

## THEOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE SERIES

Peter C. Phan, General Editor

*Ignacio Ellacuría Professor of Catholic Social Thought,  
Georgetown University*

At the beginning of a new millennium, the *Theology in Global Perspective* series responds to the challenge to reexamine the foundational and doctrinal themes of Christianity in light of the new global reality. While traditional Catholic theology has assumed an essentially European or Western point of view, *Theology in Global Perspective* takes account of insights and experience of churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania, as well as from Europe and North America. Noting the pervasiveness of changes brought about by science and technologies, and growing concerns about the sustainability of Earth, it seeks to embody insights from studies in these areas as well.

Though rooted in the Catholic tradition, volumes in the series are written with an eye to the ecumenical implications of Protestant, Orthodox, and Pentecostal theologies for Catholicism, and vice versa. In addition, authors will explore insights from other religious traditions with the potential to enrich Christian theology and self-understanding.

Books in this series will provide reliable introductions to the major theological topics, tracing their roots in Scripture and their development in later tradition, exploring when possible the implications of new thinking on gender and sociocultural identities. And they will relate these themes to the challenges confronting the peoples of the world in the wake of globalization, particularly the implications of Christian faith for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

### *Other Books Published in the Series*

*Orders and Ministry: Leadership in the World Church*, Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M.

*Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith*, Anne Hunt

*Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View*, James A. Wiseman, O.S.B.

*Eschatology and Hope*, Anthony Kelly, C.Ss.R.

THEOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE SERIES

Peter C. Phan, General Editor

# MEETING MYSTERY

*Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments*

NATHAN D. MITCHELL

ORBIS  BOOKS

Maryknoll, New York 10545

Founded in 1970, Orbis Books endeavors to publish works that enlighten the mind, nourish the spirit, and challenge the conscience. The publishing arm of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Orbis seeks to explore the global dimensions of the Christian faith and mission, to invite dialogue with diverse cultures and religious traditions, and to serve the cause of reconciliation and peace. The books published reflect the opinions of their authors and are not meant to represent the official position of the Maryknoll Society. To obtain more information about Maryknoll and Orbis Books, please visit our website at [www.maryknoll.org](http://www.maryknoll.org).

---

Copyright © 2006 by Nathan D. Mitchell.

Published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, U.S.A. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers. For permissions, write to Orbis Books, P. O. Box 308, Maryknoll NY 10545-0308, U.S.A.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

---

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Mitchell, Nathan D.

Meeting mystery : liturgy, worship, sacraments / Nathan D. Mitchell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-674-0 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-57075-674-0

1. Public worship. I. Title.

BV15.M58 2006

264—dc22

2006017581

Part 1

# The Hyper-Reality of Worship

## Ritual's Roots

### *Rhizome, Web, Word, and World*

“ALWAYS LEARN, NEVER TEACH.” This Native American aphorism captures, in four short words, the great gift that students give their teachers. Wisdom is not something “haves” impart to “have-nots”; it arises from mutuality, from dialogue and exchange, from *listening*, as the prologue of the sixth-century *Rule of St. Benedict* puts it, “with the ear of the heart.” Like polyphony, wisdom requires the simultaneous presence of many voices, combining, recombining, and sometimes *challenging* one another in their search for beauty and truth. For the process of learning is never a done deal; it requires an abiding willingness to *renegotiate* and to *reimagine* what one has long regarded as settled.

This chapter invites readers to ponder the significance of Christian liturgy and sacramental worship by reimagining its structure, its sources in human life and experience, and its changing cultural contexts. Almost forty-five years ago, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, recognized that liturgy is *communal ritual action* embodied in a variety of living, historical *cultures* (SC 14, 23, 37). Most simply defined, a “culture” is the sum total of all the ways human persons interact and live together. It includes their social contacts, contracts, conventions, and covenants; their shared language and literature; their arts and artifacts, their science and technology; their meanings and memories, beliefs and behaviors, icons and images; and not least, their religious convictions and values transmitted in song and story, and rehearsed in ritual actions. Culture is thus not merely the inevitable context within which Christians celebrate the liturgy; it is the indispensable means by which they recognize and respond to God’s action among them.<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II made this point clearly in his encycli-

---

1. For a summary of debates among contemporary social scientists about the meanings and significance of culture, see my discussions in the “Lexicon” section of *Liturgy Digest* 3, no. 2 (1996): 63-107, esp. 94-97. See also my *Liturgy and the Social Sciences* (American Essays in Liturgy; Collegetown, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999).

cal *Redemptoris Missio* (1990): “The Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the ‘seeds of the Word,’ to be found in human initiatives,” and hence “the Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also *society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions*” (no. 28).

We cannot, therefore, talk about Christian faith—and still less about Christian liturgy—without speaking about *culture*. Culture is the basic *site* where the Spirit’s presence and activity are known, named, and celebrated in word and sacrament. John Paul’s words expand a theme that had begun to emerge a quarter-century earlier, especially in the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nos-stra Aetate*, and in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. This latter document proclaimed the church’s “solidarity with the whole human family” and invited Catholics to participate in a dialogue with peoples of “every nation, race and culture,” a dialogue that “excludes nobody” and includes, especially, those who “respect outstanding human values without realizing who the author of those values is, as well as those who oppose the Church” (GS 92). In short, the council insisted, “We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live,” the world in which a “real and cultural transformation” is taking place (GS 4).

Modernity was not, of course, a creation of the twentieth century. Its origins reach back at least to the sixteenth century, when printing presses began to revolutionize people’s access to information, and when humanist scholars began calling for closer attention to the classical sources of Western civilization (now available in print!)—a move that led to a deeper appreciation of human history, its origins, evolution, and vicissitudes. During the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, modernity took still another turn, toward the thinking human subject and that subject’s vital role in the construction of reality. The Enlightenment’s attention to subjectivity embodied an increasing optimism about the power and range of human reason. Both philosophers and scientists became increasingly confident in the ability of thinkers and researchers to discover, measure, and analyze the forces at work both within human beings and outside them, in the larger universe.

By the mid-twentieth century, then, “modernity” was no longer very modern. The world’s increasing complexity raised new questions about the power of “clear and distinct ideas” to penetrate the mysteries of life and the universe. Scientists began talking about “relativity” (Einstein), “indeterminacy” (Heisenberg), and “randomness” (Prigogine) as essential factors governing the structure of reality and the sometimes erratic behavior of its building blocks. And while science continued to make enormous progress, the price was high. As William Butler Yeats wrote in “The Second Coming,” a famous poem

published in 1921, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . . / And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"<sup>2</sup> Many felt that the horrors of the Second World War—with its systematic genocide of Jews and its unleashing of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—proved that Yeats's words were prophetic.

Ironically, then, just as the Roman Catholic Church was opening a dialogue with modernity in *Gaudium et Spes*, the world itself had moved in a different direction. It has become customary among philosophers and social scientists to call this new direction "postmodernity." "Postmodern" is a broad term used to describe a wide variety of social patterns, artistic and intellectual movements, and technological innovations.<sup>3</sup> Its exact definition need not detain us here, since its features are obvious and surround us everywhere. As Jim Powell describes it in his entertaining primer, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, postmodern cultures are notable for their eclecticism and fragmentation, for their preoccupation with image and pastiche. Postmodern city-dwellers, writes Powell, live in "an exhilarating blur . . . fixated on commodities, on products, on images, like the explosion of Andy Warhol's pop art"; all is "surface . . . with no link to any reality; . . . masses of spectators abandoned to a gaze of image addiction; TV images stripped of reality, leaving only a surface, a simulacrum, schlock, kitsch, B-movies, pulp fiction, advertising, motels, *Readers Digest* culture; the merely decorative, superficial, gratuitous."<sup>4</sup> In a nutshell: cell phones; video games; "reality TV"; *Desperate Housewives*; and people "connected" to each other 24/7, while feeling utterly isolated and alone.

But postmodernism isn't just about surfaces, fragmentation, isolation, and bad news. Here, I hope to highlight its positive aspects. In chapter 1, I thus invite readers to think imaginatively about postmodern cultures, especially—though not exclusively—those of late-capitalist, industrialized Western societies such as that of the United States. Accordingly, the first part of this chapter invites readers to a conversation about the "postmodern condition" and suggests that postmodern cultures create networks of "interconnected differences" that closely resemble the technologies that flourish within them (e.g., the information technologies of Web, Internet, iPods, and cellular

---

2. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 184–85.

3. On the relation between postmodernism and consumer cultures, see the classic essay of Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wa.: Bay Press, 1983), 111–25. See also Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, eds., *The Jameson Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 188–232.

4. Jim Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners* (New York: Readers and Writers Publishing, 1998), 36–37.

phones). In the second part of the chapter, I will show how postmodern technologies such as the Web may shed light on Christian understandings of Word (God's self-communication to humankind) and world (the place where God's Word chose to "pitch its tent" and dwell among us [John 1:14]). We begin our study of Christian liturgy, then, by trying to reimagine ritual in light of our postmodern experience of life, culture, and technology.

## THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

### *Trees versus Crabgrass: Reimagining Liturgy in Postmodern Cultures*

In her elegant collection *Chosen by the Lion*, American poet Linda Gregg writes of a God who "lies dreaming in the lap of the world," a God who "knows the owls will guard the sweetness / of the soul in their massive keep of silence," a God who "thinks about / poetry all the time, breathes happily," and whispers, "There are fish in the net, / lots of fish this time in the net of the heart."<sup>5</sup> A God who "lies dreaming in the lap of the world," is, of course, incomprehensibly *near* yet elusive; a God whose *presence* may feel more like *absence*, whose truth grows mute when spoken, whose wide grace seeps through a woefully narrow gate.

Perhaps without intending to, Gregg calls our attention to an experience of God that many people who live in postmodern cultures may recognize. Postmodernity has, in fact, become an inescapable condition that shapes much of our twenty-first-century experience, at least in Western industrialized cultures.<sup>6</sup> As British theologian Graham Ward has written,

If thinking in modernity (a period roughly inaugurated by the rapid development of capitalism, technology, and the cult of the individual in the late sixteenth century) is dominated by highly determined forms such as the circle, the cube, the spiral, even the double helix, then postmodernity (not a period . . . but more a condition) finds expression in indeterminate forms such as . . . the rhizome. As a form the "rhizome" is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. . . . It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle . . . from which it grows and which it overflows.<sup>7</sup>

5. Linda Gregg, *Chosen by the Lion* (St. Paul: Greywolf Press, 1994), 30.

6. The notion that postmodernity is better understood as a "condition" rather than a movement, historical period, or episode has been developed in David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

7. Graham Ward, "Postmodern Theology," in David F. Ford, *The Modern Theologians* (2nd ed.;

Writers like Ward suggest that during the second millennium (1000-2000 C.E.), the cultural climate of Western societies changed—slowly at first, then more rapidly—from *traditional* to *modern* to *postmodern*. *Traditional* cultures value stability, regularity, order, and repetition; *modern* cultures emphasize innovation, novelty, and dynamism.<sup>8</sup> Yet traditional and modern cultures have something crucial in common: *both of them value determined structures and forms*. Thus, for example, America's "Founding Fathers" were political innovators deeply influenced by the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. They prized human reason as a God-given antidote to superstition and stressed human intelligence as the proper basis for social and scientific progress. (The late eighteenth century, after all, marked the advent of the Industrial Revolution, a key moment in the development of modern capitalist societies such as those of Great Britain and the United States.) So while men like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson endorsed the colonies' revolt against British imperialism, they abhorred anarchy. Following the colonists' military success in the War of Independence, these founders moved quickly to establish order through a *written* Constitution and a representative form of government in which each branch (legislative, judicial, executive) reined in the others (the system of "checks and balances"). Revolutionary though it was, American "freedom" and "democracy" still prized political institutions and proposed the "rule of *law*" to replace the arbitrary whims of human agents. The founders were "modern," but they shared traditional culture's fondness for form and structure.

But the postmodern cultures that began to emerge in the mid-twentieth century challenged modernity's confidence in the world's coherence and in reason's ability to analyze nature. Postmodernity favored indeterminacy, process, and motion over modernity's structure and stability. That is one reason why, in the text quoted above, Graham Ward draws our attention to the difference between the determined forms of modern cultures (e.g., the circle, the cube, the pyramid, the spiral) and the indeterminate fluidity of postmodern cultures, where structures seem to exist merely on the surface (and hence, e.g., can be deleted with the single click of a computer's mouse). Ward and others thus use contrasting images to illustrate the basic differences between

---

Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 585. Not everyone would share Ward's rather negative assessment of modernity. Thus, for example, many historians would argue that modernity is best understood in distinction from "traditional societies." Where traditional societies value stability, regularity, order, and repetition, modernity values "innovation, novelty, and dynamism." See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 2.

8. Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, 111. The image of postmodern cultures as "rhizomatic" is derived from the work of two French thinkers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizome: Introduction* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1976). See also Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 6.

modernity and postmodernity. As Ward suggests, postmodern cultures can be described as “rhizomatic” (a horizontal network of randomly connected roots) rather than “arboreal” (vertical, treelike structures with firm root systems, trunks, and branching extensions).

Simply put, postmodern cultures resemble crabgrass more than a grove of majestic maples. Anyone who has ever tried to rid a lawn of crabgrass by pulling it up soon learns that its root system resembles a mole’s maze of tunnels. Instead of a single, central root, crabgrass, Powell says, “has zillions of roots, none of which is central—and each off-shoot interconnects in random, unregulated networks in which any node can interconnect with any other node.” A “crabgrass culture” is thus a culture in constant motion, flowing, darting in every direction at once without ever forming a coherent pattern. “Arboreal” cultures, by contrast, are concerned about “origins, foundations, ontologies, beginnings and endings—roots.”<sup>9</sup> My main goal in this chapter will be to analyze the shift from late-modern “arboreal” cultures to postmodern “rhizomatic” ones, because this shift has begun to reshape our understanding of liturgy and sacrament in the industrialized West.

The distinction between cultures that resemble trees and those that resemble crabgrass was developed in the second half of the twentieth century by two French thinkers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who collaborated on a number of influential works, among them *Anti-Oedipus*, *Rhizome*, and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.<sup>10</sup> The great value of their work lies in what they tell us about the intimate relation between images and our understanding—indeed, our *lived experience*—of the world. Deleuze and Guattari pointed out that an image is never a mere figure of speech or a colorful example; an image is an optic, a lens through which we simultaneously perceive and interpret reality as it *shows* itself, *gives* itself to us. Use the wrong lens, and your vision is distorted. Use the wrong image, and your grip on reality slackens. From the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, Deleuze and Guattari argue, the image that dominated our understanding of the world—its peoples and cultures, its parts and their relationship—was the tree, a firmly rooted, hierarchically arranged unity whose individual parts constitute an organic whole, a single plant. In such a world, these writers noted, everyone has a place—and knows it. Like actors on a stage, everyone stays “in role,” in

---

9. Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, 111.

10. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *Rhizome*, translated by John Johnston, in Deleuze and Guattari, *On the Line* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983) and by Brian Massumi, in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3-25.

character. Leaders lead; inventors invent; writers write; painters paint; scientists discover; warriors fight. But change the image—the lens, the optic—and the world is suddenly a very different place. In their work, Deleuze and Guattari asked, “What if the world shows and gives itself to us not as a tree, but as crabgrass, as a network of interconnected differences?”

Deleuze and Guattari thus raised startling new questions about how we perceive, experience, and interpret the world. They set out to challenge two currents of thought that had come to dominate European philosophy, political science, and psychoanalysis during the 1960s and 1970s. One of these was *structuralism*, as represented by the work of the influential French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose ideas about archaic (premodern, traditional) cultures were widely followed in both Europe and the United States; the other was “State philosophy,” a term Deleuze and Guattari used to describe the ideological foundation on which most modern nation-states are based, including the liberal democracies of Europe and North America.<sup>11</sup> A closer look at each of these currents of thought will help us understand why postmodern thinkers reacted so strongly against them.

To begin, let's examine the way Deleuze and Guattari analyzed “State philosophy,” which, they argued, favors thought about human persons and their social relationships that is heavily hierarchical, dominated by determined forms, structures, and images. Take the image of a “tree,” for instance. Such an image encourages the concept of cultures as an organic whole that springs from a single taproot. The resulting plant—the tree—is a botanical symphony of *dominance and subordination, superiority and inferiority* that suggests a world, a culture, of orderly regulation. In the West, Deleuze and Guattari argued, such arboreal thinking has been applied to everything from philosophy (e.g., Plato's notion of a material world whose myriad manifestations stem from a unified realm of ideal forms), to psychoanalysis (e.g., the Freudian tendency to trace all psychological processes back to an originary, unresolved Oedipal conflict), to statecraft (e.g., totalitarian ideology of a superpower that views its political moxie as universal and absolute).

But the mistake of modern “State philosophy,” Deleuze and Guattari

---

11. The phrase “State philosophy” is used by Deleuze and Guattari to refer to “the representative thinking that has characterized Western metaphysics since Plato, but has suffered an at least momentary setback during the last quarter century at the hands of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and poststructuralist theory generally.” Brian Massumi, “Foreword,” in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, xi. As we shall see, the critique of “classical metaphysics” found in the work of Deleuze and Guattari is also a prominent theme in postmodern philosophers like Jacques Derrida and in postmodern theologians as diverse as Louis-Marie Chauvet and Jean-Luc Marion (both of whom critique metaphysics on their way to establishing the foundations for a new Roman Catholic approach to sacramental theology).

charged, is that it “talks the talk” of benign order, structure, and respect for individual persons, their liberty and uniqueness, but it doesn’t “walk the walk.” State philosophy takes a one-size-fits-all approach to cultures and the structures they create. It assumes, moreover, that all persons everywhere, in all times and places, share a common genealogy, “attributes of sameness and constancy,” a “shared, internal essence,” rooted (there’s the tree metaphor, again!) in a common identity.<sup>12</sup> Under such conditions, the real differences between people—the real differences between cultures—are ignored or neglected. More ominously, persons and their cultures are seen as little more than the tool (note the image!) by which the state—itself depersonalized and abstract—incarnates itself and implements its intentions in the world. It becomes progressively harder for thinking citizens to free themselves from political propaganda and to reclaim their essentially critical function in the realm of public discourse (e.g., by *voting*). In effect, the State annexes its citizens as a “wholly owned subsidiary,” so that they are no longer free and independent critics but patriotic cheerleaders for their government’s policies, goals, and social programs. The *reasonable, thinking, compliant* person is the ultimate “good citizen,” while the State “defines itself in principle as ‘*the rational and reasonable organization of a community*,’” of any community, of all communities. If sound reason and the State are siblings—twin branches produced by a common parent—one can sense how strongly an *image* (tree) promotes certain actions, and why even modern liberal democracies place such emphasis on *social compliance* and *obedience*: “Always obey. The more you obey, the more you will be master, for you will only be obeying pure reason, in other words yourself.”<sup>13</sup>

Such, Deleuze and Guattari argued, is the ideology advanced by State philosophy and its network of supporting publics (social, political, ecclesiastical, academic). It is an archaizing, totalizing ideology that, as they wrote in *Anti-Oedipus*, has grown out of touch with the everyday conditions of Western life, for “we live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. . . . We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date.”<sup>14</sup> Ours is no longer a tidy, hierarchically organized world of form and structure, but an age of fragmentation, bits and pieces, leftovers. Yeats was right; the “center cannot hold.” In an age of relentless consumerism and intense competition for scarce resources, polarization among peoples, cultures, and even religious communities escalates. Thus, even though economists and politi-

---

12. Brian Massumi, “Foreword,” in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, xi.

13. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 374, 375 (emphasis added), 376.

14. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 42.

cians today speak about globalization, and cultural analysts confidently predict a shrinking world in which distance and differences are overcome by the wonders of information technology, real divisions continue to grow, driven sometimes by economic conditions (e.g., the gap between the world's rich and its poor), and at other times by ideological or religious factors (e.g., the impact of fundamentalism in virtually every region of the world, including North America).

By challenging us to change our *image*—our lens, our optic—for perceiving, experiencing, and interpreting the world, Deleuze and Guattari help us see that postmodernism is less a philosophy than a cultural condition that arises when the modernist project—dominated by “tree-centered” thinking—falls victim to its own pretensions. Our world is not, in fact, a coherent whole whose parts can be analyzed with precision and whose peoples share a common genealogy, a “shared internal essence” rooted in a common identity. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, was surely right to point out the common vocation and the common destiny of all humankind (GS 22), but to say this is not to deny the *real differences* that separate rich from poor, haves from have-nots, the powerful from the powerless, and those with influence from those without it. Deleuze and Guattari were trying to show that if we allow the metaphor of the “tree” to dominate our thinking, we will fail to grasp what *really* separates—and connects—one individual to another, one culture to another in the world of today.<sup>15</sup> Ours is not a monocultural world that rises, treelike, from a single, unified root, but a multicultural one that erupts everywhere at once, like crabgrass in a lawn. In such a world, unity results not from denying cultural differences, still less from “homogenizing” them, but from recognizing their importance, their distinctiveness, and their indelibility. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, we have to be prepared to celebrate not “arboreal unity,” but “counter-principles of difference and multiplicity in theory, politics, and everyday life.”<sup>16</sup>

This is not easy task, because the image of the tree shapes and dominates virtually *all* Western thought, “from botany to information science to theology.”<sup>17</sup> And it is precisely to oppose the sclerotic, hierarchical, totalizing tenor

---

15. Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 76. Best and Kellner provide a lucid account of the significance of Deleuze and Guattari's work, pointing out similarities to and differences from the theories of other important French thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 98. Note that the image of “body” as the preferred metaphor for understanding who and what the church is, has had a similar impact. The body, too, is a hierarchically arranged organism, with clear lines of command and subordination. Thus, when the Second Vatican Council shifted the lens—by using the image of the “people of God” in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)—some church leaders began to feel uneasy.

of this arboreal philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari proposed an alternative analysis of social life and culture that flows from “rhizomatic” or “nomadic” models.<sup>18</sup> To say that the difference between these models resembles the difference between trees and crabgrass is to affirm Deleuze’s and Guattari’s point that *multidimensional images* offer a better way for us to understand human cultures, behaviors, experiences, thought, art, and relationships.

### A CULTURE OF INTERCONNECTED DIFFERENCES: BEYOND STRUCTURALISM

The second current of thought that Deleuze and Guattari challenge us to reimagine—to *re-image*—is that of *structuralism*. Like their critique of State philosophy, their critique of structural anthropology (and its consequences for understanding diverse cultures) is based on a shift of image, from “tree” to “crabgrass.” Both *Rhizome* and *A Thousand Plateaus* are rich in such images, and anyone who has a nodding acquaintance with computer technology and its connection to the Internet will instinctively grasp how Deleuze and Guattari imagine rhizomatic thinking and cultures. Several factors shape their views about rhizomes and the way they illumine our understanding of human experience and relationships. The first two factors flow from what Deleuze and Guattari call the “principles of connection and heterogeneity.” These twin principles require that *any point within a rhizome system be capable of direct connection any other point*—which means, from the get-go, that rhizomes resemble a Google search much more than a hierarchical chain-of-command. Indeed, rhizomes are exuberantly *anti-hierarchical*, having the characteristics of burrows or pack animals. “Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their [diverse] functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion,

---

18. As Best and Kellner point out, Deleuze and Guattari use a variety of terms for their proposed alternative to “aborescent thinking”: schizoanalysis, rhizomatics, pragmatics, diagrammatics, cartography, micropolitics, “vagabond” or “nomad” science, as opposed to the “royal science” of State philosophy (see *Postmodern Theory*, 98). Such a diverse vocabulary is meant “to prevent their position from stabilizing in [or hardening into] an ideology, method, or single metaphor” (ibid.). Thus, in their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use “avant-garde writing techniques.” The book’s very *form*, for example, becomes continuous with its “content”—or rather, as Best and Kellner observe, the distinction between form and content breaks down altogether. This means, among other things, that Deleuze and Guattari ignore the conventions of traditional literary “narrative” in favor of writing that resembles “collage” or “bricolage.” They abandon “any semblance of narrative or argument exposition in favour of a random, perspectival juxtaposition of chapters, or ‘plateaus’ (Gregory Bateson’s terms), comprised of complex conceptual flows. These plateaus range promiscuously across diverse topics, time frames, and disciplinary fields” (*Postmodern Theory*, 98). The chapters of *A Thousand Plateaus* may thus be read in any order, “with the proviso that the ‘conclusion,’ a ‘dictionary’ of terms, is to be read last” (ibid.).

and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms . . . when rats swarm over each other. The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed. Animal and plant, couchgrass is crabgrass. . . . [A]ny point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be."<sup>19</sup> The image of "rhizome" thus suggests a world of "endlessly interconnected *differences*," not a hierarchical, homogeneous structure.

Take language as an example. A chain of words, even if organized by grammar and syntax, is not really a hierarchy (sentence diagrams notwithstanding); instead, it resembles

a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages [e.g., argots]. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogeneous linguistic community. Language is . . . an essentially heterogeneous reality. There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil. . . . A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, Deleuze and Guattari argue, language is not about prescribed order, sequence, and power (the power, for instance, that accrues to those who use language well) but about *innovation* (saying something *new*) and multiple *connections*.<sup>21</sup>

Multiplicity (or "multidimensionality") is, indeed, the third notable quality of rhizomes, a quality that puts rhizomatic thinking on a collision course with the structuralism that dominated much of Western philosophy during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> French structuralism of the sort espoused by the brilliant anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss sought to identify and index the basic architecture of the human mind (and of human societies) by analyzing fundamental distinctions ("binary oppositions") found everywhere in human life—distinctions between nature and culture, the raw and the cooked, male and female, endogamy and exogamy, insiders and outsiders. In the very first

---

19. Deleuze and Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7-8.

20. *Ibid.*

21. In their "Conclusion" to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari admit that language may often seem to possess a treelike structure, but they add that inevitably, "the trees of language are shaken by buddings and rhizomes. So that rhizome lines oscillate between tree lines that segment and even stratify them, and lines of flight or rupture that carry them away" (506).

22. *Ibid.*, 8.

volume of his monumental *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, Lévi-Strauss announced his program clearly:

The aim of this book is to show how empirical categories—such as the categories of the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the decayed, the moistened and the burned, etc., which can only be accurately defined by ethnographic observation and, in each instance, by adopting the standpoint of a particular culture—can nonetheless be used as conceptual tools with which to elaborate abstract ideas and combine them in the form of propositions. . . .

I intend to carry out an experiment which, should it prove successful, will be of universal significance, since I expect it to prove that there is a kind of logic in tangible qualities, and to demonstrate the operation of that logic and reveal its laws.<sup>23</sup>

In short, Lévi-Strauss proposed that “universals” common to all human cultures really exist, and that they appear *not* at the level of multiple details—that is, not at the microlevel of customs surrounding diet, food preparation, marriage laws, tribal authority, and so on—but only “at the [macro-]level of *structure*.”<sup>24</sup> This search for cultural “universals”—codes or laws that apply to all peoples in all times and places—was rooted in the science of linguistics as it had developed in the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1918).<sup>25</sup> Saussure argued, first, that language can be accurately analyzed *according to the present laws that govern its usage*, without reference to its historical qualities and evolution, and second, that every linguistic sign (or word) has two integrated parts: “an acoustic-visual component, the *signifier*, and a conceptual component, the *signified*.”<sup>26</sup> Language, for Saussure, is thus a “system of signs [*signifiers*] that expresses ideas [*signifieds*],” and the interaction between signifier and signified gives rise to *meanings*. Moreover—and this would have crucial consequences not only for comprehending language but, as we will see later in this book, for understanding ritual and sacramental signification as well—Saussure understood that linguistic signs (speech, words) are arbitrary, that there is no natural link between signifier and signified, but only “a contingent cultural” connection.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he insisted that linguistic signs belong to a

---

23. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, volume 1, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 1.

24. Edmund Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 22 (emphasis added).

25. *Ibid.*, 23: “Lévi-Strauss sets about deriving his cultural generalizations from his linguistic base.”

26. *Ibid.*, 19.

27. *Ibid.* The Saussurian denial of any real or essential relation between “sign” and “signified”—between what scholastic theology called *signum et significatum*—was not itself new. Such a rupture

system of meanings in which “words acquire significance only by reference to what they are *not*,” that is, only in relation to their “opposites.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, structuralism embraced a linguistic theory that derived language itself from the culturally constructed, binary relation between signifier and signified, and it derived significance or “meaning” in language from the polarity between words and what they are *not*.

It is not surprising that Lévi-Strauss applied linguistic analysis to his studies of cultures—their mythology, kinship systems, ritual performances, and culinary customs.<sup>29</sup> He had come to believe that thinking about *language* is a good way to think about *social relations*, for there is, he insisted, a link between the *unconscious* codes or rules that govern social structures (e.g., dietary laws or regulations that govern who eats what with whom at a formal meal) and similarly unconscious codes at play in speech and story (e.g., the rules that determine how cultures form and transmit their mythological narratives). In both cases, unconscious but effective codes establish meaning “through a differential set of binary opposites.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, speech yields its meanings through the polarity inherent in the play between signifier and signified, while traditional stories (myths) disclose their significance in a way similar to musical variations on a theme, where “meanings” flow *not* from surface-level similarities but from deeper (and often unconscious) *contradictions* and *contrasts*.<sup>31</sup>

As Lévi-Strauss wrote in *Structural Anthropology*, myth's basic purpose is “to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction,”<sup>32</sup> that is, to create a story that lets hearers think the unthinkable, imagine the unimaginable, and reconcile themselves to the irreconcilable. Myths do this by proposing a series of opposites (young vs. old, fertility vs. infertility, parent vs.

---

was already well under way in the West during the late medieval and early modern periods, and it would result in a severe challenge to traditional Catholic understandings of the *real* relation between “signs” and “things signified” in sacramental rites (the basis for the assertion that signs “really contain and impart” what they signify). See Thomas M. Greene, “Ritual and Text in the Renaissance,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 15 (June/September 1991): 179-97.

28. Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 19.

29. As Lévi-Strauss wrote: “[E]verybody will agree that the Saussurean principle of the arbitrary character of linguistic signs was a prerequisite for the accession of linguistics to the scientific level” (*Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1963], 204). Earlier in the same book, Lévi-Strauss had noted that “although they belong to *another order of reality*, kinship phenomena are *of the same type* as linguistic phenomena.”

30. Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 18.

31. On the complexity of mythic structures and their variants, see Lévi-Strauss's chapter “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structural Anthropology*, 202-28. “Myth” does not mean “falsehood.” Myth is a form of speech used to express experiences and realities that exceed the ordinary power of language to communicate.

32. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 226.

child) that help hearers crack the codes that conceal the unconscious infrastructure of the story itself. Thus, for example, the Oedipus myths embedded in classical Greek drama allow hearers to imagine the unimaginable—viz., that “if society is to go on, daughters must be disloyal to their parents and sons must destroy (replace) their fathers.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the myth gives hearers permission to consider actions that are taboo (incest, parricide), strictly prohibited by both personal ethics and public law. Nevertheless, while these stories permit “thinking about the unthinkable,” they do not resolve every conflict. As Edmund Leach observes, commenting on Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the Oedipus stories:

Here then is the irresolvable unwelcome contradiction, the necessary fact that we hide from consciousness because its implications run directly counter to the fundamentals of human morality. There are no heroes in these stories; they are simply epics of unavoidable human disaster. The disaster always originates in the circumstances that a human being fails to fulfill his or her proper obligations toward a deity or a kinsman, and this, in part at least, is what Lévi-Strauss is getting at when he insists that the fundamental moral implication of mythology is that “Hell is ourselves,” which I take to mean “self-interest is the source of all evil.”<sup>34</sup>

Few would deny that Lévi-Strauss’s work offers great insight into human behavior and social structure. Indeed, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari cite, approvingly, Lévi-Strauss’s notion that “the world begins to signify before anyone knows *what* it signifies; the signified is given without being known.” In other words, the world “means” long before we attribute any “meanings” to it. Here one can discern a theme dear to postmodern philosophers: viz., that “every sign refers to another sign, and only to another sign, ad infinitum,” that “all signs are signs of signs,” and hence that the “world of signs” (the world of words and speech, stories and myths, icons and symbols) is not a logically structured, hierarchically arranged universe—as the “tree” metaphor would have it—but an amorphous continuum, a rhizome thriving as riotously as crabgrass. “Not only do signs form an infinite network,” write Deleuze and Guattari,

but the network of signs is infinitely circular. The statement survives its object, the name survives its owner. . . . [T]he sign survives both its state of things and its signified; it leaps like an animal or a dead person to regain its place in the chain and invest a new state. . . . There is a whole regime

---

33. Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 83. See Lévi-Strauss’s own synopsis of the Oedipal cycle in *Structural Anthropology*, 209–13.

34. Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 83.

of roving, floating statements, suspended names, signs lying in wait to return and be propelled by the chain. . . .

But what counts is less this circularity of signs than the multiplicity of the circles or chains.<sup>35</sup>

### *Cultures as Multiple, Interacting Plateaus*

We can begin to see, then, why “postmodernism”—as a recognizable philosophical movement—first emerged as “poststructuralism,” a repudiation of the structuralist project. Ultimately, structuralism was felt to be reductionistic, for it organizes and condenses human thinking and behavior into predictable patterns and units and thereby defies (or simply erases) the inevitable messiness and multidimensionality of real life. In other words, structuralism tries to turn crabgrass into trees. To counter such a move, thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari argue that we can understand the richness and diversity of human experience only if we avoid moving too quickly to generalizations—the common structure, the code, the “universal rule” valid in “all times and places”—and learn, instead, to value the *differences*, the rhizome-like multiplicity of peoples, cultures, and their activities. Neither word nor world, neither speech nor story signifies simply by means of logical, linear discourse; *all signification (and hence, all meaning) is inescapably multiple*. That is one reason why philosophers and theologians today speak of the multidimensionality, the “polyvalence,” of symbols. Symbols are polyglot; they speak several languages simultaneously—and their meanings (like their speech) are multiple.

Thus, the world really does begin to show and give itself—to signify—long before anyone knows *what* it signifies. And when it signifies, it does so by speaking several languages simultaneously—much like the Pentecost scene in Acts 2:5-13 where people from all over the ancient world, “Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs,” hear the apostles speaking as though “in our own tongues” of the “mighty acts of God.” The world’s cultures are better understood as simultaneously interacting plateaus—thus the title of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s magnum opus, *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is no accident that one chapter (or “plateau”) of this book is introduced by a reproduction of Fernand Léger’s Cubist painting *Men in the Cities*. Cubism delights in the simultaneous presence of multiple perspectives that have neither hierarchical arrangement nor an approved order of eminence and subordination. At the same time, Cubist painting points to the inevitable *segmentation* of human

---

35. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 112-13.

life and activity. Structuralists like Lévi-Strauss were right, Deleuze and Guattari comment, to speak about the “binary” segmentation of humanity, about dualist divisions, the “great major . . . oppositions: social classes . . . men-women, adults-children, and so on” that inevitably appear in mythic stories and social structures. After all,

the human being is a segmentary animal. . . . Dwelling, getting around, working, playing: life is spatially and socially segmented. The house is segmented according to its rooms’ assigned purposes; streets, according to the order of the city; the factory, according to the nature of the work and operations performed in it. We are segmented in a binary fashion. . . . We are segmented in a circular fashion, in . . . ever wider disk . . . my neighborhood’s affairs, my city’s, my country’s, the world’s. . . . We are segmented in a linear fashion . . . as soon as we finish one proceeding we begin another. . . . School tells us “You’re not at home anymore”; the army tells us, “You’re not in school anymore.” . . . But these figures of segmentarity, the binary, circular, and linear, are bound up with one another, even cross over into each other, changing according to the point of view [like a Cubist painting!].<sup>36</sup>

So yes, the early poststructuralists said, human life is segmented, organized into units that assign us to specific and limited social locations (“You’re in the army, now, recruit!”). *But that isn’t all*. What structuralism seemed to forget was the messy, ineradicable presence of the *human*—what Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once called the “confused impurity of the human condition . . . footprints and fingerprints, the abiding presence of the human engulfing all artifacts.”<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, the human is an “organism” that is *unorganizable*. Human persons and their cultures are a chaotic circulation of energies, movements, relations, changing directions, inconsistencies, an “amorphous continuum” that finally defies definition and will not submit (without protest) to limiting codes, rules, structures, “universals,” or hierarchies. People, in short, prefer to relate to one another as crabgrass rather than as trees. That is why Neruda celebrated “a poetry impure as the clothing we wear, or our bodies, soup-stained, soiled with our shameful behavior, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams . . . [t]he holy canons of madrigal, the mandates of touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing, the passion for justice, sexual desire, the sea sounding . . . the deep penetration of things in the transports of love.”<sup>38</sup>

In sum, structuralism had focused so resolutely “on the underlying rules

---

36. See *ibid.*, 208-9.

37. *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, trans. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 39.

38. *Ibid.*

which organized phenomena into a social system” and on its own description of “social phenomena in terms of linguistic and social structures, rules, codes, and systems” that it threatened to reject “the humanism which had previously shaped the social and human sciences.”<sup>39</sup> In the structuralist model, the human subject “was dismissed, or radically decentred, as merely an effect of language, culture, or the unconscious”; it was “denied causal or creative efficacy.” To a degree, the poststructuralists shared with structuralism this “dismissal of the concept of the autonomous subject.”<sup>40</sup> Yet they also sought to reclaim the human, to reassert the real presence of a human face against structuralism’s tendency to treat persons as mere “social and linguistic constructs,” the by-products of unconscious drives and impersonal forces.

So the early postmodernists—Deleuze and Guattari among them—resisted the structuralist argument that the mind has some “innate, universal structure,” and hence that human nature is invariable, the same across all cultures. People’s cultures, they insisted, really do *differ* from one place to another and from one time period to another. They form a world of real, though interconnected, *differences*. Postmodernism thus favored “a thoroughly *historical* view which sees *different* forms of consciousness, identities, signification, and so on as historically produced and therefore varying in *different* historical periods.”<sup>41</sup> As we will see over the course of this book, it was this respect for historical change and consequent cultural variability that helped to shape the Second Vatican Council’s approach to the liturgy. Thus, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms that “in the liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity,” but seeks to “respect and foster” the different, indigenous “qualities and talents of the various races and nations” (37).

### *Speaking, Writing, and Meaning*

Postmodernism did not, then, arise as simply a repudiation of structuralism. For instance, Saussure’s theory of *the arbitrary relation between “signifier” and “signified”* continued to exert an influence, especially in the thought of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida.<sup>42</sup> As Derrida notes, the meaning of our words (especially when they are in the process of being written) is never “pre-canned.” We literally do not know what our writing *means* until we’ve actually written it. (Musicians often say the same thing; we do not know what a musical score “means” until we play or sing it.) “Meaning must await being

---

39. Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 19.

40. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

41. *Ibid.*, 20.

42. *Ibid.*, 21.

said or written in order to inhabit itself,” writes Derrida, “in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning.”<sup>43</sup> That is why, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty once observed, “Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings which [are] . . . part of an a priori [content] of the mind; rather, communication arouses these meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action. The writer’s thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself.” As a result, “my own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think.”<sup>44</sup>

Notice that both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty make a connection not only between *speaking* and meaning but, more especially, between *writing* and meaning. This may seem odd, because most of us assume that when it comes to the communication of meaning, *speech* is primary, while writing is secondary. Ever since Plato, Western philosophy has shown a preference for the spoken word and a suspicion of writing as a kind of “false memory.”<sup>45</sup> Speech, after all, seems much more directly linked to the speaker. When *I* speak, *I* seem to be in firm control of what *I* mean; I create a covenant between my words and the meaning I intend by them, and this bond is guaranteed by my physical presence. (The swearing of oaths in a court of law is based on precisely this assumption—namely, that there is a solemn bond between my *word* and *me*.) Writing, by contrast, seems to drive a wedge between me and my words. After all, written words won’t sit still; they squirm and wiggle, migrating well beyond the borders of my body, consciousness, and thought. (Just ask anyone who’s ever written a letter they wish they’d never sent!) Written words take on a life of their own, a life of unintended connotations. Indeed, my writing survives my death and makes my words available to be read by others long after I’m in my grave. That means that written words can be interpreted in unexpected—and perhaps inaccurate—ways. Once words take flesh as writing, *signifiers* (the words themselves) are no longer bound to their *signifieds* (their references and meanings); they begin to point beyond themselves and become something *I* neither created nor intended.

All this is undoubtedly why Derrida speaks of writing not only as “inaugural” (having the characteristics of a fresh beginning) but as “dangerous and anguishing.” Writing, he notes, “does not know where it is going, no knowl-

---

43. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 11.

44. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, as cited in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 11; see also p. 302 n. 31.

45. See Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 25. Pickstock presents a sustained critique of Derrida’s notion of the primacy of writing and argues, instead, for reclaiming the Platonic preference for speech (pp. 3–46).

edge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that [is] . . . its future. . . . There is thus no insurance against the risk of writing.”<sup>46</sup> (Again, ask any student who’s ever written a “brilliant” essay for “Freshman Comp,” only to get an F from the prof!) Writing is risky because it reveals that meanings are not only *announced* (by live speakers), but must then be *discovered* and *read* by a diverse community of readers. Writing reminds us that, at the end of the day, authors often have little control over the “meaning” of what they produce. Rather, meanings arise from a complex series of interactions between speakers and hearers, writers and texts.

Meanings, therefore, cannot be self-willed, self-produced, and self-proclaimed. They emerge, sometimes slowly, from the give-and-take between reader and text, from the reader’s discovery of an “other” (another person) in the written text. “[D]oes not meaning present itself as such,” asks Derrida, “at the point at which the other is found, the other who maintains both the vigil and the back-and-forth motion, the work, that comes between writing and reading, making this work irreducible? Meaning is neither before nor after the act.”<sup>47</sup> Strangely, writing has more to do with *meeting* (another person) than with meaning. Surely it is no accident that the Word not only became *flesh* (John 1:14) but *writing*—and thereby guaranteed that the historical process of God’s self-revelation would continue indefinitely as new communities of readers encountered the body of the text. For as most Christian readers of the Bible would affirm, *God* is always that “other person” who is met in that physical body we call the Bible. The Bible is, above all, a site—a meeting place—that implicates both Speaker and readers in a common quest for “the other.” When the Scriptures are read, especially in the church’s liturgy, God’s search for us meets our search for God.

“The meaning of meaning is infinite implication,” says Derrida, and his comment leads us back to the “rhizomatic” thought and images of postmodern thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari. Here again we can begin to see the great value of their challenge to change our *image*—our lens, our optic—for perceiving, experiencing, and interpreting the world and its multiple cultures. Consider, for instance, what happens when the Internet is perceived not as a branching “tree” but as a species of flourishing, electronic crabgrass—a “hypertextual” rhizome, if you will. Any node on the Internet may connect with any other node to create a virtually limitless maze of connections and

---

46. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 11. When Derrida speaks about “writing,” he is referring not only to the act of writing as a technological tool or to inscribed texts but to an intrinsic component of *all* language, because every “grapheme” (letter) is essentially “testamentary,” a promissory sign meant to endure in the absence of the writer. See Derrida, *On Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 69.

47. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 11.

launch a chain reaction of multiple, unpredictable meanings. Paradoxically, the meanings found in hypertexts arise not from individual words but from the empty spaces *between* words. A hypertext's meanings are not limited to the "original author's intention," but multiply as new readers interact with them—rewriting or co-writing them. Here we can sense the mobility and mutability that Derrida assigns to the risky act of writing. As anyone who's ever placed a text on a Web site knows, once that's done, the author is no longer in control. For the electronic word has no palpable author, no discernible point of origin, no "innate" meaning lurking behind it as it makes its way across the Web. Meanings are not "in" or "behind" hypertexts, but "ahead" of them, in that "future event" when "words take me by surprise and teach me what I think."<sup>48</sup>

#### APPLIED RHIZOMATICS

I have spent time discussing the postmodern distinction between "trees" and "crabgrass" because, as I have suggested, when we change our images, our perception and experience of the world change. Moreover, it is the rhizomal image of crabgrass (rather than tree) that dominates the *theory* that drives the *technology* that is reshaping both the world of the twenty-first century and the ways we experience (think, feel, and speak about) that world. A change of image can indeed change the world—and nowhere is this more evident than in the development of the World Wide Web and the Internet. What we sometimes fail to notice, however, is that this same change of image has begun to impact our religious faith and practice, our liturgies and rituals. The Western Christian experience of Word and worship is being profoundly reshaped by information technology, just as the invention of printing reshaped both Catholic and Protestant worship in the sixteenth century.

Many people regard such technology as frightening, and perhaps for good reason. Information technology, after all, often affects us without our ever being aware of it. Under such conditions, great mischief—as well as great benefit—may result. Yet before we reject the "Information Revolution" in righteous Luddite horror, we would do well to reflect on a far more fundamental—and potentially more devastating—revolution in human history, the invention of writing itself. Writing, notes Denise Schmandt-Besserat, was

---

48. One should note that there are strong resemblances between writing (as Derrida and Merleau-Ponty understand it) and liturgical rites. For in the case of liturgies, too, we do not know what the actions mean until we actually *do* them. That is one reason why, in ancient Christianity, the "mystagogic" instruction of neophytes *followed*—and did not precede—their experience of the liturgy of initiation.

“the first technology to make the spoken word permanent”—to make it, that is, *independent* of the speaker(s).<sup>49</sup> Not only did writing make data retrieval possible in a way that orality alone could not, it also allowed people to communicate with each other without ever having to meet face to face. Writing, moreover, permitted a person to “capture” thoughts or ideas as soon as they arose, even if no one else was present to share the discovery. Beyond that, one could, on the spot, revise or edit one’s ideas, alter or embellish them, prepare different versions of them—one for private, another for public consumption. People who complain today about the isolating effects of computer technology—about our penchant for sitting alone in studies or offices, communing with a flickering screen instead of talking to real, live people—should not forget that writing, too, may be (and usually is) an intensely solitary activity.

### *Word, World, and Web*

My point here is that new technologies, like the new images proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, not only reshape cultures; they reshape religious experience (including ritual and liturgy) as well. The situation in which Catholic worshipers find themselves today is hardly unprecedented. Indeed, the technological revolution that is now reconfiguring Western thought and experience in postmodern cultures is simply the latest in a series of revolutionary changes that have been going on since the beginning of the second millennium. Three such earlier revolutions in technology may be identified:

1. The intellectual and artistic renaissance that blossomed in late-twelfth-century Europe, stimulated in part by Christian contact with other cultures during and after the Crusades;
2. The artistic, scientific, and technological revolutions of the late fifteenth century—those of Renaissance artists in Italy (and eventually in northern Europe), of Copernicus in the field of astronomy, and of Gutenberg in the field of printing and movable type; and
3. The Industrial Revolution, which began in mid-eighteenth-century England and quickly spread to the European continent and to the New World.

During the second millennium, these three revolutions radically reorganized Western thinking, art, commerce, politics, religion, and economics—to

---

49. Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 1.

say nothing of production methods and hence the relation between workers and their products. But the roots of these revolutions reach back much further, at least into the early centuries of the first millennium. Indeed, the rhizomal characteristics of the Internet may also be found in the Jewish Talmud, as Jonathan Rosen has pointed out. “[W]hen I look at a page of Talmud and see all those texts tucked intimately and intrusively onto the same page, like immigrant children sharing a single bed,” writes Rosen, “I . . . think of the interrupting, jumbled culture of the Internet. For hundreds of years, response, questions on virtually every aspect of Jewish life, winged back and forth between scattered Jews and various centers of Talmudic learning. The Internet is also a world of unbounded curiosity, of argument and information, where anyone with a modem [or wireless connection] can wander out of the wilderness for a while, ask a question and receive an answer.”<sup>50</sup>

To highlight some of the similarities between Internet and Talmud, Rosen recounts his own frustrating search for the source of a frequently quoted line from John Donne (“Never send to know for whom the bell tolls”). Rosen’s first impulse was to check academic Web sites, especially those of research libraries, but he kept drawing a blank, largely because much of Donne’s poetry and prose had not yet been digitized and made available electronically. Serendipitously, he finally found the quotation he was looking for “not as part of a scholarly library collection but simply because someone who loves John Donne had posted it on his home page.”<sup>51</sup> Here, Rosen suggests, is a case where the Internet provided a rapid connection between reader and writer that more traditional methods of bookish research could not easily match. A first-rate scholarly index or “Donne concordance” might eventually have led him to the line, “for whom the bell tolls,” but that could have meant hours of travel to and from libraries, plus additional time slogging through Donne’s *opera omnia*.

Rosen admits he felt guilty about switching from traditional research tools (printed books) to digital ones (Internet searches). Like most dedicated readers and writers, he values the bond between book and body and fears its loss. Is it, he asks, “out of the ruined body of the book that the Internet is growing”? Perhaps, but Rosen believes that he can find within his own religious tradition a link between Internet and Talmud, because both, he suggests, were born out of loss. “The Talmud,” he suggests, “offered a virtual home for an

---

50. Jonathan Rosen, *The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey between Worlds* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 10-11. The Talmud, which exists in Babylonian and Palestinian versions, represents collections of law and lore that embody both the text of the Mishnah (the oral teaching of rabbis codified about 200 C.E.) and later rabbinic debate about the mishnaic text, the Gemara. Both versions of the Talmud were compiled during the fifth century C.E.

51. *Ibid.*, 12.

uprooted culture [the Jewish people of the Diaspora], and grew out of the Jewish need to pack civilization into words and wander out into the world." Once the Romans had destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E., its liturgy—"those bodily rituals of blood and fire and physical atonement"—ceased. Jews lost their home, and "God lost His [the Temple]"; from then on, "Jews became the people of the book," no longer the "people of the Temple or the land." This physical loss meant that home and Temple had to become Torah and Talmud. Israel's physical space shrank to *writing*, to inscription, to the textual space of "the Book." "That bodily loss is frequently overlooked," writes Rosen, "but for me it lies at the heart of the Talmud. . . . The Internet, which we are . . . told binds us all together, nevertheless engenders in me a similar sense of Diaspora, a feeling of being everywhere and nowhere. Where else but in the middle of Diaspora do you *need* a home page?"<sup>52</sup>

In a word, the rabbis whose words are inscribed in Mishnah and Talmud (the codifications of oral law that accompanied and commented on Torah) had "created a virtual Temple after the real one was destroyed." The Talmudic tractate *Shabbat*, for example, discusses the many works forbidden on the Sabbath, and all of them, Rosen notes, stem from the kind of labor that had been required by the Temple's construction. In rhizomal fashion, the rabbis argued that Jews are forbidden to drag a heavy piece of furniture "across an earthen floor on the Sabbath because it might inadvertently create a furrow"; a furrow suggests the sowing of seeds; and plant life hints at the production of vegetable dyes used, for example, for the vestments of the officiating priests and for the Temple's furnishings. This rhizomal, chain-link argument points to a mazelike metaphor that connects God's house—and God—to Jewish homes and Jews. As a result, Rosen comments, "The Temple lives and does not live in the mysterious, intermediate space of the Talmud. The creation of that space was one of the tricks of Jewish survival. You could be scattered and still be at home, banished and still at the center of things."<sup>53</sup>

It may be, Rosen concludes, that the Internet is our postmodern Western way of dealing with the loss of a center, "a response to changes that have already taken place, to losses we have not yet begun to acknowledge."<sup>54</sup> But it is also true that the Web's crabgrass-like connections create "vast democratizing networks of information" that have the potential to realign cultures and societies globally. Technology spreads much more rapidly and pervasively than virtually any other human phenomenon. When it comes to the basic

---

52. *Ibid.*, 14.

53. *Ibid.*, 105–6.

54. *Ibid.*, 109.

know-how needed for the production of food or the sharing of information, technology eventually rules. John Deere tractors can be found almost anywhere on the planet, and so, increasingly, is the Web. Even premodern cultures such as that of the Clovis peoples in North America developed technologies (carved spear points) that spread rapidly across great distances, hundreds of miles away from the rock source originally used to make these tools. If there is a global lingua franca that connects diverse cultures today, its name is surely “information technology.”<sup>55</sup>

Technological revolutions succeed, therefore, not so much because they are theoretically or intellectually innovative, but because they reshape how people interact and live together and how they *do* basic tasks.<sup>56</sup> One may argue that the rapidly evolving “information revolution” has already begun to reshape cultures—and the church—in ways that affect five fundamental human interactions:

1. *Power and authority.* Perhaps information technology’s most obvious consequence is that it offers access to people who might otherwise be kept “out of the loop.” A knowledgeable fifteen-year-old hacker with a bit of chutzpah can break into classified Pentagon files without ever leaving the security of his suburban home. That such acts are possible and even routine signals a radical dispersal and realignment of any culture’s structures of power and authority. Traditionally centralized social, political, economic, moral, and religious power begins to move *away from the center and toward the margins*. In premodern cultures (e.g., ancient Israel’s after the establishment of the Davidic dynasty), power and authority coalesced around a focal center—an urban community, a royal dynasty, a temple, a priesthood—and eventually, a *book* (the Torah, the Tanakh). But in the postmodern world of the Web, as we have seen, authority is “rhizomally” dispersed, and access to power operates on many plateaus simultaneously, thanks to multiple crabgrass connections that cannot easily be controlled “from the top down.” The Internet is blissfully “nonhierarchical” and “horizontal”; its nodes “intersect in random, unregulated networks in which any node can interconnect with any other node.”<sup>57</sup>

---

55. To say this is not to ignore the perils of technologies, especially those emerging in late-capitalist, industrialized cultures. For a critique of such technologies and their possibly damaging effects on liturgy, see Richard Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

56. There may of course be alliances between philosophical movements and technological innovation, a point I have tried to show in this chapter by noting the similarities between Deleuze and Guattari’s poststructural “rhizomatics” and the crabgrass conditions that connect people and information on the Web.

57. Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, 114.

2. *Belonging*. Our experience of what it means to “belong” (to anything or anyone) is being altered; For example, the church’s liturgy has long relied on a seat-of-the-pants principle: “Bring your body; your mind will follow.” That is, if believers get themselves to church regularly, repeatedly, the light will slowly dawn. Understanding and change result from repeated *action*: people act their way into new ways of thinking; they don’t think their way into new ways of acting. This principle has been the bedrock of the Roman Catholic ritual system for more than two millennia. Liturgical acts first address the *body*, the sensorium, not the neocortex. *Caro cardo salutis*, wrote Tertullian; “the flesh is the hinge of salvation.” Thus, we baptize bodies, not brains: we immerse shivering skin in water; smear chrism on flesh aquiver with desire and emotion; and finally lead hungry neophytes to food and drink at the Lord’s table. In a word, our ritual system presupposes that we belong to God’s *people* precisely by belonging to a corporate *body*. And so, at eucharist, the ecclesial body of Christ gathers *at* and *around* the table to receive the body of Christ that is *on* the table.

So we believe. But Internet access can connect us, virtually, with prayer and praying communities worldwide, without the need for body to meet body. An old Zen proverb says there are some things that can be learned “only by rubbing two people together,” and, as the preceding paragraph argues, a similar principle underwrites the Catholic tradition of sacramental worship. Indeed, “God’s Word at the mercy of the body” is a short and apt definition of sacrament.<sup>58</sup> The body is not only the condition but the *site*—the very *place*—of the liturgy, “a living body, a singular body of desire where the threefold body—cosmic, social, and ancestral—is collected and interconnected . . . a body where the liturgy becomes world.”<sup>59</sup> In Catholic sacramental practice, body is the aboriginal Internet, our species’ first, indispensable, rhizomally connecting Web.

Can that Body-Web compete with the World Wide Web of our evolving information technology? Some would answer yes, noting that the Web is simply a digital extension of the skin, much as telescopes extend the eye’s range of vision and loudspeakers amplify the ear’s auditory powers. Yet there seem to be crucial differences. The Internet’s connections are virtually instantaneous; a mere nanosecond separates the body’s *desire* (for image, for information) from fulfillment. Yet experience teaches us, paradoxically, that instant

---

58. See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press/A Pueblo Book, 2001).

59. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press/A Pueblo Book, 1995), 309.

satisfaction is in fact the *death* of desire, for human desires live only by being endlessly *deferred* in an “indefinite process of incompleteness.”<sup>60</sup> To be human, as Louis-Marie Chauvet says, “is precisely to be opened by an *unsealable breach* and thus to look for quiet without ever being able to find it.”<sup>61</sup> Restlessness and deferral are what define us humans as “creatures of desire,” and Christian ritual respects that condition. As I will argue later, liturgies are beginnings, not endings, and their verification happens beyond the space of worship—in embodied ethics, in the “liturgy of the neighbor.” The body’s role in “how we belong”—to humankind, to church—seems indispensable. In contrast, information technology often seems impatient, even resentful, of corporality. The challenge facing us is whether we can reconcile the liturgical principle of materiality (flesh as the necessary “condition of possibility” for our spiritual meeting with God<sup>62</sup>) with a technology whose way of connecting may bypass the body and minimize the need for “face-to-face” behavior.

3. *Private and public.* A third challenge arises from the blurring between “private” and “public” in all sectors of human life. Readers may recall, for example, how, during Bill Clinton’s presidency, the contents of Special Prosecutor Kenneth Star’s impeachment referral to the U.S. House of Representatives (along with Clinton’s own four-hour testimony before a grand jury) were dumped, complete and uncensored, onto the Internet. Aside from the ethical and legal questions such an unauthorized release raised, the action made it clear that privacy, as a “constitutionally protected right,” is no longer a foregone conclusion for *anyone*, in *any* circumstances. In a flash, millions of Internet users learned more about the private sex lives of public figures than they probably wanted to know.

The Internet, of course, makes no firm distinction between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, virtue and vice, good and bad, public persona and private peccadillo. The computer screen is a great homogenizer. One click, and you can devoutly read the text of the Torah in Hebrew or the prayers of Isaac the Blind; another click, and your screen is flooded with “adult entertainment.” Moreover, while you are watching your screen, others are watching you, unobserved and unannounced—tracking your credit card

---

60. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 368.

61. *Ibid.*

62. As twentieth-century theologians like Karl Rahner pointed out, “flesh” and “spirit” are not polar opposites in Christian theology. On the contrary, human persons are a unity, and hence, the more I become my body, the more I become spirit, just as the more I become spirit, the more I become my body. It is “only through this actual bodily quality that the spiritual nature [of human persons] comes to be.” Jörg Splett, “Body,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 106.

transactions, analyzing your buying habits, monitoring your investment portfolio. Several years ago, for instance, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a short essay on the use of “cookies” in computer-based research.<sup>63</sup> Cookies are “small computer files that can imperceptibly track a user’s travels on the Web.” One researcher, Oren Etzioni of the University of Washington, described himself as “pro-cookies,” arguing that cookies are a good thing for research purposes. Others, however, objected to the whole idea of doing research on people without their informed consent.

Public and private—on the Internet the difference is often negligible, despite the proliferation of so-called secure servers. And of course the blurring of this fundamental distinction raises enormous questions for a religious tradition that, for more than two millennia, has considered the “private sanctuary of conscience” the supreme moral authority and has prized the “seal of confession” as sacrosanct.

4. *Content and access.* Evolving information technology shows how difficult it is today for religious authorities to control the content of (or access to) information about belief and behavior. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 890) insists that “it is . . . the Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error.” But anyone who has spent time surfing the Internet knows that what one finds posted on “Catholic” Web sites as “official teaching” may or may not bear any resemblance to the real core of our tradition. The *Catechism’s* conviction that it is “the Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections” may be a laudable goal, but it is very difficult to achieve in an intensely competitive cybernetic environment.

Is this a “new situation”? Not entirely. After all, St. Paul devoted a significant chunk of his Second Letter to the Corinthians to complaining that “super-apostles”—slick, first-century spin doctors whose eloquence seemed to guarantee the authenticity of their teaching—were in fact charlatans, not to be trusted as teachers of the truth (see 2 Cor 10-13). Significantly, the only antidote Paul could offer against these sleek celebrities was his *body*—his weak flesh and “contemptible” speech, his beatings, his brushes with death, his shipwrecks, his sleeplessness, his dangers, his hunger and thirst, his cold and exposure (see 2 Cor 11:16-33). Paul’s answer to his critics—the ultimate defense of his gospel—was not a theological proof but a *body*—his own and that of the crucified One (2 Cor 13:3-4). Here again, the challenge is to overcome the Internet’s impression that its contents are internally self-authenti-

---

63. September 25, 1998, pp. A 31-32.

cating (and hence true). As I noted in the prologue to this book, Christian ritual practice requires “exteriority” for verification; the liturgy of the church must be validated in the liturgy of the neighbor.

5. *Community*. Finally, our understanding of what constitutes “community” is being profoundly reshaped by the technologies that surround us. For instance, until about the middle of the last century, Catholic identity in the United States was often mediated through *immigrant, ethnic* identity. My own family’s ethnic heritage was rooted in the Great Hunger that afflicted nineteenth-century Ireland and caused waves of immigration to the United States and elsewhere. Under such conditions, Catholic identity was as closely connected to rituals of ethnic affiliation as it was to the rituals of Word and sacrament celebrated in church. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the two were virtually indistinguishable. Indeed, that was Catholicism’s strength as it migrated west across the Atlantic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It had an amazing ability to promote membership in a *global* religious community by promoting its members’ allegiance to *ethnic particularity*.<sup>64</sup>

But that time may now have passed. Thanks largely to the impact of information technology, Catholics who have arrived in this country as a result of more recent immigrations—for example, from Mexico, Vietnam, or the Philippines—are assimilated to American culture far more rapidly than their predecessors were. In significant ways, the Web and the Internet act as *solvants* upon traditional, ethnic understandings of community. But this technology-assisted pattern of assimilation may raise as many questions as it resolves. Twenty years ago, Mark Searle argued that “American Catholics are in process of becoming more characteristically American than characteristically Catholic . . . [and] cultural assimilation appears to be occurring at the expense of a distinct Catholic identity. . . . Where liturgy is concerned, this means a growing alienation from precisely that sense of collective identity and collective responsibility which the liturgy might be thought to rehearse.”<sup>65</sup> Perhaps true; perhaps not. In any case, Searle raises, from another angle, the issue of “belonging” noted in point 2 above. What does it mean to belong to the Catholic community—and does the liturgy contribute decisively to that belonging?

To help answer this question, let us explore more thoroughly the connection between the Web and the Word.

---

64. For an illuminating analysis of this phenomenon, see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

65. Mark Searle, “The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life,” *Worship* 60, no. 4 (July 1986): 333.

*Word as Web*

If we turn now to the history of the Bible in Christian contexts, a connection similar to the one Rosen sees between Internet and Talmud emerges. As Edward Mendelson notes, the hyperlink system on which the Internet depends had already begun to appear, arguably, in handwritten, illuminated Bibles that Christian monks, East and West, produced in their scriptoria. The Bible was in fact the first book to be interconnected by a system of cross-references—"marginal notes that directed a reader from one biblical passage to another, perhaps to a passage written at a distance of hundreds of years from the first. . . . The marginal references to the Bible and the hyperlinks of the World Wide Web," Mendelson argues, "may be the only two systems ever invented that give concrete expression to the idea that everything in the world holds together, that every event, every fact, every datum is connected to every other."<sup>66</sup>

That is perhaps the most obvious benefit offered by Internet technology: connections are everywhere, and they are accessible by everyone (at least everyone with access to a computer). And liturgy, as I noted in the prologue, is about connections, about being connected to God, people, planet, space, time, culture, and history. Modern information technology gives us an unprecedented capacity to connect people to people; people to history; and people to an inexhaustible stream of ideas, information, images, cultures, arts, and products. Hyperlinks have unimaginable potential for reshaping our personal and public life. But the bad news, as we've seen, is that this same system of hyperlinks may introduce us to "a world where connections are everywhere but are mostly meaningless, transient, fragile and unstable."<sup>67</sup> A few clicks and you can create your own Web page; a few more clicks, and you can destroy it—or change it into something quite different. Like Jonathan Rosen, Edward Mendelson suggests that the Internet may be built around a loss—not only the loss of homeland and worship center (as happened when Israel was dispersed in the Diaspora) but a deeper loss. "In a world without tangible bodies or enduring memories," Mendelson observes, "no one can keep promises, and yet the Bible is, above all, a book of oaths, covenants that a personal God has already kept and promises that will be kept in the future."<sup>68</sup>

---

66. See Edward Mendelson, "The Word & the Web," in *The New York Times*, June 2, 1996 ("Bookend" in the *New York Times Book Review*). This article was accessed on May 17, 2005, at <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/wordweb/bookend.html>.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

The presence of a promise thus presupposes the presence of *bodies*. The body is, after all, our primary mode of connecting with self, world, others, and God. The Bible's "hyperlink system" was thus an *incarnate* one; it told the history of salvation in terms of the history of a people on the move. Moreover, for most of the first millennium, the encounter between believer and Bible was intensely physical, for Scripture (like other written sources) was read *aloud* and not only with the eyes.<sup>69</sup> Hence reading was an embodied *motor* activity, a *social* transaction within a community of other readers, a physical fact of flesh and saliva, mumbling lips, moving tongue and teeth. Reading aloud was a way to connect *meaning* and *memory* to *movement*. The same principle influenced instruction in medieval (and modern) Qur'anic schools. Moreover, to read aloud—even if alone—was to call and invite reading partners, and thus to imply that meanings are socially constructed, that they flow from *communal* discoveries based on a shared humanity.

Connecting meaning and memory to movement helped give the Bible its enormous power to transform social structures. Mendelson argues, for example, that the abolition of slavery in the United States resulted not merely from mid-nineteenth-century socioeconomic pressures but also (and more importantly) from the fact that Quakers and other devout readers of the Bible understood the inescapable *connection* between Exodus 13:21 (where God marches before the people in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night) and 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, where Paul parallels the liberating work of Moses and the liberating work of Christ. For the abolitionists, this connection and its consequences were utterly clear: *Christians are morally obligated to repeat in their own time and place the liberating work of Moses*. As long as any people or any individual person is enslaved, God's promised act of liberation remains unfinished. To *accept* slavery (whether one is its victim or its perpetrator) is to enroll in Pharaoh's army; to *fight* it is "to obey the same imperatives that Moses [and Jesus] obeyed."<sup>70</sup>

This example is important because it shows how hyperlink connections—whether the Bible's or the Web's—can reshape a community's behavior. As tangible, physically inscribed realities, both the Bible and the human body make and keep promises. Christian liturgical traditions, East and West, thus treat Bibles and bodies (especially, but not only, Christ's eucharistic body) in the same way: both are revered, held, touched, lifted, greeted with acclamations, swathed in light and perfume.<sup>71</sup> For all public prayer, as Laurence

---

69. That is why the *Rule of Benedict* famously instructed monks to read "so as not to disturb others."

70. Mendelson, "Word & the Web."

71. One should properly speak of an "elevation" of the Gospel book at Mass much as one speaks of the elevation of the consecrated bread and wine at the end of the eucharistic prayer. (Technically,

Paul Hemming notes, "is worded—which means that all prayer is my being inscribed into the Word of prayer, which through the Spirit returns to the Father. In so much as I am of Christ, my prayer is of the body, and so takes for granted the assembly, the *ecclesia*, the body of Christ."<sup>72</sup> Because God's Word inscribes itself in human speech and sacrament, in body and Bible, the Christian's prayer and promises are *physical* realities, written on the body, carried on breath and blood, carved in the bone.

We are now in a better position to understand why, as French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé once wrote, "*the world exists in order to become a book.*" The biblical Word, like the Web, is a rhizomal *reading* of the world's crabgrass-text. As Jews and Christians understand it, Scripture is not human beings reading God's mind, but God reading the world's mind, probing its meanings in creation and covenant, story and song, deed and desire, hunger and history. Because the Bible is itself an inscribed body (the displaced homeland of a people), it can read the world's body, much as lovers read one another's flesh. If writing is the act by which "my own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think," then the Bible ("God's writing") is the Word taking the world by surprise and teaching it what it thinks.

### *Word as Polyphony, "Nomad Space"*

When Word reads world, in short, the result is polyphony, a rhizomal multiplicity of meanings sounding simultaneously. What Word sees in world is crabgrass, not a "root-book" built on strict principles of organic order or logical sequence.<sup>73</sup> (Anyone who still believes the universe runs on logic hasn't

---

the "elevations" after the words over bread and cup are "showings" rather than elevations properly speaking.) Both book and body are greeted with joyful acclamations by the people: "Alleluia" (at the Gospel procession) and "Amen" (at the end of the eucharistic prayer).

72. Laurence Paul Hemming, "The Subject of Prayer: Unwilling Words in the Postmodern Access to God," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 445.

73. Deleuze and Guattari begin their work "Rhizome," with reflections on the changed character and status of books and book-making: "A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. . . . A book is an assemblage . . . and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity—but we don't know yet what the multiple entails." See "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3-4. In this "rhizomal" account, books are a reality quite different from the "root-books" of the past, which were written on the model of a tree (root, trunk, branches), and which assumed that "the book imitates the world as art imitates nature" (p. 5). The rhizomal book "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of powers, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (p. 7). Like writing and like language itself, rhizomal books no longer assume an "ideal speaker-listener" and no longer assume that "a homogeneous linguistic community" exists (p. 7).

been paying attention.) The antistructural layout of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* is, paradoxically, a far more accurate image of the "world as book" and of "Word reading world" than the orderly compositions college profs teach freshmen to write. The Bible is like *A Thousand Plateaus*, and that is one reason why neither Jewish nor Christian liturgy reads it in strict order, from beginning to end. On the contrary, liturgy reads the Bible rhizomally, polyphonically, with many systems working at once.<sup>74</sup> Through the sheer diversity of its arrangements for reading the Bible, Christian liturgy implies that Scripture is an open system—"nomad space," to use Deleuze and Guattari's phrase).<sup>75</sup> Nomad thought is "smooth space" that resists reduction to treelike structures, closed systems, or single meanings; it resembles not the linear, cause-and-effect, sedimentary narratives favored by historians (*this* happened; then *that* . . .), but the polyphonic textures of the Bible.<sup>76</sup> One can jump into a nomad text at any point and find a connection to any (or every) other point. Liturgical lectionaries treat the Bible as nomad space, as an assemblage of mobile texts that can be placed in "conversation" with each other, even if they are not united by theme, structural similarity, or authorship. The "logic" behind such choices lies in the conviction that each biblical "passage" (itself a nomadic image) connects to every other, and hence any combination of texts opens a space where the Word may "take the world by surprise and teach it what it thinks."

So nomad space is "smooth," that is, open-ended; it lets one "rise up at any point and move to any other."<sup>77</sup> It spreads itself out "in an open space (hold the street), as opposed to entrenching itself in a closed space (hold the fort)."<sup>78</sup> Deleuze and Guattari borrow the notion of "smooth space" not from geology or geography, but from music—and more particularly, from the work of the distinguished contemporary composer and conductor Pierre Boulez. Nor is their appeal to music a mere flourish. Musical works offer the best insight not only into nomad space and thought but into the way Web and Word read world, as I will try to show in the paragraphs that follow.

For centuries—even before the invention of printing—books and their

---

74. A look at the lectionaries of Christian churches will demonstrate this point. Among Roman Catholics, since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, at least three distinct systems of reading the Bible function simultaneously: the one-year cycle of biblical readings assigned in the Liturgy of the Hours; the two-year cycle of readings assigned for use at eucharistic celebrations on weekdays; and the three-year cycle of readings assigned for Sunday eucharist.

75. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, section 12, "Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine," 351-423.

76. See *A Thousand Plateaus*, 553-54 n. 20.

77. Massumi, "Translator's Foreword," to *A Thousand Plateaus*, xiii.

78. *Ibid.*

pages have been imagined largely as warehouses for the storage and retrieval of data. Such a model implies that reading is simply scanning, the taking of inventories. To read is to take stock, to “tally the contents” of the warehouse. But suppose pages, whether printed or electronically digitized, are not primarily storage systems but *tablature*. (Note the change of image!) As defined today, tablature may refer, broadly, to *any* musical notation, but at an earlier period it signified notation for instrumental music that indicates rhythm and fingering, *but not the actual pitches to be produced by the player*. There was a great deal of *indeterminacy* in such a notation system. Moreover, musical tablature (in both broad and narrow senses) never actually stores or retrieves musical data at all; it merely furnishes cues and clues about the music’s “realization” or performance—structure, rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, clefs, and (perhaps, though not always) keys and pitches. The visual image that introduces the section entitled “Rhizome” in *A Thousand Plateaus* is the opening page of Sylvano Bussotti’s *Five Piano Pieces for David Tudor* (1959).<sup>79</sup> To classically trained pianists, this score looks a little bewildering, because, though it has familiar elements (staves, clefs), much of the notation resembles a Jackson Pollock painting. Bussotti’s score looks scattered, “thrown together,” without including clearly organized pitches or “key signatures.” The score looks maddeningly rhizomal, nomadic, indeterminate; it’s an inkblot graphic that leaves the player wondering just how the piece is supposed to “sound.” And of course that’s the point. David Tudor (1926-1996), the performer to whom Bussotti’s composition is dedicated, was well known as both a virtuoso pianist and an exponent of what is called “live electronic music.” He and other American musicians, notably John Cage, elevated indeterminacy to a compositional principle (or “anti-principle”). For these artists, the success of a work depends on the indeterminate interplay between the composer’s cues (in the score), the performer’s imagination, and, often, the active presence of other media (e.g., film, video, laser projections, dance, mobile loudspeaker sculptures, etc.). The goal is a performance both flexible and complex, with sound materials unfolding unpredictably through large gestures (some acoustic, some visual) in space and time.

What the “indeterminate” scores of Bussotti and others reveal is that *all* music is meta-notational; it happens *beyond* the score (not behind it)—or not at all. Ultimately, performance is less about the meticulous observance of the

---

79. Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3. There, Bussotti’s name is spelled with one *z*, though the preferred spelling requires two. David Tudor was a distinguished American pianist and composer (1926-1996).

composer's cues—necessary as that may be—than about creating *music*. Moreover, the postmodern principle of indeterminacy—promoted in the twentieth century by the likes of Sylvano Bussotti, John Cage, David Tudor, Pierre Boulez, Stefan Wolpe, and a host of others—is actually not as radical as it might first appear. Everyone knows that the earliest “scores” of the Gregorian Chant repertoire in the West were little more than graphic cues scratched above the words of liturgical manuscripts, with the actual sound left largely to the skill and imagination of performers, working within the parameters of a tradition that was primarily oral. If you wanted to know for certain how a bit of Roman (or Gallican, or Mozarabic) chant sounded, you had to send for one of that rite's cantors. Similarly, the vast variety of ornamentation employed in Baroque music (e.g., that of J. S. Bach), though shaped by convention, was largely left to an individual performer's skill and spontaneity.

Historically, Christian ritual reads liturgical “pages” the way musicians read scores—as tablature. A ritual text is not a warehouse for storing data or retrieving dogma. Nor are ritual meanings sedimentary and immobile; they do not lie “embedded,” awaiting arousal, in either texts or nonverbal gestures. Like music, liturgical meaning is performed “beyond the text,” or not at all. That is why, as the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet shows, Christian worship, like its Jewish antecedent, is not—and can never be—*self-verifying*, *self-authenticating*. Israel's rites for offering firstfruits were not internally self-legitimizing, because “recognition of God and thankfulness toward God . . . can be true only if they are veri-fied [*sic*] in recognition of the poor: it is in the ethical practice of *sharing* [of divestiture, dispossession] that the liturgy of Israel is thus accomplished.”<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, Christian liturgy has to be verified outside itself, exteriorly, in what Emmanuel Levinas called “the liturgy of the neighbor.”<sup>81</sup> Eucharist, for instance, cannot exist apart from ethics—and the reasons for this are both *theological* (in the precise sense of that word) and philanthropic. Paul clearly affirms that each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we “proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26)—and as Chauvet says, “God crucified in the form of a slave does not tolerate being mastered by a science. Its Word can be expressed only as an . . . *imperative* of life and action.” The ethical action that flows from eucharist “gives body to God” and “gives privilege of place to the exercise of justice and mercy where we have recognized the ‘liturgy of the neighbor.’ . . . The ethics of ‘living-in-grace,’ primarily with

---

80. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 238 (emphasis and material in brackets added).

81. Quotations in this paragraph are from Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 238, 535.

regard to those whom humans have reduced to the state of slaves, is the place of veri-fication [*sic*], the *veritas*, of the filial 'giving thanks' of the Eucharist."

### *Word, Rite, and the Discourse of the Body*

We can understand, then, why, for Christians, ethical practices like the preferential "option" for the poor are *not*, in fact, optional. The obligation of ethical action flows precisely from *God's own act* of self-emptying, self-erasure, self-outpouring (Phil 2:7-8). Jesus' act of self-abasement ("he *emptied* himself, taking the form of a slave" [Phil 2:7]) was not merely exemplary; for the cross "can be interpreted only as the renunciation by God of God's very self," and hence it is "only as the action of the Trinitarian God that the scandal of the cross can be endured by the believer."<sup>82</sup> On the cross, God subverts all we know of "God." Such a searing scandal cannot be grasped *conceptually*; it "requires the passage *from discourse to body* . . . where the body of our desire, our history, and our society becomes the place of the truth of our *word*."

Liturgical *discourse* must, then, inevitably give way to the *body*, to the embodied action of ethical performance. To say this is not to deny the emphasis, in Catholic tradition, on sacramental worship as intrinsically efficacious *ex opere operato* ("from the very doing of the deed"); still, that much-maligned phrase must be parsed accurately. To the words *ex opere operato* one must always add *Dei* ("of God") or *Christi* ("of Christ"). The guarantee of efficacy (i.e., grace will truly be offered and bestowed whenever this action is performed) flows from God-in-Christ, who acts as the sacrament's "principal agent" or "final cause," to use traditional scholastic language. This obviously does *not* mean that sacraments "say what they do and do what they say" simply or solely because the rite has been validly celebrated by an assembly (ministers + people) having the required intentions. *Ex opere operato* is not a defiant assertion that sacraments "work" mechanically, despite the minister's disposition; it is, rather, a stern reminder that Christian worship is not self-legitimizing. Even if one views sacraments as "self-actualizations" or "self-expressions" of the *church* (defined as God's "eschatologically triumphant grace," as Christ's abiding presence and availability in our world), one must still remember that the church's identity as "sacrament of salvation" in and for the world is not self-produced or self-bestowed. Chauvet is unquestionably right when he insists that in liturgy and sacrament the church does not "invent" its own identity, but receives it from a God who is incomprehen-

---

82. Quotations in this section are from Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 532, 535, 375, 409; Chauvet quotes both Hans Urs von Balthasar and Walter Kasper.

bly near yet irreducibly Other. Sacraments are thus acts of “submission” to the Other; in them, the church puts itself “at the disposal of the Other,” and hence it “lets the Other act by performing a gesture which is not from itself, by saying words which are not its own, by receiving elements which it has not chosen.” In a word, it is only “by *receiving itself* from [Christ], its Lord, that the Church attains its identity. The sacraments . . . are the *instituting* mediation of this identity.” And thus, whenever it celebrates sacramental liturgy, the church confesses its radical dependence on Christ as the very condition of its existence and its freedom.

### *Rule of Prayer, Rule of Faith, Rule of Life*

I am arguing, then, that Christian ritual is best understood as tablature or musical score—and that liturgical scores are “rhizomal, nomadic,” limitlessly multiple in meaning and internally “indeterminate,” that is, capable of verification only through the *exteriority* of ethical action.<sup>83</sup> Christian liturgy begins as ritual practice but ends as ethical performance. Liturgy of the neighbor verifies liturgy of the church, much as a composer’s score makes *music* only through the risk of performance.

Hence, the ancient, binary formula *lex orandi, lex credendi* (“the rule of prayer is the rule of faith”)—though often invoked to assert the priority of doxology over doctrine<sup>84</sup>—is in fact something of a red herring. The formula is flawed from the get-go, because its reasoning is circular: “We *believe*,” it asserts, “that the church’s public prayer shapes what (and how?) we believe.” But such a statement *already expresses* fundamental convictions—*beliefs*—about the nature of both Christ and church, beliefs that make liturgy possible (and obligatory) in the first place. There is a sense, of course, in which it is quite true to say that liturgy is where theology is born—where the church

---

83. I use the term “ritual” here and throughout this book in much the way Ronald Grimes understands it. *Ritual*, Grimes argues, is the “general idea,” the formal “definition or characterization,” while *rites* are what people actually enact (see Ronald Grimes, “Emerging Ritual,” in *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy* [Valparaiso, Ind.: NAAL, 1990], 16). The term “ritual” is thus broader; it implies a “convergence of several kinds [of action] we normally think of as distinct. It is an ‘impure’ genre. Like opera, which includes other genres—for example, singing, drama, and sometimes even dancing—a ritual may include all these and more” (see Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990], 192). For a detailed and technical discussion of ritual as a fusion of thought and action, theory and culture—as well as of the relation between definitions of ritual and understandings of culture—see two books by Catherine Bell: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

84. See, e.g., Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press/A Pueblo Book, 1984/1992), 3: “Worship conceived broadly is what gives rise to theological reflection, rather than the other way around.”

is “caught in the act of being most overtly itself as it stands faithfully in the presence of the One who is both object and source” of its faith—and hence that liturgy alone deserves the moniker *theologia prima*.<sup>85</sup> Still, the *lex orandi, lex credendi* formula suffers from the same limitations that beset all such closed-circuit, binary oppositions. If doxology checks doctrine, might not the reverse be true as well, viz., that doctrine checks doxology?

That, certainly, was the opinion of Pope Pius XII, who argued in his apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), that “the liturgy of the church does not engender Catholic faith, but rather springs from it, in such a way that the practices of sacred worship proceed from the faith as the fruit comes from the tree.”<sup>86</sup> (Old images die hard!) Three years earlier, the same pope had disputed the idea that “the sacred liturgy is a kind of proving ground for the truths of faith, meaning . . . that the Church is obliged to declare such a doctrine sound when it is found to have produced fruits of piety and sanctity through the sacred rites of the liturgy, and to reject it otherwise.”<sup>87</sup> Such words suggest that Pius XII was more concerned about doctrinal control of the liturgy than about promoting Prosper of Aquitaine’s dictum, *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (“let the rule of prayer establish the rule of belief”). While he admitted that Prosper’s adage could be understood as “perfectly correct” if “one desires to differentiate and describe the relationship between faith and the sacred liturgy in absolute and general terms,” he still insisted that the “entire liturgy . . . has *the Catholic faith for its content*.”<sup>88</sup>

The slogan *lex orandi, lex credendi* does not, then, offer as much light as it may seem to promise. In spite of the tension between them, doxology and doctrine remain a cozy *ménage à deux*, each partner in the pair defining itself in terms of the other. But the deeper question is not whether faith controls worship, or vice versa, but whether either of them can be verified in the absence of a *lex agendi* (a rule of action or behavior), an ethical imperative that flows from the Christian’s encounter with a God who is radically “un-God-like,” a God who, in the cross of Jesus and in the bodies of the “poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned,” has become everything we believe a God is *not*. The ethical imperative implied by the phrase *lex agendi* breaks apart our comfortable “faith and worship” duo by introducing that subversive element of *indeterminacy*.

85. *Ibid.*, 74, 75.

86. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (November 1, 1950), 20. Latin text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 42 (1950): 760. Note the use of the arboreal metaphor to express the relation between liturgy and faith.

87. Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (November 20, 1947), 46. Latin text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 39 (1947): 540.

88. *Mediator Dei*, 48, 47. Latin text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 39 (1947): 540–41.

Christian liturgy, moreover, gives this indeterminacy an unsettling theological twist. Indeterminacy destabilizes; it de-centers—and that is salutary, even if discomfiting. The God who is “beyond all forms of being, of wisdom, and of power,” the God who acquires a Self only through those “little ones who do not exist” (i.e., the marginalized have-nots whose poverty, hunger, and misery count for nothing in the world’s eyes) can be met and worshiped only within the “body of the world and of humanity”—more specifically, of suffering humanity. Christian liturgy always speaks the Word of the cross, and it is “a rupturing Word.”<sup>89</sup> It was surely not mere rhetoric that prompted Paul to remind the Corinthians (and us) that “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the *death* of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

The rupturing Word of the cross proclaims that God has become what we customarily believe God *is* not and *should* not be. As Stanislas Breton puts it,

It is precisely because [God] is nothing of that which is that he must become. But this “becoming” necessarily passes through the face of the other. Nothing is more disconcerting . . . than the last judgment according to St. Matthew (25.31-46). At the hour of truth that sounds the final decline of the idols, in that flash of lightening [*sic*] that concentrates a life upon the one thing necessary, what we would have thought essential is not what finally matters. The last day is . . . the triumph of the everyday. The “blessed of the Father” hear . . . the revelatory Word: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat; . . . thirsty . . . a stranger . . . a prisoner.” Those awaiting the sentence make no appeal to those things that common religious sense would have deemed indispensable: cult, adoration, absolute submission to a transcendent Truth. The elect themselves seem not to understand. . . . Would the most distant also be the most near? Or is it that we know neither near nor far? Are not the poor, in their non-being, the shadow on our earth of that kenosis Paul celebrates [cf. Phil 2.5-11] as that yet unseen future?<sup>90</sup>

The last day is the triumph of the everyday; God’s becoming passes *through the face of the other*. Surely Stanislas Breton is right to insist that “the history of the Cross is defined by the humblest gestures: dress, nourish, shelter, quench. In such banality, it is not surprising that the irresponsible faithful fear that the economy of faith has been reduced to vulgar materialism. Indeed, the

---

89. Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. Jacquelyn Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 120-22.

90. *Ibid.*, 121-22.

intransigent paradox [of the parable in Matthew's Gospel] signifies the necessity of giving, to that which has no face."<sup>91</sup>

The judgment scene in Matthew 25 has all the characteristics of a heavenly liturgy, to which all nations have been summoned and invited to participate. Worshiping angels are present (a sign of cultic context); the eschatological "Son of Man" presides, speaking and blessing; and a kind of "dialogue homily" precedes the just ones' entry into eternal life, imaged earlier in Matthew as a royal "wedding feast" (Matt 11:1-14). But at the heart of this "heavenly liturgy" lies a subversive indeterminacy. Those who sincerely believed they "dressed, nourished, sheltered, and quenched" are shocked to learn they *didn't*; those who didn't seem to realize they were "dressing, nourishing, sheltering, and quenching" are shocked to learn they *did*. Like Matthew's parable, liturgical indeterminacy ruptures our "complacent equilibriums"<sup>92</sup> and forces us to deal with radical Otherness (the *Other* who is God, *others* who are human). To do so means forgetting the imperious, autonomous self so that "the wound of an Otherness . . . always beyond our grasp" may leave on us "its trace in the humble call of the neighbor."<sup>93</sup> In a word, God's hiddenness is not merely a consequence of "godless relativism, humanism, materialism, and modernity" (the usual suspects); it is a fundamental fact of Christian experience. Always, Christian theology is stauology, a science of the cross, "the study of a God whose divinity is effaced in a humanity crushed *to the point of* requiring of us this body of world and humanity without which God cannot come among us in truth."<sup>94</sup>

To celebrate liturgy on the blissful assumption that we *know* the God we worship is thus a dreadful mistake. For one thing, liturgy (*opus Dei*) is less "our work for God" than God's work for us. Moreover, God's coming among us always passes through the face of the other and through the banality of the humblest gestures: dress, nourish, shelter, quench. Such considerations should give us pause, yet, as American novelist and poet Annie Dillard writes, Chris-

---

91. Ibid., 123.

92. Ibid.

93. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 75. Emmanuel Levinas's "liturgy of the neighbor" is based on precisely such an understanding about the inescapable demands of Otherness. Ordinarily, "the I dominates the Other," and hence "total self-knowledge is total immanence and sovereignty." But the presence of the Other (and here Levinas means the *human* other) calls the "I" into question. "Before the Other [the human other], the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent." See E. Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 18. Here, Levinas (like other postmodern philosophers) opposes the classical metaphysical notion of Being ("impersonal, anonymous, violent reducer of otherness to the totality of the same") by invoking the Other ("pure eruption and rupture bursting, through the 'Face,' the unifying pretensions and the ultimately totalitarian essence of [traditional Greek philosophy's] *logos*)." See Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 46.

94. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 75.

tian worshippers often “come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing.” Confident in their long and hallowed traditions of public worship, communicants in such churches often seem to “saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked.”<sup>95</sup>

### *The Call to Conversion*

To forget the liturgy’s danger is to resist or ignore its call to conversion. It is entirely possible, as Anglican theologian Urban Holmes noted a quarter-century ago, for religious belief to use its loud affirmations of orthodoxy in order to insulate itself from the God who “lies sleeping in the lap of the world,” who lives “hidden in the darkness.”<sup>96</sup> Nor is liturgy immune from this temptation. When worship no longer hears the rupturing Word of the cross, when it forgets that Christian doxology and doctrine are *both* stauology (a “science of the cross”), when it closes its eyes to the God whose divinity is effaced in a crushed humanity, it may wind up serving ideology rather than “the dark mystery to which liturgical symbols would point.”<sup>97</sup> Those who fear that if liturgy “pays too much attention” to the human it will forget the divine should remember that “*God is nowhere more divine than in the humanity—the sub-humanity—of the Crucified.*”<sup>98</sup> Whether we place ourselves on the left wing or the right wing of an increasingly polarized Christianity, we err if we approach the liturgy expecting to have our lives *affirmed* and our ideas *confirmed*. We should not underestimate the sovereign “I’s” eagerness to erase the Other, to forget that in the presence of this Other, I am *responsible*. Emmanuel Levinas put the point perfectly: “The Other [here, the *human* Other] is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent.”<sup>99</sup> In a nutshell, no one gets into heaven without a letter of recommendation from the poor.

“Good liturgy,” Urban Holmes wrote, “borders on the vulgar . . . leads us to the edge of chaos, and out of that experience will come a theology different from any previous theology.” Commenting on Holmes’s point in his clas-

---

95. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (1977; paperback, New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 60.

96. Urban T. Holmes, “Theology and Religious Renewal,” *Anglican Theological Review* 62, no. 1 (1980): 18.

97. *Ibid.*, 19.

98. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 493.

99. See n. 93 above for full reference to this citation from Levinas.

sic study *On Liturgical Theology*, Aidan Kavanagh observes that the immediate post-traumatic result of our brush with chaos is “deep change in the very lives of those who participate in the liturgical act.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, the history of Christian worship is less the chronicle of its ritual texts and forms than the cumulative impact of changed lives on all participants. Take that away, and one has ideologically driven ritualism rather than worship of a God whose glory is seen in the disfigured body on the cross, a “laughable caricature of a body, a body so wasted, so liquefied, so melted away that it is already treated as dead by those who divide his clothing.”<sup>101</sup> That is why Kavanagh insists that liturgies “grow” only when the assembly is “brought regularly to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God,” for it is precisely *change*—radical *adjustment* in living—that makes liturgy “theological.” Such change is a process “partly conscious and partly unconscious . . . long term and dialectical,” its agents “more likely to be charwomen and shopkeepers than pontiffs and professors.”<sup>102</sup>

We cannot, in other words, worship God without consenting to God’s command that we “*recognize others as like us in their very otherness.*”<sup>103</sup> The price of such consent, writes Louis-Marie Chauvet, is very high indeed; it is “nothing less than the choice of a freedom that is responsible for the others . . . an inescapable responsibility from which no others . . . can relieve me.”<sup>104</sup> Liturgies “grow”; they have “meaningful histories,” precisely (and only) to the degree that they chronicle the unfolding of conversion in a real, live, quivering community. Kavanagh is quite right to argue that

the liturgical assembly’s stance in faith is vertiginous, on the edge of chaos. Only grace and favor enable it to stand there; only grace and promise brought it there; only grace and a rigorous divine charity permit the assembly . . . to come away whole from such an encounter, and even then it is with wounds which are as deep as they are salutary.<sup>105</sup>

We leave the liturgy limping and sore from wrestling with the Stranger (see Gen 32:23–33). For we cannot acknowledge God’s victory in Jesus’ cross, we cannot acknowledge the crucified One as “the Other who is like the Father,” without “ourselves being called into question.”<sup>106</sup> In liturgy, as in life, our confession of God’s glory

---

100. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73.

101. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 501, 500.

102. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 74–75.

103. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 506.

104. *Ibid.*

105. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75.

106. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 506, 501.

goes hand in hand with the unveiling of our own sin. . . . How can we . . . speak of God on the basis of the cross without being ourselves implicated down to the very marrow of our desire? A reversal of desire is demanded here, a reversal that would not only confess our own injustice in the very place we arrogated to ourselves the authority . . . to condemn the Just One, but also simultaneously confess a God completely Other than our infantile desire's God of Marvels.<sup>107</sup>

Liturgy leads us to the brink of chaos in order to tutor our desire, to reverse its triumphalism and megalomania.

### CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the relation between ritual's roots and the post-modern condition that shapes Western industrialized cultures and deeply influences our self-understanding, our experience of others and world, our faith, our religious practice, and especially our connection to liturgical word and worship. When all is said and done, we can speak about a *theology* of liturgy not because doxology and doctrine are old allies that feed off each other's triumphs, but because, as I have argued throughout this chapter, worship is "applied rhizomatics." Its indeterminacy opens *ethical* space (the space of *lex agendi*) that requires us to deal with radical Otherness (the *Other* who is God, *others* who are human) and allows us to verify the legitimacy of the church's public worship only through the "liturgy of the neighbor," only by passing through the face of the Other. Thus I have insisted that liturgy's mazelike, connective, crabgrass condition resembles music more than textbook, syllabus, or doctrinal definition.

Moreover, making use of the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I have suggested that a change of image—of optic—changes our perception, experience, and interpretation of the world. Ritual may thus be thought of "rhizomally," as a technology for "reading" the world. For, as our discussion of the connections between "rule of prayer, rule of faith, and rule of life" revealed, ritual does not abandon the world, but rearranges it as "rehearsal" for God's kingdom, as practice for that Supper of the Lamb where God and humankind meet at table. For Christians, the liturgy of the church can be verified only in the liturgy of the neighbor. But to say this is to confess that a celebrating community must open its doors to others, to *the* Other, who calls us by name. As theologians like Louis-Marie Chauvet remind us, the "name"

---

107. *Ibid.*, 501 (slightly altered).

we are called is not self-assigned. At liturgy, we do not invent or assert our own identity; we *receive* it. That is why Christian worship begins only after all participants agree to act as impersonators, traveling to a “strange land” under assumed identities, on another’s passport: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>108</sup> The liturgy’s first words do not announce who *we* are, but inscribe us in Another.

There is thus a kind of ventriloquism at work in ritual; *our* mouths open, but Another speaks. Here, too, ritual resembles music. Both are audible arts that make inaudible gestures. In his illuminating essay “Music, Music,” post-modern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard notes that music’s enigma lies not in what it says but in what it lets us hear beyond the audible. Music is parturition—it *labors* giving birth, struggling to open “a passageway through which something can happen that has not yet happened, a child, one’s past, . . . a musical phrase.” The musician’s task is to open the passage. For ultimately, music’s source isn’t a sound—an engine’s roar, or breath passing through an ebony tube, or a column of air vibrating in a lead pipe—but a “gesture” made before and beyond sound, a language beneath and beyond words.<sup>109</sup> Is it T. S. Eliot’s “Music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts”?<sup>110</sup>

Perhaps, then, music’s source—and ritual’s—is that inaudible Other whose “word” is the discourse of the body, with what Pablo Neruda called its “impure speech,” its vigils and wrinkles and dreams. For the body is how we listen most deeply to the world—it is, indeed, the “eye” through which we read the world. Perhaps, as Pascal Quignard suggests, the ultimate, inaudible source of both music and ritual may be *lamentation*, that primal cry of terror we utter whenever we are threatened by nullity and loss—the cry with which we first greet the world.<sup>111</sup> Ours is, after all, a species deeply and inescapably afraid, haunted by fears carried on our breath, carved on bone and body. Could it be that music and ritual both arise from a fear that borders awe? Does not music often begin as a rattling, a drumming, a beating, a moaning? Perhaps beyond these acoustic banalities lies lamentation, a deep sadness, a cry of loss and abandonment, the ruptured Word of the Crucified: *Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani?*

Music and ritual do not express this dereliction directly, yet it is always *heard*, an ever-present “mute” within our music, sorrow’s shadow in the bright

108. Pickstock, *After Writing*, 181, 184.

109. Jean-François Lyotard, “Music, Music,” in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 218, 221.

110. T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages,” section V, in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 44.

111. See Lyotard, “Music, Music,” 221–26, for an extended quotation from Quignard’s work.

joy of Mozart. And there is something more. Beyond the loss and lamentation that breathe in all our music and ritual, there lives *affect*, the ability not merely to have emotions but to *feel* them. Affection, as Aristotle noted, is what animals *do*. If lamentation is our music's mute source, affection is what propels us forward. As Lyotard writes, "Music labors to give birth to what is audible in the inaudible breath. It strives to put it into phrases. . . . Every sonorous phrase, even the simplest, announces that there will be another phrase, that it is not yet over. . . . Every phrase asks to be honored by [another] . . . phrase. [So] [t]he phrase goes out toward you and asks you for a phrase"—a *response*, not an "answer" but a moving forward. And what happens? "A community is born, polyphonic even in plainsong, enchanted by sonorous apparitions even within the war of counterpoint. The community forgets the anonymous horde moaning with the terror of [loss, extinction]. [Still,] [t]he community . . . does not efface the horde."<sup>112</sup>

All music—and all ritual—are perhaps cries against extinction, against the body's bondage, the ending of the waltz, the fading of the rose, the dying of the light. Despite all our bravado, our claims of autonomy and control, our confidence in the mutuality of doctrine and doxology, ritual makes *us* well before we make it. That is why learning to *do* liturgy requires not knowledge of ritual but conversion, deep change met at the brink of chaos. Such learning, as Chauvet suggests,

amounts to the slow work of apprenticeship in the art of "un-mastery," a permanent work of *mourning* where, *free of resentment*, a "serene" consent to the "*presence of the absence*" takes place within us little by little. In gospel terms, this is a work of conversion to the presence of the absence of a God who "crosses himself out" in the crushed humanity of this crucified One whom humans have reduced to less than nothing, and yet where, in a paradoxical light, faith confesses the glory of God.<sup>113</sup>

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What images would you use to describe the culture(s) in which you live? What images best describe your experience of "church"? In what ways are these images different? similar? compatible? reconcilable? irreconcilable?
2. How does your experience of contemporary information technology impact your experience of the world? of relations with others? of God's Word? of ritual action and liturgical prayer?

---

112. *Ibid.*, 229.

113. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 74.

3. This chapter listed five ways that information technology is presently reshaping culture and church (see pp. 26-30 above). What would you add to or subtract from that list?
4. A central theme of this chapter is that Christian liturgy can be "verified" only through the "liturgy of the neighbor." How would you describe the relation between liturgy ("the rule of prayer"), belief ("the rule of faith"), and ethical action ("the rule of life")?
5. Do you regularly (or ever) experience sacramental liturgy as a "call to conversion"? Why or why not?

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. New York: Guilford Press, 1991. The authors provide a clear and critical guide to the significance of thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari, while pointing out similarities to and differences from the theories of other important French thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.
- Chauvet, Louis-Marie. *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press/A Pueblo Book, 2001. A good guide to understanding liturgical prayer and sacramental worship as postmodern theology understands them.
- Hart, Kevin. *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2004. A clear and excellent guide to postmodern thought, especially as it shapes Christian philosophy and theology.
- Mitchell, Nathan D. *Liturgy and the Social Sciences*. American Essays in Liturgy. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999. A brief study that examines and assesses the many ways research in the social sciences (e.g., sociology, anthropology, cultural studies) has impacted thinking about ritual and liturgical prayer since Vatican Council II (1962-65).
- Pecklers, Keith, ed. *Liturgy in a Post-Modern World*. New York: Continuum, 2003. A collection of papers from a symposium held in Rome in 2002; each paper addresses a specific aspect of liturgical prayer and celebration.