

SACRAMENTS

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REVELATION
OF THE HUMANITY OF GOD

*Engaging the Fundamental Theology
of Louis-Marie Chauvet*

Edited by Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

INTRODUCTION

Louis-Marie Chauvet: A Short Biography ix

Philippe Bordeyne

Building on Chauvet's Work: An Overview xv

Bruce T. Morrill

PART ONE

THEOLOGY, FUNDAMENTAL AND SACRAMENTAL

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 Theology in a Postmodern Context and the
Hermeneutical Project of Louis-Marie Chauvet 5

Lieven Boeve

Chapter 2 The Sacraments as "Celebrations of the Church":
Liturgy's Impact on Sacramental Theology 25

Patrick Prétot

PART TWO

SCRIPTURE AND SACRAMENT

Introduction 43

Chapter 3 The Word in the Liturgy:
Incarnating the Gospel in Cultures 47

David N. Power

Chapter 4 The Relationship between Scripture and
Sacrament in Lutheran Theology 63

André Birmelé

PART THREE

ECCLESIOLOGY, PASTORAL AND ECUMENICAL

Introduction 79

Chapter 5 Sacramental Theology at the Mercy of Pastoral Service 83

Philippe Barras

Chapter 6 "Is that your liturgical movement?":
Liturgy and Sacraments in an Ecumenical Ecclesiology 101

Gordon W. Lathrop

PART FOUR
LITURGY AND ETHICS

- Introduction 115
- Chapter 7 The Ethical Horizon of Liturgy 119
Philippe Bordeyne
- Chapter 8 Time, Absence, and Otherness:
Divine-Human Paradoxes Bonding Liturgy and Ethics 137
Bruce T. Morrill

PART FIVE
SYMBOL AND SACRAMENT: THEOLOGICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

- Introduction 153
- Chapter 9 When Anthropologist Encounters Theologian:
The Eagle and the Tortoise 155
Elbatrina Clauteaux
- Chapter 10 Sacramental Symbols
in a Time of Violence and Disruption:
Shaping People of Hope and Eschatological Vision 171
Judith M. Kubicki, CSSF

PART SIX
SACRAMENTAL-LITURGICAL THEOLOGY
AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

- Introduction 187
- Chapter 11 The Social Sciences
and Christian Theology after Chauvet 189
Jean-Louis Souletie
- Chapter 12 Rituality and the Retrieval of Sacrament as
“Language Event” 207
Nathan D. Mitchell

Bibliography of Louis-Marie Chauvet 225

Contributors 231

Index of Names 233

Index of Subjects 235

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Louis-Marie Chauvet: A Short Biography

Philippe Bordeyne

“All theological discourse depends upon the dominant discussion of the era that preceded it, either to argue against it or to reinforce it. It is obvious that mine has been partly constituted as a reaction against the scholastic discourse of my formation at the theological faculty of Angers.” Thus Louis-Marie Chauvet begins the contextual rereading of his theological work in an article dedicated to Joseph Doré in 2002.¹ He was sixty years old then. He is greatly indebted to his upbringing, to his teachers and friends, but also to encounters that have marked his life. These have allowed him to leave his familiar surroundings without abandoning them totally, since Chauvet is a faithful person. You only need listen to him speak. During his courses, the examples drawn from everyday life do not distract from his lively, brilliant, and speculative thought. In the little anecdotes he tells, you perceive the immense respect that Chauvet has for those who passed the faith onto him because they truly lived it. In that respect, his reference to Scholastic discourse as a repelling factor that led him elsewhere can be misleading. This because Chauvet was well grounded. He draws his audacity of thought from a land that continues to nourish him.

He hails from the devoutly Catholic region of the Vendée. He was born on January 26, 1941, at Chavagnes-en-Paillers to a peasant family. His mother had left school at the age of eleven to tend sheep, but she had absorbed the literary culture that was lavished upon her in the elementary education of the time. She bequeathed to her son the taste for reading and respect for the rules of writing. In this village of three thousand inhabitants, all, without distinction among the social classes, practiced religion. Like many other boys of his village, Louis-Marie was attracted to the priesthood. After schooling at the seminary of

¹ “Quand la théologie rencontre les sciences humaines,” in F. Bousquet, H.-J. Gagey, G. Médevielle et J.-L. Souletie, *La responsabilité des théologiens: Mélanges offerts à Joseph Doré* (Paris: Desclée, 2002), 401–15: 401.

Luçon, he was ordained a priest in 1966 for his home diocese. Soon thereafter he was sent to pursue his studies at the Catholic University of the West at Angers.

He received his formation by Thomist professors, among whom he recognized that some were “excellent.” But this Scholastic theology did not sufficiently feed our curious and inventive student, who wished like many others that theology might better respond to the questions of the time.

He was anxious that church history and biblical exegesis be able to effect change, since they introduce a sense of plurality. Jean Colson’s course on ministries in the Acts of the Apostles impassioned him, as it demonstrated the complexity of approaches according to the contexts and the times.² Chauvet received his canonical license degree in theology in 1967, after having defended a thesis on the priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews.³ As a student, he benefited from the readings and the reflections of his brightest fellow students. Wine country and wine encouraged sharing in friendship. Due to numerous conversations “to the bottom of the barrel,” particularly with Jean-Paul Resweber who was a fellow student at the seminary at Luçon, he was initiated into the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics.⁴

² At that time, Colson was a recognized specialist on the theology of ministries (Jean Colson, *L'épiscopat catholique: collégialité et primauté dans les trois premiers siècles de l'Église*, Preface by Yves M.-J. Congar, Unam sanctam 43 [Paris: Cerf, 1963], and he was preparing a work on Luke (*L'énigme du disciple que Jésus aimait*, Théologie historique 10 [Paris: Beauchesne, 1969]). Colson became the favorite theologian of Msgr Rodhain, founder of *Secours Catholique* in France that sought to construct a theology of charity. Cf. Jean Colson, *Le Sacerdoce du pauvre: réflexions sur le sacerdoce prophétique du Messie, roi des pauvres, dans l'Évangile selon saint Luc* (Paris: S.O.S., 1971).

³ Three years earlier, the Sulpician Joseph Doré defended his thesis at the Angelicum in Rome on the priesthood of Christ *Secundum ordinem Melchisedech*. Doré became the dean of the theological faculty of the Institut Catholique of Paris in 1988. He left the Faculty in 1997 when he was named archbishop of Strasbourg.

⁴ Jean-Paul Resweber defended his thesis in Catholic theology at the University of Strasbourg in 1973, under the title *Essai sur le discours théologique, à la lumière de la critique heideggerienne de la métaphysique* [Essay on theological discourse in the light of the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics]. Later he became professor of philosophy at the University of Metz. Notably he pub-

Chauvet left to write a dissertation in Paris, but he began by taking courses at the Superior Institute of Liturgy (hereafter ISL), where he received his diploma in 1969. During this time he acquired a solid understanding of liturgical history, all the while benefiting from the pastoral ferment after the council. Alexandre Ganoczy, who was teaching at the Institut Catholique of Paris, proposed a research topic to him on penance in the thought of Calvin, in order to study how the Reformer from Geneva conceived of the fruits of justification. Ganoczy received a scholarship for him, allowing him to spend the academic year of 1970–71 at the Institut für Europäische Geschichte at the University of Mainz. There he worked with professor Joseph Lortz, author of a new Catholic interpretation of the Reformation in Germany.⁵ When he returned to Paris, Ganoczy was named to the University of Würzburg. Chauvet pursued his doctoral studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études with Richard Stauffer.⁶ But Stauffer abruptly had to suspend all professional activities for health reasons when Chauvet's dissertation was nearly finished. Pierre Burgelin, a specialist of Leibniz,⁷ agreed to join his committee in extremis; he determined that the last chapter was more than sufficient for a dissertation.⁸ Chauvet defended his first doctoral dissertation at the University of Paris I-Sorbonne in 1973, under the title *Jean Calvin: critique théologique et pastorale des doctrines scolastique et tridentine du sacrement de la pénitence* [John Calvin: Theological and Pastoral Critique of Scholastic and Tridentine Doctrines on the Sacrament of Penance]. It is of the end of a formation process where history plays a critical function regarding Scholastic theology.

Chauvet then returned to a parish in Vendée, where he was appointed as a vicar at Les Herbiers. The Dominican Pierre-Marie Gy,

lished on Heidegger, on the philosophy of language and on interdisciplinary methods, a theme very dear to Chauvet. Cf. Jean-Paul Resweber, *La Méthode interdisciplinaire* (Paris: PUF, 1981).

⁵ Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1939–1940).

⁶ Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie 33 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978).

⁷ Pierre Burgelin, *Commentaire du "Discours de métaphysique" de Leibniz*, Études d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses (Paris: PUF, 1959).

⁸ Only about a hundred of the five hundred pages drafted were included in the doctoral defense. The others continue to sit in boxes.

director of the Superior Institute of Liturgy, noticed this young diocesan priest. With the agreement of Pierre-André Liégé, the dean of the Theology Faculty, Gy wanted Chauvet to replace Alexandre Ganoczy and sought permission from the Most Reverend Charles Paty, bishop of Luçon, who readily acceded to the request. But Chauvet loved the pastoral life. He was not convinced that his place was in Paris. It was his pastor, Father Jacques David, the future bishop of La Rochelle, then at Évreux, who heartily encouraged him to accept the offer. In 1974 Chauvet began his teaching at the Institut Catholique of Paris, but he always kept a foot in pastoral ministry, at first half time at Vendée until 1981. Then he continued pastoral ministry from 1982 in the Diocese of Pontoise, near Paris, where he still is the pastor in charge at Saint-Leu-la-Forêt. His dissertation in theology, defended in 1986, was already a mature work. It quickly attracted an international audience to his research.⁹ In 1989 Chauvet was elected professor by the counsel of the Theology Faculty of the Institut Catholique of Paris.

During all these years, he gave numerous workshops in dioceses around and sometimes outside France on theology and pastoral practice of the sacraments. There he collected those working in the field who sought to proclaim the Gospel and to form believers in a rapidly evolving world. Chauvet's theology is difficult to understand if you omit his constant comings and goings between liturgical life, where one receives whomever comes for sacramental preparation and university teaching. Chauvet is the heir to a tradition of reciprocal interaction between pastoral practices and theological research at a high level that gives witness to the strict relations between the National Center of Pastoral Liturgy (hereafter CNPL¹⁰) and the ISL.

At the Institut Catholique of Paris, Chauvet benefited from a stimulating environment, as much from the numerous disciplinary fields as from the friendly encounters with colleagues and students. In the framework of the ISL, which was his primary job, the teamwork generated some wonderful research insights. On the one hand, Chauvet

⁹ Chauvet, *Symbole et sacrement: une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1987).

¹⁰ Translator's remark: CNPL signifies *Centre National de Pastorale Liturgique*. *Pastorale* is the noun and *liturgique* is the adjective. In English we say "pastoral liturgy" but in French the term implies "liturgical pastoral practice." For the sake of clarity according to English usage, "*pastorale liturgique*" will be rendered "pastoral liturgy."

could be proud of the certainty with which Pierre-Marie Gy plunged him into the liturgical tradition, and on the other hand, he appreciated the audacity of Jean-Yves Hameline, well rooted in liturgical and musical practices, but who was always open to new approaches regarding ritual experience through the social sciences.¹¹ In the wider framework of the Theology Faculty, Chauvet often contributed to seminars or interdisciplinary colloquia. In 2001 he was assigned to teach the course in fundamental theology by the dean at that time, Henri-Jérôme Gagey, who succeeded him in the course of sacramental theology.¹² Chauvet recognized that this request was the occasion of a happy “awakening” that would force him to leave sacramental theology the better to find it in rereading Barth, de Lubac, Rahner, and particularly Balthasar.¹³

This brief return to the biography of the French theologian will be useful to the readers who followed his teaching, those who heard him in workshops, or simply those who had access to his books and articles. The paradox is that this man who has contributed so much to the radiance of the Institut Catholique of Paris to the outside world has traveled very little outside France. He reads the medieval theologians in the original text, he speaks Latin and sings it beautifully, but he doesn't have the habit of speaking in languages other than French. Nevertheless, his work is translated, read, and commented upon everywhere in the world, especially in North America. Numerous doctoral dissertations have been dedicated to his sacramental theology. From this came the idea to write this book in two voices, one American and the other European, and to publish it simultaneously in France and in the United States, thanks to a happy collaboration between Éditions du Cerf and Liturgical Press. Most of the French-speaking authors have many times joined their voices to speak about the contribution of Chauvet to contemporary theology. In the United States and in other English-speaking countries, students are well acquainted with his two major books. In this work, thought and written in common, we would like to assist readers to understand better the current

¹¹ Jean-Yves Hameline, *Une poétique du rituel* (Paris: Cerf, 1997).

¹² It was due to the suggestion of Gagey that Chauvet published *Les sacrements: Parole de Dieu au risque du corps* (Éd. de l'Atelier, 1993), which placed his thesis on symbol and sacrament at the disposition of the general public.

¹³ Academic session marking Chauvet's retirement, Institut Catholique of Paris, June 21, 2007.

endeavor of sacramental theology and liturgy, all the while demonstrating how our teacher and friend has contributed to it directly or indirectly. You will see that the accents are sometimes different from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Chauvet, impassioned by interpretation, will not be surprised by this. The best way to honor him is publicly to lay our foundation of the varied interpretations of his work that is not found solely in the texts but also in the integrity of a life dedicated to liturgical action.

Building on Chauvet's Work: An Overview

Bruce T. Morrill

Liturgical theologians have been fond of asserting that the *lex orandi*, the law of prayer, establishes the *lex credendi*, the law of belief, even as they continuously debate just exactly what this patristic principle, as crystallized in Prosper of Aquitaine's famous sentence, means in the life of the church. Over several decades of a prodigious academic and pastoral career, Louis-Marie Chauvet has produced a systematic treatment of why and how sacramental liturgy is essential to Christian faith. Liturgical theologians largely tend to approach the topic on the basis of the history and elements of the Christian rites, whereas Chauvet, while continuously affirming and drawing from the irreducibly ritual nature of the sacraments, does so in the genre of a fundamental theology.

Fundamental theology methodologically reflects on the nature of divine revelation as conveyed through Scripture and tradition, as well as on the conditions that dispose humans to receiving that revelation. The methodological beauty of Chauvet's highly theoretical work lies in his constant consideration of actual liturgical practices such that pastoral insights abound. The beauty of its content emerges in his arguments for the corporality of our redemption in Christ, the particularity of that divine Word as the Spirit writes it on the universal body of the church through the ritual activity of the sacraments, the ethical human imperative inherent to that divine self-gift, and the grounding of this sacramental ethics in the biblical revelation of the crucified God.

The theological concept repeatedly refreshing such a demanding, thoroughgoing argument is Chauvet's elucidation of *grace*. Of utmost importance for a Christian sacramental anthropology and ethics (a life of justice, mercy, and sharing) is the thankful recognition of the utter gratuity of God's saving presence to humanity. By means of symbolic-language theory Chauvet argues that the divine gracious presence is only possible due to the nature of the God revealed in the Gospel.

*God reveals God in what is most different from God. God reveals the divine self ultimately as God when God "crosses out" God in humanity. God reveals God as human in God's very divinity. This does not just mean that God is "morally" more human than humans, who so often are inhuman, but that "ontologically" it belongs to God to be the only one fully human. The relation of love alone makes one fully human . . .*¹

Salvation comes through the risks the triune God took in the death and resurrection of the Son and continues to take as the Spirit reveals the "humanness" of the God of Jesus Christ in sacramental liturgy, enabling our lives to be liturgy, a spiritual sacrifice glorifying God.

Chauvet has thus argued vigorously for grounding the theology and practice of liturgy in the paschal mystery:

*To start from the Pasch . . . is first to locate the sacraments within the dynamic of a history, that of a Church born, in its historic visibility, from the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost and always in the process of becoming the body of Christ all through history. To start from the Pasch is consequently to be obliged to build sacramental theology not only on the Christological but also the pneumatological principle.*²

Chauvet's insistence on history is crucial for the implications of his argument. Embracing the scandalous particularity of history opens us to the liberating content of Jesus' life, to the words, actions, and decisions through which he revealed the character of God as boundless mercy, forgiveness, and strength. To insist on history as the medium of God's redemptive work is to accept the sometimes consoling, other times unsettling revelation that, like Jesus, we meet God in the concrete circumstances of our own lives, both as participants in various social bodies and in the waxing and waning of our personal bodies. For such was Jesus' life-story unto death, empowered by the Spirit of the God who

¹ Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 163. Key sources for Chauvet's argument for the humanity of God are E. Jüngel and J. Moltmann. See Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 492–509.

² Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 487.

raised him from the dead and thereby revealed the divine presence in a life spent in self-sacrificing love for fellow humans.

The risen Christ's gift of the Spirit sets the lives of believers in the same pattern of encountering the unseen God in the concrete circumstances of their own time and place. The "eschatological memorial of the Pasch, that is, the very specificity of the Christian liturgy"³ places the lives of every believer in the present-tense drama of the mystery of salvation. This language of mystery should tell us that our faith is at once a profound trust in God's saving, redemptive, vindicating will for humanity but also an ongoing call to accept the incomprehensibility of that God of love, our inability to control how the human story of God will finally come to completion.⁴ As St. Paul teaches, the same Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead now lives as the first fruits of his resurrection in the lives of those baptized into his death, working all for the ultimate good in us, just as for Jesus. What characterizes such a life of faith is hope: "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."⁵

At the heart of Chauvet's fundamental sacramental theology is his recognition and insistence that the sacraments of the church are practices of *faith*. Chauvet describes faith as "the assent to a loss,"⁶ a continuous letting go of our projections of what we imagine God should be like, so that the totally other yet lovingly near God revealed in the crucified and resurrected Christ might really be present to us in our lived experience. Chauvet identifies our imaginary projections of God as part of the larger human challenge of struggling with reality in all the difficulties and surprises with which historical existence presents us. This imagining of total presence, of complete possession or perhaps fulfillment, most often does not result from a moral failure of the will but, rather, arises in individuals' unconscious as they face harrowing challenges or chronic disappointments or limited personal qualities. Yet upon reflection we realize that it is precisely the resistance of the other to our expectations that tells us we are dealing with the real and not an emotionally driven projection of our own desires onto

³ Ibid., 485.

⁴ See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 168–86.

⁵ Rom 8:25. See also Rom 6:3-4; 8:23, 28.

⁶ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 39.

what is around us. Heavily influenced by Heidegger's phenomenology, Chauvet describes how genuine presence always entails absence. "The concept of '*coming-into-presence*' precisely marks the absence with which every presence is constitutively crossed out: nothing is nearer to us than the other in its very otherness . . . nothing is more present to us than what, in principle, escapes us (starting with ourselves)."⁷

Here an example may help, one I would argue is germane to any human relationship: being hurt by someone or being the one who inflicts pain on another. This experience may well entail the sort of alienation within oneself to which Paul so honestly attests: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."⁸ Precisely in such wrestling we are at our most real, spared any illusions of immediate presence to ourselves or another, called to grapple with what matters through the very bodily matter of our lives and, in so doing, to construct our own subjectivity in the world that is given us. To reflect upon the human engagement of reality in this way is to reject the Western dualistic valuing of soul over body, mind over matter, invisible over visible, unchanging essence over becoming-in-existence. Instead, with Chauvet, one comes to recognize that "the sensible mediations of language, body, history, desire" comprise "the very milieu within which human beings attain their truth and thus correspond to the Truth which calls them."⁹ This lack of immediate access to reality is what constitutes the human need for language, by which is meant the entire range of symbols whereby humans submit to the otherness intrinsic to life, to the rule-bound cultural layers through which they perceive the raw data of the physical universe affecting their senses. Constantly working with the signs, words, gestures, and narratives—the "language"—of their society, people participate in a world at once given—through symbolism and language usually so conventional to the native user as to seem "natural"—yet continuously under construction.

What has too long plagued the Western Christian understanding, and therefore practice, of the sacraments, Chauvet argues, is the metaphysical notion that the (ideal) human subject exists prior to and outside the world of language (symbolism), that some level of immediate access to reality is available to humans. From this arises thought and

⁷ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 404.

⁸ Rom 7:19.

⁹ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 6.

practices that value the “internal” over the “external,” the invisible over the visible, thereby mistaking language (the symbolic) for a mere instrument to be overcome so as to enter into the total presence or pure essence of reality. Nothing could be further from the truth! The very “language” of the symbols that people of a religious tradition share, specifically in the manner they choose to engage them, are what comprise their particular experience of the divine and their view of the world, their commitment to its order, their ethics, their willingness to spend their lives in its realization.

To say “there is speaking” constantly in human beings is to say that every perception of reality is mediated by their culture and the history of their desire. In the absence of these, this reality would be left to its raw factualness and would be only a chaos or meaningless jumble. In order for the subject to reach and retain its status of subject, it must build reality into a “world,” that is to say, a signifying whole in which every element, whether material (tree, wind, house) or social (relatives, clothing, cooking, work, leisure) is integrated into a system of *knowledge* (of the world and of society), *gratitude* (code of good manners, mythical and ritual code ruling relationships with deities and ancestors), and *ethical behavior* (values serving as norms of conduct). The infant as well as the adult have to deal with this world, *always-already* constructed, and not with things in their crude physical state. By these means, the universe and events form a coherent whole which is called “the symbolic order.” Subjects can orient themselves by it because each thing can find in it its own signifying place.¹⁰

Thus, language is not the instrument but the womb of our subjectivity, society the “space” constructed of knowledge, gratitude, and ethical behavior wherein people dynamically engage the symbols already present as cultural tradition in ever-original acts of meaning, such that the subject, language, and culture are contemporaneous.

Chauvet’s theological move is to interpret the practice of Christianity, the ongoing formation of Christian identity, as a particular engagement in this essential anthropological structure of knowledge, gratitude, and ethics. Christian identity is not self-administered but, rather, lies in the “assent to faith in Jesus as ‘Christ,’ ‘Lord,’ ‘Son of God,’” an assent to “the confession of faith from which the church was

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

born.”¹¹ The church is the milieu within which believers come to and exercise an empowering competence in the symbolic order given by the Spirit of the risen Christ in a consistent pattern: the knowledge of faith’s content through the proclamation of Scripture, the inscribing of that word on the bodies of believers through the symbolic gestures, and the sacramental experience of Christ’s absence as an indwelling presence compelling believers to action.

Luke’s Emmaus account (24:13-35), Chauvet demonstrates, is paradigmatic of the ecclesial pattern, set in the context of the day of the resurrection, which had become the Lord’s Day, the day of the Sunday assembly. In the story, Christ comes to the two disciples who have quit Jerusalem, leaving behind their expectations of immediate divine deliverance through Jesus, abandoning those hopes with the corpse of the would-be messiah. Jesus fills the empty space of their long walk home with his exposition of the Scriptures as revelatory of the meaning of his life and death. The beginning of faith, then, is the renunciation of the immediate sort of divine deliverance they expected, and their consenting to the meaning mediated through the crucified and risen Jesus’ interpretation of the Scriptures. While Christ’s proclamation may have burned in their hearts, however, they only come to recognize him when they are drawn into the reality of that word for them through the ritual of his taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing the bread at table. The pattern of the symbolic gesture is identical to the evangelist’s description of Jesus’ action at the Last Supper, a tradition we know the earliest ecclesial communities practiced as having come from the Lord (see 1 Cor 11:23). Thus, “it is in the church celebrating the Eucharist as his prayer and his action, as it is in the church welcoming the Scriptures as his word, that it is possible to recognize that Christ is alive.”¹² That climax to the Emmaus story, nonetheless, results in Jesus’ immediate vanishing from their sight, an absence that, far from leaving them with a hopeless feeling of abandonment (as in the story’s opening), inspires them with the power to go back to Jerusalem to share the good news. This, Chauvet argues, signals the ethical dimension of ecclesial faith: The sharing in word and sacrament is verified—realizes its truth (verity)—in the *koinonia* of practical care, concern, and service among believers. Ethical praxis in daily life is as

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Ibid., 26.

much a performance of the word written on the body as is sacramental rite, the work of one and the same Spirit.

Chauvet thus arrives at an explanation for the ecclesial practice of faith as a taking up and converting of the basic three-dimensional structure of human subjectivity. Chauvet's sacramental theology is a philosophical interpretation of how God's having taken up and saved the human condition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus becomes real in the lives of those baptized into that same paschal mystery. The church's symbolic order of Scripture, sacrament, and ethics makes of the human pattern of knowledge, gratitude, and ethics a sacrament—an embodied revelation—of the reign of God, the salvation of human beings. What keeps this way of life explicitly Christian is ongoing balance between these three constitutive poles of the practice of faith. Only by submitting to the resistance of reality revealed in each dimension's juxtaposition to the others do believers continue to give themselves over to the otherness, the presence-in-absence of the God of Jesus. Such ongoing praxis of Scripture–sacrament–ethics keeps the faith real in its sometimes consoling, other times painful openness to the revelation of the God of Jesus.¹³ By submitting together as church to the performance of Scripture, sacrament, and ethics—face to face in liturgical gathering, far and wide in daily living—Christians discover over and again that otherness, finally, is not a threat but an invitation, that the God of Jesus can be trusted.

The corporality of the practice of the sacraments, precisely as language-laden, communal acts of symbolic mediation, is what makes their celebration so essential to knowing and living the Christ proclaimed in Scripture. Participation in sacramental liturgy, as an ecclesial body given over to both the Word in Scripture and symbolic gestures that inscribe that divine word on our persons, delivers us from the human tendency to imagine that there should be no distance, no gap,

¹³ Here I find the burden of Chauvet's argument resonant with Gordon Lathrop's liturgical theory of juxtapositions, as well as his mentor Edward Schillebeeckx's mystical-political theology of the contrast experience. See Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 15–83, 204–25; and *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 53–79, 197–225; and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 817–19; *Church*, 5–14; and *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, ed. Robert Schreier (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 272–74, 257–59.

no otherness between ourselves and the fullness of God. The members of a liturgical assembly bring precisely their bodies to the celebration, their daily action (ethics) as persons engaged in the social and cosmic bodiliness of the human story being written in history. By participating in the traditional body of the church's sacramental worship, we submit to the mystery of God revealed in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, a God who comes to us in and through the shared bodily medium of our human knowing, suffering, and loving. Thus does the God of Jesus become really present to our lives, even as that sacramental ecclesial presence always recedes in its coming, sending us in the Spirit to discover the Word as living and active in us and our world.

The celebration of the sacraments is for revealing the transformative presence of the (scriptural) God of *Jesus* in all the ambiguity of our (ethical) living,¹⁴ not for repairing to some sacred precinct where we get to witness God for God's own sake. Here trinitarian faith is not a puzzling theological abstraction but the heart of embodied faith. Here faith in the crucified God scandalizes theism (with its monolithic god). The Christ who comes to us in the sacraments is the one who lived a human solidarity unto death, revealing the *difference* in God that is the source of our salvation, crossing out the gods of human imagination and establishing a similitude between God and humans. In the paschal mystery the love between Father and Son becomes the love between God and humanity. The Spirit is the difference, the holiness, the otherness of love shared between Father and Son. The Spirit wrote that difference on the person-body of Jesus of Nazareth, raised him from death to glory, and now writes that difference on the bodies of believers in the rites of the church. In celebrations of the paschal mystery "God is revealed as the one who, through the Spirit, 'crosses God out' in humanity, giving to the latter the possibility of becoming the 'sacramental locus' where God continues to be embodied."¹⁵

If Chauvet's fundamental theology of the sacramental structure of Christian faith strikes the reader as paradoxical, then that can only attest to its success in articulating something of the tragic beauty of the paschal mystery: God's revelation of salvation as the meeting of divine and human desire (the Spirit) in the human (bodily and historical, as-

¹⁴ "In other words, *every sacrament shows us how to see and live what transforms our human existence into a properly Christian existence.*" Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

sured yet struggling, defeated but triumphant) person of Jesus. Any imaginary shortcut to the immediate presence of divine fulfillment is a sliding away from the faith, a misplacing of the hope, a malnourishment of the love that comes to us in the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ. The assent to the particular symbolic order of human living that is the tradition of the church—the constant, mutually informing movement between word, sacrament, and ethics—is what nurtures the life of Christian faith. When the divorce of symbol from reality (body from spirit) slips into Christian practice, we lose the singular grace, the divine favor, the Gospel has to offer us. Rather than gracing us with original gifts only God (in God's saving difference) can give, liturgy becomes a mere expression of what we already know, the sacraments mere instruments for one dimension or other of human experience. The pastoral consequences can prove tragic in ways anything but beautiful, the sacramental liturgy of the church trapped in a sacred no man's land practically irrelevant to the profane commerce of everyday life—personal, ecclesial, social, economic, political.¹⁶

Much is at stake for the church's mission, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, at the dawn of this new millennium. We Christians, I would suggest, currently find ourselves amidst a seismic anthropological shift no less epochal than that of the Middle Ages, a profound transformation (material, intellectual, institutional, psychological) in how humanity goes about being human. Certainly, what Western Christianity looked, sounded, ordered, and argued like in the fourteenth century was significantly different from what characterized its practices and theologies at the end of the first millennium.¹⁷ The local and global

¹⁶ For my own attempt at wrestling with this problem, see Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

¹⁷ The scholarship, of course, is vast, allowing me here to mention only one exemplary contributor to the field, Carolyn Walker Bynum. For a collection of scholarly essays demonstrating the medieval transformation in sacramental theology and practice, see Gary Macy, *Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999). My own thinking in this regard was opened thanks to medieval church historians' contributions to an interdisciplinary conference on Catholic ritual I codirected at the College of the Holy Cross (Worcester, Massachusetts) in 2002. See *Practicing Catholic: Ritual, Body, and Contestation in Catholic Faith*, ed. Bruce T. Morrill and others (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

consequences of Enlightenment and modernity (scientific, technological, economic, governmental) are playing out, at accelerating pace, in ways that demand of Christian theologians work that is both faithful to Scripture and tradition and adequate to the exigencies of the publics they serve—ecclesial, academic, and public.¹⁸ The coeditors and contributors to this present book offer here their theological scholarship in the hope of not only honoring the person and monumental work of Chauvet, but also advancing constructive thought about sacramental liturgy in service to church and world along six lines of inquiry: fundamental theology, biblical theology, ecclesiology, theological ethics, the social sciences, and theological anthropology. It remains for readers, of course, to judge whether our academic efforts approximate the personal and professional gratitude and esteem with which we hold our colleague, Father Chauvet.

¹⁸ For an original discussion of theology and those publics, see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

Theology, Fundamental and Sacramental

It is in the church that faith finds its structure because the church is in charge of keeping alive, in the midst of the world and for its good, the memory of what [the ascended Lord Jesus] lived for and why God raised him from the dead: memory through the *Scriptures*, read and interpreted as speaking about him or being his own living word; memory through the *sacraments*, . . . recognized as being his own salvific gestures; memory through the *ethical* testimony of mutual sharing, lived as an expression of his own service to humankind.¹

Every human subject is born from the possibility of conceiving a world, of celebrating it, of acting in it. The discursive logic of the *sign*, the identifying challenge of the *symbol*, the world-transforming power of the *praxis* (to the benefit of everyone): these three elements coalesce and form a structure. The structure of Christian identity that we proposed turns out to be the restatement, albeit a new one, of this fundamental anthropological structure.²

In these two opening chapters, Lieven Boeve and Patrick Prétot introduce the reader to the basic method and goal of the present book, namely, how to continue the development of sacramental theology along the lines of Chauvet's highly constructive, original thought while always attending to Christian faith's actual practice in history.

¹ Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 28.

² Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 180.

Chauvet has achieved a comprehensive method that, while profitably engaged with philosophy and the social sciences, is genuinely theological. Reading Chauvet so as to discern faith's potential and demands in the contemporary world requires a double movement of contextualization and deployment. Chauvet's work must be appropriated both in its own specific context, including the theology he inherited, and in the contemporary situation. It can thereby be applied and tested in the face of new challenges. Chauvet himself has in recent years taken up such a review of his own thought, a retrospective inquiry encouraging the contributors to this present book to do the same.

Boeve describes the philosophical context wherein Chauvet's theology evolved. The linguistic turn in philosophy required his rejection of instrumental conceptions of language so as to argue for it as *mediation*. Furthermore, the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics elicited in Chauvet a hermeneutical posture emboldening him to pursue the infinite quest for truth as it unfolds in the sacraments. Chauvet has thus come to conceptualize Christian faith as an interactive triangle of Scripture, sacraments, and ethics, prohibiting any imaginary immediate access to God by insisting on the human corporality of the divine revelation Christ's Spirit works now in the church. Boeve recognizes in Chauvet's decision to engage a particular philosophical theory (in his case, Heidegger's) not centered on Christianity's God, the methodological principle of simultaneously upholding the particularity of Christianity and that of any theoretical interlocutor. Therein, for Boeve, lies the pertinence of Chauvet's fundamental theology in a postmodern age: Contrary to other philosophies and theologies that secretly revert to escaping radical particularity, the faith allows itself here truly to be affected by the context and, in so doing, is able to participate in the reconstruction of the world.

Like Boeve, Prétot recognizes the merit in Chauvet's having theorized anew the particularity at the heart of sacramental theology. For Prétot, however, the novelty lies already in Chauvet's having methodologically crossed over from the sacramental (in general) to the liturgical (in particular). By concerning himself with actual rituals in their irreducible contingency at the very point when he was rethinking the efficacy of the sacraments, Chauvet broke away from a scholasticism that had lost sight of the concrete bodiliness of their celebration. In this Chauvet is heir to another particularity, that of the liturgical movement, which strove to scrutinize the diversity of rites and the people

celebrating them, thereby reestablishing the singular value of the history of the liturgy. In the end it is to the particularity of the church that Chauvet refers through his attentive resituating of sacramental theology in the pastoral efforts of a church seeking to live the sacraments more authentically in a world in full evolution. By relocating the theology of the sacraments in the personal and social bodies celebrating them, Chauvet encourages our attention to the bodily experiences whereby Christian salvation comes to us in history.

Theology in a Postmodern Context and the Hermeneutical Project of Louis-Marie Chauvet

Lieven Boeve

INTRODUCTION

To celebrate its 575th birthday, the faculty of theology of the K. U. Leuven on March 7, 2007, conferred an honorary doctorate on Louis-Marie Chauvet who, in response, gave the address, “Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*.”¹ Upon hearing this title, and having already agreed to write the present contribution, I must admit, a tremendous fear overwhelmed me. The word *relecture* can mean many things (and definitely possesses a very strong meaning in the book under consideration²): from merely “reading again,” to “adaptation” and “correction,” to “new reading” and “drastic revision” of the old text. To my great relief, however, Chauvet did not that day present a *retractatio* or anything close. On the contrary, in his address he reviewed the background and main lines of his theological approach, situating his work in the context of the philosophical and theological resources and discussion of the 1980s. Nevertheless, in the margins of his speech he added some remarks, mostly inspired by the more than twenty years

¹ “Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*,” *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 88 (2007): 111–25; in Dutch, “Een terugblik op *Symbole et Sacrement*,” trans. Lambert Leijssen, *Collationes: Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Theologie en Pastoraal* 37 (2007): 237–56; English translation forthcoming in *Louvain Studies*.

² Chauvet indicates this by placing *relecture sacramentelle* (trans. “sacramental reinterpretation”) in his major work: *Symbole et sacrement. Une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1987). The English translation, cited throughout this present chapter, is *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

that have passed since the publication of this *magnum opus*. Again it became clear that the fundamental sacramental theology Chauvet developed extensively in *Symbole et sacrement* is still of importance not only to contemporary sacramentology and liturgical studies, but to theology at large, both as an encompassing project and as regards its different disciplines. Dealing with the specific questions of what is classically considered to be only one among many theological disciplines, i.e., sacramental theology, Chauvet's work has resulted in an attempt to reconstruct the fundamental framework of theology itself, with important consequences for the diverse theological disciplines, particularly biblical hermeneutics, christology, ecclesiology, ethics, and pastoral theology. Characteristic of this reconstruction is the fact that it brings together the basic elements of Christian existence—faith and praxis, sacraments, church, Christ—and not from a totalizing, systematizing perspective but, rather, an existential one. Chauvet's sacramental theology is indeed framed from within a *relecture* of Christian existence, a hermeneutics of being a Christian in the contemporary, so-called postmodern context.

In this contribution I will deal especially with the fundamental theological framework and theological method Chauvet has developed, with a view to both the problem Chauvet intended to solve and contemporary fundamental theological discussions. At the time of its publication *Symbole et sacrement*, by its framework and method, breathed fresh air into theology. Today, however, and thinking further than, though still with Chauvet, he may yet offer thought-provoking reflections and suggestions for a continued reconsideration of theology in dialogue with the present context. It is fair to state, I suppose, that Chauvet has moved theology from being structured through premodern schemes onto the threshold of the postmodern context. It is from this perspective that Chauvet's endeavor is to be appreciated while at the same time deepened and strengthened.

THE HERMENEUTICAL PROJECT OF CHAUVET

In what follows I would like briefly to elaborate on some characteristics of Chauvet's project, at the risk of over-accentuating these while at the same time forgetting many others. All of them bear witness to the fact that Chauvet's theology has not only drawn lessons from modern theology but also brings us to the verge of the challenges within the present postmodern context. When one looks at it today, it is quite remarkable how in *Symbole et sacrement* an intrinsically linked

double movement takes place, both on the level of theology's subject matter and its method. First of all, Chauvet attempted to reconsider the way in which theology expresses and reflects on God's communication in history with God's people. Secondly, in doing so Chauvet practiced a theological method that not only makes possible this reconsideration but also lives up to its theological outcome. We elaborate on this in the following four paragraphs.

The Criticism of Onto-theology and the Linguistic Turn in Theology

Chauvet's project involves both a critique of former ways of thinking the sacraments and the introduction of a new approach, seeking to solve the problem he diagnoses in the classical, Scholastic approach to sacrament. The first chapter of *Symbole et sacrement* opens with: "How did it come about that, when attempting to comprehend theologically the sacramental relation with God expressed most fully under the term 'grace,' the Scholastics . . . singled out for privileged consideration the category of 'cause'?"³ Chauvet consequently shows how Thomas Aquinas, in order to explain that sacraments realize what they signify, attempted to refine the concept of causality, harmonizing the heterogeneous categories of *signum* and *causa* "in such a way that the type of sign under examination would have these unique traits: it would indicate what it is causing and it would have no other way of causing except by the mode of signification."⁴ The result, however, is that God's salvific action in the sacraments is thought of through an instrumental, productionist scheme, and it is precisely this scheme that obfuscates and even prevents a contemporarily plausible account of the sacraments. More fundamentally, it is the onto-theological presumptions of such a scheme that Chauvet, inspired by Heidegger's criticism, argues against: first, the forgetting of the ontological difference in the attempt to ground the being of beings in a first being; and, second, the dichotomy of being and language, situating being outside language and turning language into an instrument, accentuating its representational character. Today such a scheme turns theology into idolatry, a speculative attempt to take hold of God and God's grace.

As an alternative Chauvet proposes to think of sacramental mediation in terms of symbolic exchange, using the dynamics of interhuman

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 17–18.

communication and the gift as the basic paradigm. Language is not instrumental but a mediation: the medium in and by which all speaking, thinking, and acting takes place, the space in which speakers, thinkers, and agents are already situated and by which they are constituted. It is through such a shift that Chauvet intends to realize “the replacement of an onto-theological logic of the Same . . . with a symbolic representation of the Other.”⁵

From Philosophy to Theology: A Homology of Attitude

Chauvet not only shares Heidegger’s criticisms of onto-theology,⁶ but in order to start his theological reconstruction he claims a “homology of attitude” between Heidegger’s anthropological thinking and a contemporary theological anthropology. The relation between a human subject (*Dasein*) and Being is homologous to the relation of the believer to God. God’s presence relative to the believer is to be thought of in a similar thinking pattern to that of Heidegger’s thinking the manifestation of Being, which is also and at the same time the withdrawal of Being: in revealing, God constantly withdraws. This positing of a homology in no way intends to identify the two; on the contrary, it implies that neither is reducible to the other. “The crucified ~~God~~ is not crossed-out ~~Being~~.”⁷

As a matter of fact, for Chauvet, Heidegger’s accounts of *Dasein* and the Christian faith are both distinct ways of living, anchored within two irreducibly different, coexisting, symbolic orders. For, with Heidegger, Chauvet accepts that, because of the fact that Being always has already withdrawn, we are left abandoned in a historically determined particular context. As such, we are embedded in a narrativity anterior to our identity; we belong to a symbolic order that irreducibly surrounds and determines us. By so doing Chauvet implicitly asserts the “co-originality” of both discourses, whereby the one cannot be considered an ontic particularization of the ontological other. The homology between Heidegger’s philosophy and theological discourse concerns two irreducible discourses, shaping two irreducible and even irrecon-

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ See also L. Boeve, “Method in Postmodern Theology: A Case Study,” in L. Boeve and J. C. Ries, eds., *The Presence of Transcendence: Thinking ‘Sacrament’ in a Postmodern Age*, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* 42 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2001), 19–39.

⁷ *Symbol and Sacrament*, 74. See also 82.

cilable worlds. Their homology implies “without building a foot-bridge between the Heideggerian Being and God, to reject a fundamental divorce between the philosophical and theological ways of thinking.”⁸

In terms of positing the relationship between philosophy and theology, Chauvet thus appreciates the assistance philosophy can offer for a contemporary theology by its preventing theology from falling back into mere fideism. The concept of “homology” (instead of “analogy,” which is still dependent on onto-theological presuppositions⁹) succeeds in this regard to underline the proper role of philosophy in theology’s search for understanding, while at the same time safeguarding the integrity of theological discourse itself. Chauvet indeed refuses any reduction of one to the other, or confusion between the two. Methodologically, philosophy serves theology both in situating the Christian faith in an anthropological and epistemological perspective and in helping to express theologically what faith is.

At the same time, and probably more than Chauvet would want to admit,¹⁰ positing the reflexive Christian discourse, although both homologically structured and “co-originary,” as a distinct, particular discourse, next to and even over against the Heideggerian philosophical discourse, particularizes this philosophical discourse. It thereby qualifies itself as an expression of a contingent, historical, particular symbolic order: a symbolic order without (the Christian) God. I would add, it is only when this move is continued that the profoundly hermeneutical character of both the philosophical and theological attempts to come to understanding may be appreciated. It may also shed light on the dynamic processes of dialogue, learning, criticism, and reconstruction that the Christian discourse is involved in—a process we will describe in what follows as “recontextualization.” Moreover, one may suggest that adequately grasping the particular nature of both these discourses will offer room, in a context of growing plurality, for other discourses to be engaged as well. It may enable theology to deal more fruitfully with one of the current major challenges in theological discussions: the engagement with the plurality of (religious) discourses and the (religious) other.

⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 37–43.

¹⁰ There is, for example, no indication of this in “Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*.”

Chauvet finds his resistance to metaphysical theological foundations and his openness to symbolic thinking as the way to escape onto-theology confirmed in psychoanalysis. In the perspective of Lacan, every foundation of absolutely secured identity belongs to the imaginary. Living from this insight, i.e., coping with the insatiable desire for secured identity without attempting to give into it by wishing to satisfy it completely, implies entering a (particular) symbolic order, circling around what is revealed in the desire. Identity construction, therefore, is coping with the rupture in one's identification, learning to live with the desire of desire without fulfilling it completely.¹¹

The Question of Reference—

Toward a More Radical Hermeneutical Theology?

Sacraments from now on, therefore, should be reflected upon in terms of symbolic exchange, following the model of human communication, in terms of linguistic mediation with its proper symbolic efficacy. It is through the symbolic work of mediation that the relation of the believer to God is realized: a relational identity never accomplished, yet a way ever to be continued. From this mediation, realized in everyday life the sacraments are the major symbolic expressions, constituted in particular, contingent, historical-cultural materiality (corporeality).¹²

For Chauvet it is crucial to affirm that the Christian symbolic order is not a double of an anthropological reality already present there anyway but, rather, generates its specific reality, efficacious in its own right. This efficacy moreover is not only of an intralinguistic nature, but urges—on theological grounds—an extralinguistic referent, even if one can only intralinguistically bear witness to it. In Chauvet's words:

if this kind of symbolic work is to be correctly placed within the purview of *intra-linguistic* efficacy, it cannot, as far as God's grace is concerned, be reduced to this socio-linguistic process: this would be to transform theology into nothing more than a peculiar form of anthropology and to diminish the absolute otherness of God. We must say, then, that "sacramental grace" is an *extra-linguistic* reality, but with this distinction, in its Christian form it is comprehensible only on the (intra-linguistic) model of the filial and brotherly and sisterly alliance established, *outside of us (extra nos)*, in Christ.¹³

¹¹ See *Symbol and Sacrament*, 76 ff., 95 ff.

¹² See *ibid.*, 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140. See also 438–44.

At this point Chauvet would seem to share the intuitions of Paul Ricoeur when dealing with the question of reference, deepening the dynamic concept of metaphorical reference (is/is not) to the imaginative-productive notion of the “world before the text,” while at the same time stressing the thoroughly theological urgency of this reference. Although the “theo-ontological” vehemence of the Christian discourse is only to be testified to from within Christian discourse itself, thus fundamentally growing from within its hermeneutical circle, it is nonetheless crucial for that discourse’s integrity and plausibility.

More than ever, this insight pushes theology’s hermeneutical turn further toward its full realization, pressing the challenge that Chauvet should continue along the way Ricoeur also traveled during the closing decades of the past century.¹⁴ In his reflections on time, narrative, and narrative identity, Ricoeur increasingly relativized the borders between concept and metaphor, reflection and poetics, thinking and narrating, and as a result, between phenomenology and hermeneutics.¹⁵ For Chauvet this implies that what he has repeatedly presented as “the triple determination of truth,”¹⁶ as an alternative to metaphysics, ultimately is profoundly qualified by its hermeneutical nature. The “meta-function” of our thinking (which Chauvet borrows from S. Breton) and the phenomenological explorations into truth finally do not escape or, put more positively, find their appropriate place in the more fundamental third, hermeneutical determination of truth. Chauvet’s approach here opens the door to a fully realized hermeneutical theology, finding its locus in actual lived Christian existence. From there forward theology can make such claims, which do not escape the dynamics of the hermeneutical circle while at the same time searching for general validity.

¹⁴ And this also with regard to his *relecture* in “Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*.”

¹⁵ This point has been convincingly developed by Christophe Brabant in “Ricoeurs hermeneutische ontologie,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 69 (2007): 509–34; here, 530.

¹⁶ Chauvet develops this triple determination in “The Broken Bread as Theological Figure of Eucharistic Presence,” in L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, eds., *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: Fundamental Theological Perspectives*, BETL 160 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2001): 236–62. (French original in *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 82 [2001]: 9–33; and more recently again in his “Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*.”)

*Theology, Christian Existence, and Corporeality—
On Mediation and the Refusal of Immediacy*

Such is indeed one of the main assets of Chauvet's renewal: the irreducible intrinsic link between theology and the very particularity and materiality of Christian existence. In line with this, Chauvet concluded "Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*" thus: "[The] entire project can be resumed in the idea of the positive consent to corporeity as the mediation of the most spiritual relationship with God. Faith holds us to the body, and a sacrament is nothing other than the Word of God happening 'at the risk of the body.'" ¹⁷ By so doing Chauvet not only forged a more plausible and relevant alternative to the classical onto-theological schemes. At the same time, and to his credit today, he corrected the often unilateral political-ethical interpretations of Christian praxis in many Western modern (political and liberationist) theologies, themselves reacting against too traditionalist and intellectualist accounts of Christianity. Indeed, the praxis-oriented answers of these theologies to the urgent questions about the plausibility and relevance of the Christian faith in a modern context often failed to situate the sacraments and other concrete religious practices in relation to the legitimate ethical-political praxis they called for (except, e.g., in terms of "conscientization").

The shift Chauvet thus proposes is

to think the most "spiritual" through the mediations of the most "corporeal," and to think this theologically, in fidelity to the reception of our condition as God's creature, as grace, not with resentment as if it would be seen as a small evil but, "with joy" . . . as the place where our relation to God is carried out. ¹⁸

Sacraments then are no longer to be considered as a supplementary means to assist a communication between God and human beings, a communication that should take place primarily in the interiority and immediacy of the believing subject. Nor are they instrumental in constructing the ecclesial community or inspiring political-ethical Christian action. On the contrary, because of their corporeal and institutional constitution, the sacraments are the paradigm in which to conceive of divine-human communication. ¹⁹ It is in this way that the

¹⁷ "Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*," 124. See also *Symbol and Sacrament*, 152 ff.

¹⁸ "Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*," 121.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 121. See also *Symbol and Sacrament*, 140–41.

efficacy of the sacraments should be understood, and therefore obviously cannot be undervalued. And here Chauvet formulates the answer to his initial question about the relation between *signum* and *causa* in the sacraments: “that means that there is nothing more effective than that which however is only a sign, because language is like the matrix within which the subject happens and within which he is led as a subject.”²⁰ Of this the Eucharist is the prime and paradigmatic example. Because of this, Christian faith is fundamentally sacramental in structure, mediated, to be distinguished and safeguarded from the temptation of the immediate—the desire to have an immediate grasp, an unmediated contact with God, Christ, grace, salvation, which is the desire for onto-theological presence.

Further elaborating on this point, Chauvet unfolds the structure of Christian identity and the role of the church as symbolic order in which this identity is constituted and lived. In this order he distinguishes the constitutive triangle of Scriptures, sacrament, and ethics. Through these three dynamically interrelated elements the church, as a proper symbolic order, performs its fundamental sacramental mediation. Moreover, when only one of the three prevails, the integrity of Christian existence is endangered: privileging the cognitive dimension of faith (Scripture) turns into dogmatism; overvaluing the sacramental element leads to magic; and the prioritization of the ethical dimension degenerates into moralism. All three are instances of the desire to master the dynamically interrelated threefold reality of Christian existence. They short-circuit the fundamental sacramental mediation, turning Christ into an object, an idol. In Chauvet’s words: “These are three different methods, most often subtle, for killing the presence of the absence of the Risen One, for erasing his radical otherness. Three different ways, expressed in another way, to convert him, the ‘Living’ One, into a dead body or an available object.”²¹ And further:

To give up the hope of finding the lost body of Jesus by consenting to meet him, alive, in the symbolic mediation of the Church thus requires a good joining of the three elements in their mutual differences. . . . Now, as risen, Christ has departed; we must agree to this loss if we want to be able to find him.²²

²⁰ “Une relecture de *Symbole et sacrement*,” 122.

²¹ *Symbol and Sacrament*, 174.

²² *Ibid.*, 177.

Christ is not at our disposal. Encountering him only occurs in and through an event of the symbolic mediation of the church, itself resulting from the dynamic interrelation of Scriptures, sacrament, and ethics. Only a Christ who is not turned into an object, into a presence, but is (in onto-theological terms) absent, can be symbolically mediated. Only as such can Christ become sacramentally present (*la présence du manque de Dieu*). It is at this point that Chauvet reminds us of the homology of attitude between Heidegger's philosophy and his own theological approach. For the Christian believer, the concrete modality of authentically engaging this absence is living in the church as the symbolic Body of the risen Christ.

One might wonder whether the language of absence and of lack is ultimately the most appropriate to express "post-onto-theologically" God's salvific revelation in the risen Jesus Christ. Chauvet's language here indeed remains dependent on the onto-theological structures he intends to overcome instead of developing a more appropriate language to express Christ's sacramental presence in the church. The latter, of course, has nothing to do with an absence as such but with qualitatively other ways of being present.

RECONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGY IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

It is the awareness of a theological urgency that drives Chauvet to his reconsideration of the sacramental structure of Christian existence. The gap between classical sacramental theology and contemporary culture puts the very plausibility and relevance of the sacraments, and of Christian existence as a whole, under pressure. Consequently, because of the fact that the epistemological conditions have changed (of which the linguistic turn is the prime indication), theology is in need of reconsidering the way it performs its age-old task of "faith in search of understanding." It is with this aim that Chauvet engages in an interdisciplinary dialogue with contemporary philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, ritual studies, etc., in order to reconfigure the proper rationality of Christian faith, both *ad intra* (for Christians), but also *ad extra* (explaining what Christianity is about to the culture at large). Indeed, Chauvet's project is one of the better contemporary illustrations of what I have termed in other places "theological recontextualization."²³ His engagement in such an exercise allows a better situating of

²³ See L. Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition. An Essay on Christian Faith in a Post-modern Context*. Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 30 (Leuven/

his theology in the contemporary field of philosophical-theological reflection on religion today.

Recontextualizing Theology: A Theological-Methodological Urgency

As a theological category, recontextualization implies that Christian faith and tradition are not only contained in a specific historico-cultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical context but are also co-constituted by this context. Certainly, faith cannot be reduced to context, nor can tradition's development be reduced to mere adaptation to shifting contexts. Nevertheless, there is an intrinsic bond between faith and tradition, on the one hand, and historical context, on the other. Hence, contextual novelty puts pressure on historically conditioned expressions of Christian faith and their theological understanding, driving these toward recontextualization. Contextual sensitivities and thought-patterns start shifting; older forms of tradition lose their familiarity and plausibility; and effects of alienation arise. Both through taking part in and confronting itself with this changed context the Christian faith community is urged to find new ways to express its faith in fidelity to the tradition as well as to the context in which it is situated, balancing between continuity and discontinuity. The concept of recontextualization thus functions both descriptively and normatively. As a descriptive category, it assists in analyzing the ways in which tradition has been challenged by contextual change and novelty, varying from stubborn condemnation and suppression of this novelty to its uncritical embracement and adaptation. As a normative category, recontextualization calls for a theological program. The theological insight in the intrinsic link between faith and context inspires theologians to take the contextual challenges seriously, motivating them to come to a contemporary theological discourse that at the same time can claim theological validity and contextual plausibility.²⁴

Grand Rapids: Peeters / Eerdmans, 2003), chap. 1; *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007), chap. 2; and *Theology, Recontextualisation and Contemporary Critical Consciousness: Lessons from Richard Schaeffler for a Postmodern Theological Epistemology*, in E. Gaziaux, ed., *Théologie et Philosophie*, BETL 206 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2007): 455–83.

²⁴ As a normative theological category, recontextualization can be theological motivated from a renewed understanding of the doctrine of incarnation, as I have tried to show in "Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology," in T. Merrigan and J. Haers, eds., *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and*

The dialogue with philosophy and other human sciences has been and is still elementary in this process. Most often philosophy offers a reflexive account of contextual worldviews and sensitivities. To a large part it constitutes the intellectual horizon in which theologians seek to express an understanding of Christian faith. On many accounts the historical involvement of theology with philosophy has clearly led to new ways of doing theology.²⁵ Theologians have borrowed models, patterns, ideas, and terminologies from philosophy and the human sciences in order to develop, structure, support, or flesh out their own understanding of what Christian faith is about. They use thinking patterns, categories, etc., from philosophy in order to reflexively express the truth of faith—which, by its own nature, is never absolutely grasped or completely understood—and to signify it both in a theologically and contextually plausible and relevant way. Theologians do not thereby become philosophers as such with the philosophers (or human scientists with the human scientists). On the contrary, in the best tradition of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, they use philosophy to consider anew the specific claims of their theological tradition. Such dialogue implies not only engaging in a confrontation with contextual critical consciousness (self-criticism) but also, and more importantly, searching for a contextually anchored understanding of Christian faith, i.e., developing a theology for the present day. In both, philosophy's assistance is at once necessary and also welcome.

Chauvet's approach not only gives answer to the descriptive usage of recontextualization but also illustrates the normative impetus of the concept, doing this both on the level of the legitimization of his approach and the interdisciplinary dialogical way in which he elaborates the latter. At the same time, however, and of primary importance here, is his explicit attention to the particular theological features of the Christian faith. To whatever degree the theological *relecture* of Christian existence may be helped, and even reconfigured, by the dialogue

the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology, BETL, 152 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2000), 577–93; and in *God Interrupts History*, chap. 8.

²⁵ The prime example is the way in which the rediscovery of Aristotelianism influenced Scholastic theology, at best illustrated by the new synthesis performed by Thomas Aquinas, between Augustinian tradition and Aristotelian thought patterns and vocabulary. See, for example, O. H. Pesch, *Thomas von Aquin. Grenze und Größe mittelalterlicher Theologie. Ein Einführung* (Mainz: Mathias-Grünewald, 1988, 1989).

with philosophy, anthropology, etc., Christian faith can never be reduced to merely philosophical or anthropological structures—as if it were a kind of narrative double or illustration of these structures. Through dialogue Chauvet succeeds, with the help of contemporary philosophy, etc., in not only reconsidering the reflexivity of being a Christian today but also testifying to the proper legitimate position of theological discourse in relation to these other discourses. Exemplary in this regard is the homology of attitude that Chauvet claims between Heideggerian and theological discourses, and thus their “co-originality.” This motivates, for example, his refusal to reduce theology to merely “ontic” discourse, secondary to the “ontological” discourse of philosophy. This approach not only offers theology a structure for rethinking the dynamics of Christian faith but also posits Christian faith and theology as distinct and irreducible discourses, to be taken on their own terms.

This, I would claim, is what theological recontextualization in the contemporary, so-called postmodern context is about. This is also what enables us to situate Chauvet’s theological methodology in the current broader postmodern philosophical-theological field. It would lead us too far astray to attempt to present the full picture of this field. It is, however, most enlightening to relate Chauvet’s approach to two discussions that have colored the scene for at least the last two decades: first, the postconciliar theological discussion on the relation between Christian faith and the (post)modern context and, secondly, the “turn to religion” in contemporary phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction.

*Theology and the Dialogue with the Context:
Between Continuity and Discontinuity*

First, the post-Vatican II discussion on theological methodology and the relation between Christian faith and the contemporary context has been modified by the postmodern criticism of modernity.²⁶ The theological dialogue with modernity, answering the call for aggiornamento argued for and enacted in *Gaudium et Spes*, lost much of its

²⁶ For a further elaboration of this argument, including bibliographical references, see *God Interrupts History*, intro. and chap. 2. See also L. Boeve, “Beyond the Modern and Anti-modern Dilemma. *Gaudium et Spes* and Theological Method in a Postmodern European Context,” *Horizons* 34:2 (2007): 292–305.

attractiveness and plausibility once the modern dialogue partner got deconstructed. So-called correlationist theologies, such as Edward Schillebeeckx's, suffered even more when the still-existing overlap between Christianity and culture progressively disappeared.²⁷ For a long time the latter functioned as the unquestioned, and thus facilitating, background for correlating Christian faith and modern rationalities and sensibilities. Theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger, who were hesitant to engage in the dialogue because of the ambiguities of the modern context (e.g., secularization, secularism), saw their point proven and further reinforced by their even more pessimistic evaluation of postmodernity (nihilism, relativism, amoralism, aestheticism, individualism, etc.). Other so-called postmodern theologies, such as John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy, joined in and, as an alternative to the modern secularism and postmodern nihilism, presented a neo-Augustinian counter-narrative, reclaiming the world from a Christian participationist perspective.

More fundamentally, however, the difference between the two positions is not so much a question of whether a dialogue of theology with the modern context is productive or not as whether such a dialogue is of any theological necessity. Those rejecting that necessity perceive Christian faith as in essence not affected by it. The contrary position starts from the basic theological premise, also in the background of the normative conception of recontextualization, that Christian faith's involvement with the context very much makes a difference. Because of the incarnational dynamics of Christian faith, there is even an intrinsic link between revelation, faith, church, tradition, and the context in which they are situated. Faith and church are not unaffected by, let alone in opposition to, the world; they participate in constituting it. Furthermore, they are in part constituted by the world. Given the fact that God reveals Godself precisely in history, history is ultimately co-constitutive of faith's truth. However, because of the postmodern criticisms of modernity, modern correlation as a dialogical strategy indeed lost a lot of its plausibility due to its excessively accentuating the continuity between faith and context. Therefore, contrary to those pleading for discontinuity, it is not the necessity of the dialogue that should be put into question but the nature of such dialogue, and this because of the altered situation.

²⁷ This becomes very clear when one studies the evolution apparent in the results stemming from the three European Values Studies, a survey undertaken in most of the European countries during the last three decades (1981, 1990–1991, 1999).

It is here that Chauvet's interdisciplinary, hermeneutical theological approach, which, as we mentioned, could further be radicalized, renders its service. It not only seeks continuity with the present context but also accentuates the specificity of Christian existence in relation to this context. In so doing Chauvet successfully holds together both continuity and discontinuity in the relation between Christianity and context. This is due to not only contextual reasons (the particularity of different symbolic orders) but also the theological structure of Christian faith itself: answering the call of God, which can never be grasped or ever mastered, but to which it has access only in the sacramental mediation of the symbolic order of the church.²⁸

*Chauvet and the "Turn to Religion" in Contemporary
"Continental" Philosophy: On Incarnation and Contamination*

A wide range of philosophers belonging to the phenomenological, deconstructionist and/or hermeneutical traditions, including Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and Gianni Vattimo, have placed the theme of religion on the philosophical agenda again. Such movement occurs very often in relation to their attempts to overcome onto-theology and to engage otherness and transcendence. It is noteworthy that, in their approaches, religion is often thought of primarily as a structure in and through which the decentering of the subject is grasped. Also noteworthy, in view of Chauvet, is the merely relative importance of language, particularity, and narrative in relation to this structure. Very briefly I will illustrate this point with regard to Jean-Luc Marion, Jack Caputo, and Richard Kearney, all three of whom are very close to the catholic theological tradition but, in a particular way, also distant from it.²⁹

²⁸ For a proposal for holding together continuity and discontinuity in the dialogue with the context through a theology of interruption, see my *God Interrupts History*.

²⁹ For a more developed elaboration of my argument, and further references, see L. Boeve, "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics. A Critical-Constructive Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 81 (2005): 305-33; as well as (also in relation to Radical Orthodoxy): "(Post)Modern Theology on Trial? Towards a Radical Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Particularity," *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003): 240-54.

Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness³⁰ takes as its point of departure the "saturated phenomenon," which turns the subject into the dative and, thus, the one who is given to, who receives oneself through receiving what is given. Therefore, the human response is always already secondary, consisting in nothing more than the acknowledgment of the reception of oneself from givenness. This structure, according to Marion, is given and therefore prior to language and hermeneutics. Accordingly, this dynamic of appeal and response, and the relationship it constitutes, also structures the nature of divine revelation and the role of religious language. According to Marion, therefore, it is not so much a hermeneutical approach to religion and religious language that teaches us how to understand (Christian) religion and religious truth, but a radicalized phenomenological approach, that is, a phenomenology serving as a heuristic reducing particularity and language to its primary structure (*autant de reduction, autant de donation*—the more reduction the more givenness).³¹

Following the lead of the later Jacques Derrida, John Caputo expresses the dynamics of deconstruction and the corresponding critical consciousness in explicitly religious vocabularies. This results in a so-called radical hermeneutics of religion that seeks to determine the "religious" in terms of "religion without religion," reducing religion to a (universal) structure of religious desire.³² Caputo indeed strives to uncover the structure of "pure prayer," that is, a relation of the subject to a "You," while at the same time deferring the question of whether this You in effect exists.³³ He is concerned, as it were, with retrieving a form of spirituality uncontaminated by particularity and narrativity to the point of dropping the presupposition that there is a You to whom or which the prayer is directed.³⁴

³⁰ See J. L. Marion, *Etant donné: essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

³¹ See Marion, "'Christian Philosophy': Hermeneutic or Heuristic?" in F. J. Ambrosio, ed., *The Question of Christian Philosophy Today* (New York: Fordham University, 1999), 247–64.

³² As another way of expressing this structure of religious desire, Derrida and Caputo indicate the "messianic structure" recognized in, but at the same time distinguished from, the various particular messianisms.

³³ See J. D. Caputo, "Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Experience of Prayer," in Marco Olivetti, ed., *Théologie négative*, Biblioteca dell' 'Archivio di Filosofia' 59 (Rome: CEDAM, 2002), 861–80.

³⁴ Caputo, however, is also aware of the fact that neither Derrida nor he himself escapes from linguistic contamination. See, for example, B. Keith Putt,

Finally, Richard Kearney, following Ricoeur, criticizes the “short-cut” approaches of both phenomenology and deconstruction, claiming in *The God Who May Be*³⁵ to perform a “phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval” of (the Christian) religion, thereby indicating the importance of the “metaphorizing role” of hermeneutic mediation in understanding religion. Ultimately, nevertheless, Kearney, borrowing from Derrida and Caputo the concept of messianism, also tends to reduce religion to a quasi-universal ethico-religious structure, thus placing at risk his own starting point. This is well illustrated by his view on the plurality of religions: in the end, for Kearney, all religious traditions, in one way or another, share the “same” caring for justice and peace, for human wholeness and fulfillment. All convey narrative wisdom in order to realize this fulfillment. The God-who-may-be is revealed and witnessed to in many traditions, whose insights may well be analogous or complimentary. Thus, in the end, language and narrativity differentiate and divide again.³⁶ Religious truth is finally to be situated in what is radically beyond language, beyond narrativity. Hermeneutics becomes a tool to evoke and point at this beyond. Language again risks being considered as a contaminate of the quasi-universal purity of an ethico-eschatological religious desire.

Although all, albeit each in his own voice, display a hermeneutical sensibility for particularity, in practice they tend to situate the basic structure of the religious outside or beyond particularity, deeming language contamination. Yet is it legitimate to equate language with contamination? From a fundamental theological perspective, at least, this challenges the importance of incarnation as the theological-epistemological category par excellence to name God and to think about religious truth. Or is Christianity, with its christocentric and thus incarnational approach, from the very outset always doomed to be too

“What Do I Love When I Love My God? An Interview with John D. Caputo” (by B. Putt in J. H. Olthuis, ed., *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 150–79; here, 165.

³⁵ See R. Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutic of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³⁶ This is the reason Kearney opposes the very explicit “confessionally partisan” truth-claims of religions. For Kearney the uniqueness and definitiveness of the fullness of God’s revelation in the incarnation in Jesus Christ qualifies to be such a claim. See his *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 41.

particular, too historical, too positive? Chauvet definitely would oppose and reverse this argument, both on philosophical and theological grounds. Concerning the philosophical, he would argue for the irreducibility of the symbolic order and for the very corporeality of its operations in dealing with religions and their efficaciousness. On the theological level, he would add that it is only in the concrete materiality, particularity, and narrativity of Christian existence—thus in its arch-sacramental features—that God’s word and grace are mediated. Language should not be looked at in terms of contamination or fall. The latter ultimately makes any “pure” or “authentic” concept of religion impossible, compelling hermeneutics to leave its entanglement with particularity behind and move in the direction of a pure, but nonetheless untenable, religious structure. In Chauvet’s account, however, a hermeneutic of religion, and definitely a hermeneutics of Christianity, does not lead “beyond,” let alone “behind,” language, but to language itself: to the concrete stories, practices, texts, and traditions wherein religion is lived and experienced. For it is through concrete corporeal mediations that the spiritual is communicated and lived. Language is constitutive for religion. As a matter of fact, this may well be Christian reflection’s particular contribution to Continental philosophy’s recent turn to religion.

CONCLUSION

It may sound awkward, but in attempting to forge an alternative to the premodern sacramental thinking patterns, Chauvet has presented us with a theology and theological method that lead us at least onto the threshold of the postmodern context. His hermeneutical-theological project, with its strong accent on mediation, language, praxis, and corporeality, not only offers a plausible and relevant *relecture* of Christian existence today, with many consequences for theology and its disciplines, but also, because of its approach, takes sides in the theological-methodological discussion on the relation between Christian faith and context. This has important consequences for the positioning of Christian faith in relation to today’s (European) culture and society. Finally, it allows theologians to take part in the philosophical discussion on religion, criticizing those forms of religious hermeneutics that claim a religious purity beyond the mediations of language and the symbolic order.

At the same time it remains true that, because of its starting point and dialogue partners, *Symbol and Sacrament* testifies to the theological

struggle of a particular generation, a struggle with which many of my generation, children of the linguistic turn, are hardly still familiar. Moreover, the hermeneutical-theological drive is challenged by new questions. For example, it is confronted by accusations of, on the one hand, particularism and narrativism, while on the other, relativism and false universalism. These challenges would seem to inspire certain theologians today to halt prematurely the hermeneutical turn, returning again to more short-cut onto-(theo-)logical approaches due to fearing the consequences of a fully hermeneutical theology. The latter deliberately sets aside the will to master its subject and secure identity, pursuing instead the never-ending and in-securing way of faith seeking understanding in the concrete, material mediations of our Christian existence. For many, however, this would seem an excessively dangerous and insufficiently reassuring position in a context too easily evaluated as nihilistic and relativistic.

A second challenge for a contemporary hermeneutical theology is the confrontation with otherness in and the engagement with religious plurality. This challenge does not in the first place imply the reflection on otherness in one's own discourse (which Chauvet evidently has done), but concerns coping with the challenge of the concrete, external other, who is also the religious other. The context in and for which Chauvet has written his theology, however, is still predominantly seen as marked by secularization, challenging theology to profile itself vis-à-vis the alternative of an existence without God. In this regard the particularization of the Heideggerian philosophical discourse could be a first step to invite other religious and ideological discourses, themselves exponents of different particular symbolic orders, to enter into a critical-productive dialogue. A theological reflection on the possible productive relation between the other in one's own discourse and the other (of another) discourse, then, could be a second step. It is in such a direction that a future *relecture* of Chauvet's hermeneutical theology could go.³⁷

³⁷ For an engagement of these challenges, see my *God Interrupts History*.