eye contact with the congregation or gestures dramatically at this moment, he exacerbates this view. A theology of disclosure does not simply state the correct way to present the words of institution but introduces distinctions regarding the presentational differences involved. In other words, it looks at not only what is true and false in the presentation itself but also at the mode of presentation by which something is disclosed truly or falsely.

The mode of manifestation of the words of institution is that of sacramental quotation. Even apart from the Eucharist, there is a basic presentational difference in human communication between depiction and quotation. Consider a concrete example. If I tell someone that my pet dog has been killed in a car accident by drawing my forefinger across my neck, I am presenting the information differently than if I report that the veterinarian declared him dead at half past noon. The first instance is a depiction; the second a quotation. In each case I communicate something about a dead canine, but the modes of presentation are distinct. In the first instance, I am offering my interlocutor a kind of picture of what happened. Whether or not I carry out this signal with dramatic flair (I could, for example, embellish by yelping like a dying animal or mimicking the sound of screeching tires), the presentation speaks through my gesture by means of drawing the dying animal into the context of the conversation (91). Through my dramatic presentation, I myself am disclosed as the maker of a picture.

The second example consists of a quotation rather than a dramatic performance. Even if my interlocutor chooses to form in his head an image of a dead animal lying on a table in the veterinarian’s office, my quotation alone has not created the picture of what happened. Rather than creating an image, the quotation draws our attention to the content of what is quoted. It invites a discussion of the fact of my pet’s death, from which we can expatiate on the living dog’s qualities, my grief, my interlocutor’s empathy, the meaning of an animal’s death, etc. By citing the words of the veterinarian, I move the conversation away from myself to a presentation made by someone else. The

38Sokolowski elaborates the distinction between picturing and quoting in his book, Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), esp. 5-10, and 27-33.
39Ibid., 6-7.
words and gestures instantiate rather than perform. He becomes transparent so that we can behold the missions of the divine persons in the very offering of a sacrifice. The words he quotes presuppose an emptying of the performative self before the power and efficacy of the divine Word. Admittedly, this form of representation introduces what Sokolowski refers to as "a provocative ambiguity" in the play of presentations, but by identifying the proper sense of sacramental quotation, it is still meaningful to say that Christ himself speaks during the consecration. Identifying the real presence of Christ in the priest's words and gestures also means understanding the appropriate absences that border the presentation of the real. Nonetheless, if we cannot say or understand that Christ himself speaks in the eucharistic celebration, then the proper focus on God's real presence and real action on our behalf would be seriously weakened.

Many other aspects of the eucharistic mystery are submitted to a similar phenomenological analysis in Eucharistic Presence: the representation of Jesus' preenactment of his death on the Cross in the Last Supper, the epiclesis or calling down of the Holy Spirit on the gifts we are about to present to the Father, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the blending of memory and anticipation in the time of the Eucharist, the difference and relation between the Christian Eucharist and the Jewish Passover meal, bread as sacrament, and our participation in the conformity of Christ's obedient, distinctly human will to the will of the Father. All of these themes and several others merit the attention and careful scrutiny of contemporary Catholic theologians, for many of them have been either lost altogether or obscured by modern theology's fascination with critical theories which abstract from God's own appearance in the eucharistic feast. In what follows I would like to focus on just two themes: the role of the community and the treatment of creation and eschatology.

From the perspective of what is generally taught in Catholic universities and seminaries today, Sokolowski's relegation of the participatory role of the congregation to a single footnote in the book comes as a bit of a shock (19, n.11). In light of the anthropological dimension of the disclosure delineated above, one might have expected a more prominent and sus-

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40"God's word is itself effective; his word "is not a discourse but an action" (65). The citation is from Louis Bouyer, Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 32.

41Sokolowski, Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions, 30.
tained treatment of the community’s role as a dative of manifest
ation (cf. 144). This jolt is offset by his admission on the pre
vious page of the

many presences of Christ in his Church: the community itself establishes
a particular presence of the Body of Christ, Christ is present in the minis
ter who celebrates the Eucharist, he is present in the Scriptures read dur
ing the liturgy of the Word, and he becomes sacramentally present as he
is both offered in sacrifice and received in communion during the liturgy
of the Eucharist. (17)

According to Sokolowski, the one Body of Christ is represented
in the community, in the ordained priest, in the Scriptures, and
finally in the action of distributing (the “offering” and “receiv
ing”) of the eucharistic elements themselves. These distinct rep
resentations admit, he states, of “a graded order among those
who participate in the Eucharist, particularly between the priest
and the congregation” (17). Placing the priest above the congre
gation, he notes, “emerges not because of any personal qualities
of the individual celebrant, but because the ordained celebrant
represents Christ the Lord” (17). He also draws upon the Pauline
metaphor of headship and body to signal the ordered representa
tion of Christ’s presence that descends from the actual distri
bution of the Eucharist to the community itself.

Acknowledging that “a graded order” exists among
the participants in the eucharistic celebration is essential for re
covering the true meaning of the many presencings of Christ in
his Church. Referring to the “I” of Christ as the Head of his Body
which is spoken in the priest’s quotation of the words of institu
tion is an appropriate way to clarify this point (17). Without
such language, the sense in which the priest stands in a unique
way in persona Christi in the eucharistic celebration can easily be
lost to view. Democratizing the relationships between priest and
laity not only belies important theological distinctions, but it
leads to serious problems in the disclosure of Christ’s real pres
ence. Sokolowski’s distinctions help to preserve the true sense
of representation.

However, given that the sacramental quotation of
the words of institution already harbors ambiguity, the presenta
tional analysis could have been taken one step further. Does
not the representation by the ordained priest function through a
second kind of “provocative ambiguity” to disclose in one per
son simultaneously a layman, an ordained minister, and the per
son of Christ? I am not referring to the priest as a representative
who presides over and gathers the community. (This, too, is a

necessary presentational difference.) I am referring to what
might be paradoxically called the hidden silence which one
would expect to exist in the heart of the priest as he speaks the
words of institution. In spite of distinct roles, all who participate
in the liturgy experience the elevation of human speech to its
most noble purpose, i.e., doxology. But a presentational analysis
of praise reveals that it is not only apparent in performative ut
terances of the verbal kind. A layman’s experience of the silent
ground of human speech is disclosed preeminently in the word
less act of kneeling interiorly and exteriorly before the eucharis
tic “sending” of the divine Persons. Paradoxically, the priest is
no less a silent observer of this divine exchange even as he acts
and speaks in persona Christi. This is an important point to keep
in mind when we consider the difference and relation between
the mutual sacrifices made by the priest and the laity in the
Mass. All who share the common priesthood of the baptized, in
cluding the ordained priest, are called to taste and see the glory
of the Lord, and all are called to offer up this silent sacrifice of
self in the celebration of the Eucharist.

It must also be observed that silent observation of
the divine exchange on the part of the priest is not a presenta
tional distinction in the ordinary sense. Quoting the words of
Christ, the priest discloses Christ’s presence whether or not he
is kneeling before the eucharistic sending in his heart. But,
curiously, there is an indirect but visible presentation of his self-eff
acement before the congregation when he gives his voice and
his hand to Christ. By definition, the priest cannot become the
creator of a self-effacing image. Self-effacement is never gestured
but is directly related to the degree that the priest allows the
words of Christ to be spoken as a sacramental quotation. To
the degree that Christ’s presence in the sacramental action is offered
to the view of the congregation, the gathered community can,
however, recognize that the priest becomes a self-effacing dative
of disclosure.

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4 Cf. St. Bonaventure, Brevisloquium, prologue, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson,
NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963); 4: “... we must reach out in a spirit of pure
faith to the Father of Lights, and kneeling in our hearts, ask Him to give us,
through His Son and in the Holy Spirit, the true knowledge of Jesus Christ,
and together with knowledge, love for Him.” Italicus added.
44 Cf. Hieromonk Alexander (Colitzin), Et Introibo ad Altare Dei: The Mysta
gogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the East
The practical consequences of this unusual presentational situation are twofold. First, the paradoxical silence in the priest’s heart as he speaks the words of institution can become an indirect part of the display that takes place before the congregation. Put simply, the faithful are more likely to see Christ in the Bucharist, the more his representation of the words and actions of the Last Supper appears as a sacramental quotation. Moreover—and this constitutes the final paradox of the priest’s self-disclosure—the priest “succeeds” in representing his common priesthood with all the baptized the more he displays his own distinct role as the unique representative of Christ on the altar. The less they are distracted by his personal style, the more likely they are to observe that the self-effacement of Christ himself is well suited to the priest’s persona. Gestures, affects, and words that blur the distinctions between priest and laity only serve to hide the eucharistic disclosure. In fact, such expressions constitute a patronizing imposition upon the community with which the priest is trying to express his co-equal status.

A second area in which the theology of disclosure could be further scrutinized is creation and eschatology. The theology of creation in Eucharistic Presence follows the notion of “the Christian difference” developed in Sokolowski’s earlier work, The God of Faith and Reason. God did not have to create the world. Christianity, Sokolowski argues, intensifies the God-world relation as it existed in pre-Christian pantheism because Christian faith alone posits that creatures “participate through Creation in the independent existence of the God who could be even without the world” (39). On the basis of this fundamental distinction, Sokolowski clarifies the meaning of the contingency of the world and the necessity of the divine being (42-51). This section is one of the most elucidating in the entire book even though his contrast between the Christian metaphysics of creation and that of ancient paganism is sometimes overdrawn (42-54).

In spite of the carefully drawn metaphysics of creation and the affirmation of Christ as the first-born of creation and his “pre-existent” role in the foundation of the universe, there is still a certain tendency in Eucharistic Presence to treat the divine redemptive action as an a-cosmic event. This shortcoming may follow from the strenuous effort on Sokolowski’s part to portray God’s redemptive activity manifested in the sacraments in light of the Christian distinction. Accordingly, the sacrificial death of Jesus represents “an action that is not simply part of the history of the world, even though it does belong to that history” (64). Sokolowski correctly recognizes that the unique pattern of exchange that takes place between Father and Son on our behalf is not identical with any of the natural or cultural processes in the world’s own development (59, 75). Yet the strong distinction he draws between a redemptive sacramental action and the Eastern theopanic notion of sacramental manifestation, distancing himself from the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, may have the unintended side effect of de-sacralizing the world of appearances (76-81). For Schmemann the Eucharist is a manifestation of the Kingdom, centered on the Last Supper as an icon of present and future glory. Sokolowski adopts the more typically Western position that the Eucharist is first and foremost a sacramental action commemorating Christ’s obedience unto death on the Cross. Although the two notions have often been separated in the history of the Christian tradition, a distinction between the Creator and his creation can still be preserved without an antithesis between a theopanic, realized eschatology and a dramatic pattern of supra-historical exchange between God’s choice and a created counterchoice (75).

emanationists, he skips over the fact that Christianity also had to distance itself from pagan dualists, as St. Augustine did vis-à-vis the Manichaens.

48E.g., 107: “The Eucharist engages, and perpetually reminds us of, the Christian distinction between the world and God.” Cf. The God of Faith and Reason, 147.


50On the other hand, Sokolowski is not at all unwilling to question the current Western liturgy on the basis of Schmemann’s notion of the Eucharist as our participation, even now, in the celestial liturgy. Cf. 20, esp. n. 14. Some indications of a more spiritual and sacramental theology of creation appear in Robert Sokolowski, “Praying the Canon of the Mass,” 14-15.
One could instead adopt the position of Balthasar that the Cross of Christ itself is planted in the cosmos as a visible sign of our redemption.51 Some of the more fanciful medieval accounts of Christ's descent into hell depict such an event literally. In other words, the earthly silence of human sin comes paradoxically close to the divine silence of the Cross, what Balthasar calls the Son's "Not word."52 Two texts in the Gospel of Mark and many in the Johannine literature and Book of Revelation present the view that the blood of the new covenant can be seen even now by those whose eucharistic faith awaits the second coming of the Lord.53 In 2 Timothy 1:10, St. Paul reminds the faithful that the "appearance" (epiphaneia) of our Saviour Jesus Christ abolished death.

The primary advantages of understanding the eucharistic mystery in such a way that preserves a balance between substitutionary divine action and theophanic manifestation are twofold. First, it would underscore that, even though an ever greater dissimilitude between Creator and creature is foundational to the sacramental representation, the Western tradition can still appropriate the proper sense of a cosmic liturgy. The sacrament in creation is manifested, in some sense, in all created realities beginning with but not limited to the natural elements of oil and water and the human fabrications of bread and wine.54 Moreover, one can maintain the strong notion of God's independence from the world (cf. 108) while still recognizing the necessities for seeing, knowing, and acting that are entailed in the liturgical act of blessing the creation.55 When understood in light of the Christian difference, blessing the creation and hoping for its redemption in Christ is never a concession to pantheism. But an affirmation of the Christian difference without an equally strong enjoinder to bless the Lord's creation may weaken our sense of the power of the Word to be heard and seen in all created reality. Recently, both Eastern and Western Christian theologians have developed the profound implications of this cosmic view of sacred liturgy for the present ecological crisis.56

Second, a properly Christian understanding of the sacramentality of creation itself would shed light on St. Paul's eschatological plea that "all of creation is groaning in labor pains even until now."57 Even though references to the eschatological realities are scattered throughout Eucharistic Presence (e.g., 20, 30, 103, 107), Sokolowski views the "eschaton" as an eternal frame from which the identity of the many sacramental appearances of the one, true sacrifice of Christ comes into view. While this relatively static picture is not entirely incompatible with a Christian view of the world, it leaves out the biblical sense that God's kingdom might, without warning, manifest itself in human history as a sudden, interruptive force.58

54 On p. 37, Sokolowski does mention that: "[t]he Eucharist is the most material of all the sacraments; it establishes a sacramentality in eating. The bread and wine given to us to be consumed are palpable images of the life that is conveyed to us in and through the Church." Unfortunately, this reflection on the sacramentality of the natural world is quite brief. For Sokolowski our existential view of the created world is guided by both the Christian metaphysical distinction and the biblical view that creation itself is God's saving action (117). He chooses to emphasize Christian belief in divine election, viz., that "we are there because God wants us to be" (ibid). It seems that his stolid conviction regarding the Creator's free choice to create can sometimes obscure the Christian liturgical disclosure of nature's theophanic dimension. On the necessity of maintaining both the freedom of creation and the visible manifestation of divine love in the created order, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Creation and Trinity," Communio 15 (Fall 1988): 291.

55 In his treatment of the place of liturgical blessings, Sokolowski focuses more on blessings as a human response to God's words and deeds and their roots in the Jewish kenhal than on the blessing of creation (19-20, 66-67).
58 Cf. J.B. Metz, Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 100-135, 169-79. There is a hint of Metz's sense of eschatological interruption in the last chapter of Sokolowski's book. There he compares the eucharistic sense of disclosure to Helen Keller's experience of suddenly realizing that names actually referred to things. "This was the disclosure," he writes, "of a dimension, not just the manifestation of a new thing (202. Sokolowski goes on to describe the Christian disclosure as the introduction of a new mode of presentation) (202) and reminds us that the disclosure of this new dimension includes the recognition that "God does indeed judge...[W]e can be judged by him alone, even beyond any human judgment"
These criticisms are not meant to detract from the tremendous service that Sokolowski, a philosopher who has already distinguished himself internationally in the field of phenomenology, has performed for Christian theology. *Eucharistic Presence* elucidates distinctions and poses basic philosophical questions which will address the problems of our late modern situation. There is no doubt that the fundamental questions he raises and the probing answers he provides could have far-reaching implications for future theological research. In the following section, I will show just how *Eucharistic Presence* could stimulate a discussion about the present state of theology in general and of sacramental and liturgical theology in particular.

IV.

Reading *Eucharistic Presence* requires a broader perspective than is presupposed by most works in theology today. As the text unfolds, the reader is made aware of multiple dimensions of the questions being addressed. Sorting out these different dimensions is essential to following the thread of the argument. If one approached Sokolowski's text with the expectation of finding yet another critical correlation of the Catholic sacramental tradition to a particular school of philosophy, one would miss the true originality of his theology of disclosure. If one approached the book only as a meta-theological reflection on phenomenological categories such as appearance, manifestation, presence, and absence, then even this conceptual baggage would obscure his attempt to recover the sacramental realities themselves. Few works in contemporary theology can be said to be as demanding or as rewarding, for *Eucharistic Presence* requires that the reader keep two foci in view at all times: the specific reflections on the mystery of the Eucharist and the general "theological style" that begins with God's own self-disclosure.

In articulating the dual foci, Sokolowski makes demonstrably clear that the practice and theory of the Eucharist admit of no neat and tidy separation. While that thesis by itself is hardly controversial, his approach nonetheless stands apart from a great deal of what has been written by Catholic theologians in recent decades. Recent Catholic theology has increasingly adopted the view that only by articulating abstract methodological procedures can one avoid the charge of bias and prejudice. Though taken out of context, a passage from a recent review of the literature on Catholic sacramental theology will help illustrate this point:

Studies on ritual, language, feast, symbol, and the like are the commonplaces of most of current sacramental theology. At the same time, the understanding of the place of sacrament in the Church and in the economy of grace is quite divergent. The differences are in large part understandable in light of different fundamental approaches or theological methods that dictate the way in which the ritual and the symbolic is integrated into theology. 59

Ritual, language, feast, and symbol function as the conceptual threads which link the diverse studies under investigation. Abstractioning from the content of the distinct proposals to the uniform plane of method allows each proposal to be adjudicated with the minimal imposition of bias on the part of the reviewers. The diverse interpretations of these categories can then be explicated, compared, and contrasted in light of their methodological differences.

*Eucharistic Presence*, by contrast, eschews conceptual models for sacramental theology altogether. In doing so, it questions the very primacy of method in contemporary theology. In other words, Sokolowski deliberately avoids articulating an abstract foundational or fundamental theology by which ritual, language, feast, and symbol can be explained. He admits of no conceptualizations that can be fully divorced from the particular ways in which the realities display themselves in specific rituals, languages, feasts, and symbols. Writing against the grain of what these reviewers call "most of current sacramental theology," Sokolowski points us beyond abstract conceptualizations to the divine realities themselves. 60

The objection will be made that Sokolowski covertly imposes his own particular perspective, drawn principally from the insights of Husserlian phenomenology, on the sacra-


mental realities which he aims to disclose. How could one ade-
quately assess such a criticism? On the one hand, as contempo-
rary theology raises the stakes for a methodologically abstract
discipline, the suspicion of distortion or prejudice within the
subject matter of theology increases rather than decreases. This
comes as something of a surprise since the purported aim of a
neutral, scientific method is to ward off the intolerance and
entrenchment associated with adopting a single, commonsense
point of view. The defense of theological method easily becomes
what Gadamer has named “the prejudice against prejudice it-
self.” As Sokolowski himself once noted with respect to modern
science, purely formal reflection on the way things are structured
“washes out any question of intrinsically better or worse states
... When this way of thinking prevails, it is not surprising that
the essential of things become dismissed as only ideological pro-
jections of someone’s point of view.” In other words, the more
abstractly and scientifically one lays the foundations of the
discipline, the more vulnerable will that discipline become to the
Ockham’s razor of the deconstructionists and the ideology cri-
tique of the social critics. The former will claim that those who
aim to speak about the essentials of things proffer a view that
homogenizes the internal inconsistencies of the system, one too
confident in our ability to know and depict the correspondence
between language and reality. The latter will point to hidden
ways in which culture, politics, economic systems, race, and gen-
der prejudice our talk about the sacraments.

On the other hand, critical methodologies of these
sorts can lead to more honest and direct talk about the divine re-
alities disclosed in the sacraments. In this sense, contemporary
theology does not have the option of abandoning method alto-
gether. Newly evolving methodologies can indeed illuminate
the place of ritual, language, feast, and symbol in the study of
the Christian sacraments. Theology gains nothing by attempting
to reinstate a pre-critical communion with the essences of things
or barricade itself against social criticism. A truly Catholic ap-
proach, one which remains open to the insights of all the non-
theological disciplines, cannot dismiss the detachment from the
lived experience of the divine reality which modern reflective
thought demands.


61 Presence and Absence, 141.

But not all abstract reflection must conclude with
the emancipation of consciousness from tradition. The modern
prejudice that liberty of thought and action are identical with de-
tachment from tradition and social bonds is being questioned
now more than ever. 62 It would be ironic indeed if Catholic the-
ologians, prohibited from embracing modern developments by
Church authorities for so much of the modern period, became
the last defenders of this questionable ideal of liberation. Like-
wise, an unreflective acceptance of modern rationality’s burial
in the name of “post-modernism” could be equally premature.

In light of this dilemma, a wholesale reappraisal of
the wisdom of theological method is needed. 63 There are two
ways, I think, in which Sokolowski’s theology of disclosure
could initiate such a discussion. First, the bracketing of a the-
ologian’s personal commitment to the realities of which theol-
ogy speaks needs to be examined with as critical an eye as the
modern hermeneutics of suspicion treats traditional under-
standing. 64 The ill effects of a prejudice against prejudice itself
can be felt most acutely in those instances in which a historically
reconstructive reconstruction of Scripture or tradition has been taken as
the primary mode of access to the theological realities. Gadamer
produced a seminal critique of modern historicist prejudices in
his now classic Truth and Method, and Balthasar has spoken force-
fully against the gnosticizing effects of historicism on both Chris-
tian theology and the life of the Church. 65 The recent scholarly
exchange about John Meier’s A Marginal Jew and the criticisms
raised against using a purely historical reconstruction (however

62 Cf. Louis Dupré, Passage to Modernity, 1.
63 There are, of course, many ways to define “method.” Even though I do not
employ them in this essay, distinctions between a transcendental method, a
“generalized empirical method” (Lonergan), a “mutually critical correlation” (Tracy),
“reductive warrants” (F. Fiorenza), and “indirect methods” (Rahner)
are in fact important for theology. However, what I say about “method” in
what follows would apply to any form of reflective consciousness “that aims
to establish a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding
cumulative and progressive results.” Cf. Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theolo-
64 Cf. David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 140, n. 51: “critical interpretations
of the metaphor “bracketing” are as apt as literalist interpretations of the
Scriptures.”
65 Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, 162-360; Balthasar, Theodramatik III
ordinary usage screen can have the additional meaning of electronic monitor. As a vehicle for representing images, this sense of the metaphor highlights the methodologist's freedom to manipulate the data according to principles or cognitive activities that are operative in all situations in which a disclosure may occur. In sum, method is a process of abstraction which allows the interpreter to narrow a wide field of data to an increasingly manageable pool. In the process some data are left in, and others are weeded out. Significantly, the methodological approach pays no attention to how the data are disclosed as data.

Understood in this manner, method promises more than liberation from the prejudice of common sense experience. Methodological reflection gauges distinct realms of activity or presence within the field of data and adjusts its mode of reflection accordingly. Because so much attention has been paid to method by theologians in the late twentieth century, highly sophisticated differentiations between the task of theology and that of other academic disciplines as well as within theology (biblical studies, liturgical studies, systematic theology, historical theology, etc.) now abound. Without methodological reflection the distinctions which allow us to know what we are doing when we are engaging in these disciplines would be less precise. A theology of disclosure cannot revert to a form of thinking that ignores these gains. Sealing Pandora's box without investigating its contents satisfies neither curiosity nor the legitimate theological task of testing everything and retaining what is good (1 Thes 5:21).

Theologians today now face the difficult and largely uncharted situation of assaying the gains and losses of modern methodological reflection. Bernard Lonergan, whose own notion of dialectic as method included the transformative moment of personal conversion, expressed this dilemma in the following terms:

While for secular man ... the most familiar differentiation of consciousness distinguishes and relates theory and common sense, still in the history of mankind both in the East and the Christian West the predominant differentiation of consciousness has set in opposition and in mutual enrichment the realms of common sense and of transcendence.


67 Gaston Bachelard, The New Scientific Spirit, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 137; Henry H. Bauer, Scientific Literacy and the Myth of the Scientific Method (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 42-62, esp. 46 where Bauer speaks of “the knowledge filter of science.” Bauer rejects the notion of a scientific method, which he defines as “an impartially objective set of rules” (44), and prefers to speak of a filtering process. He seems not to be aware that since the time of Descartes and Bacon filtering has been taken as the basic activity of the scientific method.

68 Cf. E. Husserl, The Crisis of the European Sciences, 32.


70 Method in Theology, 266.
Lonergan recognizes that modernity creates a new situation for reflective thought. Ancients viewed the world in terms of the difference and relation between their common sense view of the world and their felt sense of a reality beyond the world. Moderns, particularly those who have relinquished a religious view of the world, are inclined to replace this distinction and relation with the distinction and relation between a reflective consciousness and the prescientific manifestation of the world that appears to common sense. The modern secular interpreter ignores the question about whether our common sense perception of the divine can ever make a permanent contribution to theoretical reflection. In effect, the novel contribution of a theology of disclosure is to rebuild the bridge between theory and manifestation without ignoring the disclosive power of reflective thought.

The passage from ancient theorin to modern scientific reflection creates both a hope and a danger. With its differentiation of a methodological screen that draws upon common sense even as it sets itself apart from it, modernity hopes to speed up the process whereby new problems and situations can be tested. Modern culture's covetous desire to achieve quick and effective results accelerates the pace at which theologians can pursue the ideal of methodological inquiry. But once the differentiation of a methodological standpoint is taken as an adequate substitute for what Lonergan calls "the mutual enrichment" of common sense by the self-disclosure of God, then method's edifice of a purely reflective consciousness becomes idolatrous. Taken as an end in itself, methodological reflection—no matter how rigorous and self-correcting—obsures the appearance of truth.

When method dominates without attention to the disclosure of truth, theology suffers. The identity of the reality disclosed in faith's vision becomes chimerical. The unity of theological discourse in its primary formal object, God, is fragmented into a manifold of ideological viewpoints. The expanding multiplicity of theologies is no longer a necessity which ensues from the unspeakable infinity of the Word but is an equally dogmatic theoretical axiom needed to safeguard an increasingly incoherent cultural pluralism. At this point the ancient sense that Christian theology can minister as the logos of the Logos is permanently lost.73

73Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, God without Being, 143.