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## **A SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE: SOME ANGLICAN THINKING**

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## A SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE: SOME ANGLICAN THINKING

*This article examines the notion of a sacramental universe from the perspective of some Anglican thinking based on the philosophical concept of moderate realism. Whereas traditional Anglican thinking on a sacramental universe emphasised the concept of a sacred thing, Rowan Williams broadens the debate by putting a case for sacramentality as the paradox of difference where the Divine is seen in 'not-God-ness' given into inanimate form in the sacraments. Sue Patterson helps to clarify the relationship between theology and realism and advances the case for moderate realism as the foundational philosophical concept of a sacramental universe within the Anglican tradition.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the long accepted tenets of the catholic expression of Christianity, of which Anglicanism is a part, is that people live in a sacramental universe where God chooses to use material things to be present to people and where these material things function as vehicles of grace. The story of creation in Genesis affirms the goodness of what God created as a material world (Genesis 1 and 2) and God's presence through that creation. The witness of the Christian Scriptures affirms that God chose human flesh in which to incarnate the Word or Logos (John 1) as the man Jesus Christ. The Gospels witness that it was in human flesh that Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again among people, being seen and experienced as the power and presence of God in material human form.

The belief that people live in a sacramental universe created and used by God is widely present in many thinkers of the Anglican expression of Christianity and some of these will be briefly explored below, but the notion of a sacramental universe has more recently been questioned and redefined by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. This article explores the work of some Anglican thinkers who engage with the idea of living in a sacramental universe in its long accepted sense and then goes on to explore Williams' redefinition. The work of the theologian Sue Patterson will also be used to show the importance of the relationship between theology and realism. Both of these contemporary thinkers aim at providing greater balance between the traditional and more recent understandings of the notion of a sacramental universe. Such understandings have the potential to provide greater focus for modern Anglican sacramental theology.

### REALISM AND SACRAMENTALSITY

The philosophical assumptions which underlie much Anglican thinking regarding sacramentality relate to the distinction between realism and nominalism. Realism argues that signs, such as the water, bread and wine used in Christian sacraments, convey what they signify. Nominalists deny this and argue for a world of particulars in which particular signs function only to remind believers of a past and completed event which cannot be contextualised in any real sense in the present in, say, the Eucharist. These philosophical notions of realism and nominalism operate within the larger philosophical question of the problem of universals, explored by both ancient and modern philosophers. David Armstrong states that "the problem of universals is that problem of how numerically different particulars

can nonetheless be identical in nature, all of the same ‘type’.”<sup>1</sup> Armstrong has a preference for realism and his use of the term “identity of nature” has important implications for sacramental theology<sup>2</sup> in that he distinguishes between what he calls a strict or immoderate realism, where “particularity and universality are related constituents of particulars”<sup>3</sup>, that is, the particulars possess numerical identity, such that in the case of the Eucharist, bread would be numerically identical to the fleshy body of Christ and result in a literal piece of flesh being on the altar, and a moderate form of realism. Moderate realism implies that different particulars, such as bread and wine on the one hand and Christ’s body and blood on the other, do not possess numerical identity, but nonetheless share an identity of nature. Universals, for example the nature of Christ, are therefore in such a moderate realist analysis strictly identical in their different particular instantiations, bread and wine in the Eucharist and Christ’s body and blood, without the particulars being numerically or strictly identical as an immoderate realist analysis would imply. In a previous article we have explored the distinction between moderate and immoderate realism in relation to eucharistic theology and have argued that “bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ can have the same nature (Christ’s identity of nature) without having a strict or numerical identity. This means that bread and wine can have Christ’s identity of nature without being the particular of his literal flesh and blood.”<sup>4</sup> This notion of moderate realism underlies much Anglican thinking regarding sacramental theology, especially eucharistic theology.

Rowan Williams has argued for this moderate realist theology of the Eucharist in his book *Tokens of Trust*, where in speaking of the Eucharist he tries to hear the words, “‘This is my body; this is my blood’ as Jesus saying of the bread, ‘This too is my body; this is as much a carrier of my life and my identity as my literal flesh and blood’.”<sup>5</sup> Williams argues that Christ’s identity of nature, is strictly identical in both instantiations, that is, whatever it is that Christ is, is in both instantiations. Williams says that:

The force of the Gospel text ... seems to be more to do with a kind of extension of the reality of Jesus’ presence to the bread and wine. They too bear and communicate the life of Jesus, who and what he is. By eating these, the believer receives what the literal flesh and blood have within them, the radiant action and power of God the Son, the life that makes him who he is.<sup>6</sup>

This means nothing more than Christ’s identity of nature is in both instantiations of bread and wine on the one hand, and Christ’s body and blood on the other. This means that the while there is no strict identity between the particulars, bread and wine in the Eucharist, and the universal, the nature of Christ as Word or Logos, there is nonetheless a strict identity between the universal divine property, the nature of Christ as Word or Logos and the instantiation of that universal property in the particular. To immobilise the object by concentrating too much on the empirical particular in this world, that is, the bread and the wine, is to destroy the nature of sign-making, as well as the nature of a sacrament and to suggest the philosophical assumptions of immoderate or fleshy realism. Williams seeks the

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<sup>1</sup> David Armstrong, *Nominalism and Realism. Universals and Scientific Realism Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>2</sup> This has been picked up by Brian Douglas and Terence Lovat, ‘The Integrity of Discourse in the Anglican Eucharistic Tradition: A Consideration of Philosophical Assumptions’, *The Heythrop Journal*, 51 (2010), 847-861.

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong, *Nominalism and Realism*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas and Lovat, ‘The Integrity of Discourse’, 853.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 116.

balance of moderate realism where signs are seen to instantiate the universal divine identity they signify.

### A SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE

William Temple in his Gifford Lectures of 1932–3 and 1933–4 expressed the view that we live in a sacramental universe.<sup>7</sup> In fact Temple argued, “Christianity is the most avowedly materialistic of all the great religions.”<sup>8</sup> Temple meant by this that the goodness of creation and the sacramental principle of God being present through and in things was at the centre of Christianity and not that Christians were merely addicted to material things. It was in things of this world that the reality of God was revealed, ultimately in the incarnation of Christ in human flesh.<sup>9</sup> The materiality was not the initiative of humans but the initiative of God. Here, Temple observed that, for some, “reality” was mechanical and materialistic while, for others, it was spiritual. This led him to a central question: “Should we conceive of things as existing independently, and possessing value as an attribute? Or should we think of value as itself the true reality which realises its various forms through embodying itself in things – or through the creation of things for this purpose of the Divine Will?”<sup>10</sup> Temple’s talk of “value” was posing the question of whether these things exist independently of one another and possess value only as independent and particular things, that is nominalism, or whether true value was realised in various forms through embodying itself in things, that is, realism. For Temple, the latter was seen to be true and he argued that in Christianity, material or matter is given a place of respect since it is created by God and seen to be good. God, argues Temple, uses the material or matter to be present to human beings. Temple affirms that we live in a sacramental universe and such a view was founded on the philosophical assumption of realism, where particular signs were seen to instantiate the universal values they signify.

Talk of a sacramental universe was not a new thought in Anglicanism. George Herbert alluded to this very question in one of his hymns where he said:

Teach me, my God and King,  
in all things thee to see.<sup>11</sup>

Herbert here expresses a sacramentality which suggests that God is to be found and seen in all things or particulars, including the material things of this world.

Bishop Lancelot Andrewes had said much the same thing in one of his Christmas sermons where he argued:

Of the Sacrament we may well say, *Hoc erit signum*. For a sign it is, and by it *invenietis Puerum*, ‘ye shall find this Child’ [Luke 2: 12]. For finding His flesh and blood, ye cannot miss but find Him too. And a sign, not much from this here. For Christ in the Sacrament is not altogether unlike Christ in the cratch [cradle or manger]. To the cratch we may well liken the husk or outward symbols of it. Outwardly it seems little worth, but it is rich of contents, as was the crib this day [the sermon was preached on Christmas Day] with Christ in it. For what are they but *infirma et egena elementa*, ‘weak and poor elements’ [Galatians 4: 9] of themselves? Yet in them find we Christ. Even as they did this

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<sup>7</sup> William Temple, *Nature, Man and God. Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow in the Academic Years 1932–1933 and 1933–1934* (London: Macmillan, 1934).

<sup>8</sup> Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 478.

<sup>9</sup> William Temple, *Christus Veritas, An Essay* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 229.

<sup>10</sup> Temple, *Christus Veritas*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, (ed. Tim Cook) (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), 171.

*day in praesepe iumentorum panem angelorum*, ‘in the beast’s crib the food of angels’, which very food our signs both represent and present unto us.<sup>12</sup>

For Andrewes, the use by God of human flesh in the incarnation and the use by God of bread and wine in the Eucharist are one and the same in that they are both based on a sacramental principle dependent on moderate realism, wherein God chooses to use things of this world in order to show God’s presence, power and very being in the form of Jesus Christ.

The idea of a sacramental universe is found in the modern era as well. John Macquarrie argued that, “perhaps the goal of all sacramentality and sacramental theology is to make the things of this world so transparent that in them and through them we know God’s presence and activity in our very midst, and so experience his grace.”<sup>13</sup>

Macquarrie observes that in such a sacramental universe there is a duality: seen and unseen, material and spiritual, secular and sacred, ordinary and extraordinary, natural and supernatural, subjective and objective. He says that:

we cannot escape the fact that we exist as embodied beings in a material world ... constantly involved in the tension between spiritual and material, soul and body, sacred and secular. To live in these tensions is the condition in which God has placed us, and we must seek the right balance between the polarities.<sup>14</sup>

This is what Macquarrie calls “the sacramental principle” and it is this principle, he argues, which allows us to find the balance between the polarities.<sup>15</sup> Finding the balance requires the need to recognise that the material is created by God and is therefore good. The material is worthy of respect and indeed at a point in time, God chose to manifest the universality of the divine life through the incarnation of Jesus Christ such that God was in human form in space and time. In such a sacramental system, this encounter with God through Christ is continually renewed in the rites of the Church where visible and particular matter is used to instantiate the universality of the divine. The water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist are used by God in this way and indeed are at God’s initiative.

Macquarrie also argues that, “in many religions of the world, matter has been suspect” and is “regarded as the opposite of spirit”. But, for Macquarrie, “the material world ... is the creation of God and was pronounced by him to be good” and this “is reinforced in Christianity by the doctrine of the incarnation, the claim that the Word became flesh.”<sup>16</sup> There is, for those who accept the sacramental principle and the realism on which it is based, an intimate connection between “word” and “sacrament” or “sacramental action”. Sometimes, this has been obscured in Protestant theology and the sacraments have been marginalised while the word is elevated. As Macquarrie says:

In Protestantism generally the Word and the activity of preaching are exalted as the primary functions of the Church, to the neglect of the sacraments. Certainly, the Word and the preaching of the Word should be exalted, and sacraments without the Word tend to degenerate into superstition. But perhaps even greater violence is done to our essential human nature if the Word and the hearing of the Word, that is to say, verbal communication, is isolated from sacramental action.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, *The Works of Lancelot Andrewes*, ed. J.P. Wilson and J. Bliss (Oxford: Parker, 1841-1854), Volume I, 35.

<sup>13</sup> John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (London: SCM, 1997), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> John Macquarrie, ‘Incarnation as Root of the Sacramental Principle’, in *Christ: The Sacramental Word. Incarnation, Sacrament and Poetry* (London: SPCK, 1996), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Macquarrie, ‘Incarnation as Root of the Sacramental Principle’, 30.

Perhaps any imbalance between Word and Sacraments is a product of an imbalance between the transcendence and immanence of God. Post-Reformation theology has tended to stress God's transcendence at the expense of God's immanence and this, in turn, has led to an emphasis on the "spiritual" at the expense of the "material" or the "thing" and for some, a refusal to accept the sacramental principle. Material things have sometimes been seen as evil or lifeless even though God has chosen to use the material so powerfully in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in the sacraments. Temple picks up this same idea when he says that "our argument has led us to the belief in a living God who, because he is such, is *transcendent* over the universe, which owes its origins to his creative act, and which he sustains by his *immanence*."<sup>18</sup> Macquarrie, in an economical and yet profound expression, says: "God is near as well as far."<sup>19</sup> When there is an imbalance between the transcendence and immanence of God, this sometimes causes a suspicion of the immanent sacramental or material "thing" and an elevation of the transcendent word. This elevation of the word is particularly evident in the work of Robert Doyle, who when discussing eucharistic theology, describes a "word ontology" which takes precedence over any form of "sacramental ontology."<sup>20</sup> Catherine Pickstock has described this nominalist separation of sign and signified as an approach to sacramental theology functioning as "a textual calculus of the real" where such a world is "disposed to treat words as capital."<sup>21</sup> Such an approach denies the existence of a sacramental universe and the moderate realist philosophical assumptions on which it is based.

Perhaps this suspicion of things and subsequent rejection of the sacramental principle and the notion of a sacramental universe is more related to the way modern people perceive "things". "Things" are typically seen as real and solid material objects located in time and space and this sometimes suggests that "things" are separate entities without any real relationship between things, what is described above as nominalism. A sacramental view of the world, however, suggests that the meaning of "things" is not found in merely giving them a name but is to be found in the context of properties and relations, what is referred to above as realism.<sup>22</sup> In a realist sacramental view, God uses material things, such as water or bread and wine, to instantiate, that is, be an instance of, the presence, power and substance of God. Realism is implicit in a sacramental worldview and a sacramental universe. God's being is to be found in the sacraments in such a way that material things are not only signs but instances of the deeper reality of God. This immanence of God does not however imply that God is identical with the world or material things in a way described above as immoderate realism. To accept such an immoderate realist analysis would be to accept pantheism wherein God is seen to be identical with nature, thus taking a position of fleshy realism.<sup>23</sup> Such an immoderate realist view has generally been denied by the Christian tradition. Aquinas, for example, specifically denied any local or fleshy presence of Christ in the Eucharist, arguing that:

The body of Christ is not in this sacrament in the way that a body is in place. The dimensions of a body correspond with the dimensions of the place that contains it. Christ's body is here in a special way that is proper to this sacrament. For this reason we say that the body of Christ is on many altars, not as in

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<sup>18</sup> Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 473.

<sup>19</sup> Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Doyle, "Word and Sacrament in catholic and evangelical theology", in *Who May Celebrate? Boundaries of Anglican Order. A Second Publication of the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod on the Identity of the Eucharistic President or Administrant of Holy Communion*, ed. Ivan Head (Sydney: The Standing Committee of General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia, 1996), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, 3 and 10.

<sup>22</sup> See the work of David Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 94

<sup>23</sup> See Douglas and Lovat, 'The Integrity of Discourse', 857.

different places, but as in the sacrament. In saying this we do not mean that Christ is only symbolically there, although it is true to say that every sacrament is a sign; but we understand that Christ's body is there, as we have said, in a way that is proper to this sacrament.<sup>24</sup>

For Aquinas, and for others who accept the notion of a sacramental universe, God is not identical with nature or present in an immoderate realist sense, but present nonetheless, with the presence, being and grace of God known in natural things and through human capacity to respond in faith.

## ROWAN WILLIAMS AND A SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE

Rowan Williams makes valuable contributions to the idea that we live in a sacramental universe and follows on from Macquarrie's suggestion that it is necessary to seek a balance between the polarities. He puts the argument that what makes sacraments distinct is what they are *for*, that is, following Aquinas, sacraments are for making human beings holy. The uniqueness of Christian sacraments is not so much about their "doing" but in the uniqueness of Jesus in his dying and rising.<sup>25</sup> Williams moves away from the older idea of "things" being sacred objects instantiated in nature, as is seen in the work of Temple and Macquarrie, and more towards sacramental "action", where things and people are made new.

Humans, he argues, are irreducibly bound up with language and culture and, as a result, are also concerned with what he calls "transformative action", where "there is action, the making of new things."<sup>26</sup> This implies *praxis*, where the world is constantly augmented by what is said and done, and where "the world that is thus all the time being brought into the circle of human meaningfulness does not stand still."<sup>27</sup> This has realist connotations in the sense of living in a sacramental world. Williams goes on to argue that:

what at first might seem to be labelled objects and no more themselves come to be meaningful; they point us to other things, other situations, they become part of what we say. And what we do with a 'thing' thus activated to point to something else becomes part of what the next speaker-agent has to work on. ... We work on our world in what seems an insatiable desire for new perception and new possibilities of action.<sup>28</sup>

These realist implications become even more apparent when Williams speaks of signs and how they function. He says, that as humans, "we make signs, and make ourselves through signs"<sup>29</sup> since "humanity without the making of sign and form is nothing" because "of the fact that we are bodily" and because signs "are intrinsic to our actual thinking and living as bodies."<sup>30</sup> All this, he says, is "universally predicated of the Logos" because "it is natural for human beings to know ideal structures and spiritual matters only through sense-objects."<sup>31</sup> Signs then function in the way that the Logos functions in the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, and so "ideal structures" and "spiritual matters" are known through material objects that are known through the senses. As the Logos is instantiated in the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, so material objects instantiate universals and this is in the nature of a sacrament. Signs therefore are "the means of coming to the knowledge of someone or

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, (ed. William Barden) (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964) 3a, 75.1, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 197.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 197.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 198.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 198-199.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 199-200.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 200.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 200.

something other than ourselves” and since this “other” “is supremely alien to the everyday world, yet not in any way an identifiable reality in competition with it” then “it can only be shown or signified materially.”<sup>32</sup> This is a moderate realist philosophical assumption, where sign and signified are linked, one which resonates with the other thinkers cited above, such as Andrewes, Temple and Macquarrie, but which moves the debate to a new level. Indeed, Williams sees this realist assumption as the way to proceed since:

if we try to signify God and his work by resorting to abstract expression, talking about minds and ideas in a vacuum, we dangerously forget what *we* are (flesh and blood, timebound) and create a phantom world of pseudo-objects alongside our own familiar one.<sup>33</sup>

God, argues Williams, is not like a phantom or, “pseudo” world since God is more radical, “and it is only by speaking and engaging with the material world in a particular way that we come to express truly and respond properly to the real otherness of God.”<sup>34</sup> This means that “being human, being bodily and being a user of ‘signs’ are inseparable.”<sup>35</sup> It is precisely for this reason that Williams casts doubt on the idea that the world is naturally sacramental or epiphanic, since “something invoked as a prelude to sacramental theology, will run the risk of obscuring the fact that signs and symbols are *made*” that is, “that sign-making is a material and historical practice.”<sup>36</sup> This conclusion provides new depth for sacramental theology and for the idea that we live in a sacramental universe and helps to balance the work of the other Anglican thinkers cited above. For Williams, the symbolic forms which are part of realist assumptions:

are not just lying around, nor are they thought up as arbitrary glosses on straightforward experience of the world; they are what we live through as humans – as beings capable of recalling and re-moulding what is given us, taking it forward and so re-moulding ourselves, the horizons of our understanding and our hope.<sup>37</sup>

## SACRAMENTALITY AND THE PARADOX OF DIFFERENCE

Williams’ theology of the Eucharist is at some distance from what Temple or Macquarrie might call the “sacramental principle” or the “sacramental universe”. The sacramental principle, argues Williams, operates on the understanding that we recognise the divine presence in all things. This is view of the poet George Herbert explored above. Rather, for Williams it is “that the divine presence is apprehended by seeing in all things their difference, their particularity, their ‘not-God-ness’, since we have learned what the divine action is in the renunciation of Christ, his giving himself into inanimate form.”<sup>38</sup>

It is the paradox of difference that underpins the moderate realist assumptions of Williams and which at the same time avoids the fleshy and local problems of any immoderate realism. Sign is not strictly identical to signified, each having its own particularity: bread and wine and body and blood of Christ and yet the one, that is, the sign, instantiates the other, the signified. It is exactly this difference in particularity that distinguishes moderate and immoderate realism.

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<sup>32</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 200.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 200-201.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 200.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 200.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 201.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 218.

Williams is not alone in his reflections. Sue Patterson has twin concerns: the nature of theology and the nature of reality, where the issue that links them both is the role of language.<sup>39</sup> She examines realism in relation to Christian theology, arguing that:

Theological realists ... regard theology as having a scientific character in that, like scientific observation and theory-building, it is governed by its object. The being of God reflected in contingent creaturely being has an intrinsic rationality which the human knower comes to know in the same way that he or she comes to know worldly reality – that is, by ‘grasping it in its depths’ through participating in the given (revealed) structures of its being. This approach, therefore, asserts a universal rationality that is in the first place divine and in the second place, contingently, cosmic or worldly. The argument is that our concepts become true concepts as they come to be coordinated with the rational structure of reality (whether divine or worldly) through our indwelling of that reality.<sup>40</sup>

Patterson’s view presents an inherent realism as she speaks of the “intrinsic rationality” of the human knower, operating as the science of critical reflection. Such critical reflection occurs as a person knows and grasps reality in its depths. For Patterson there is something universal about this process of knowing, where, “realist theology asserts that Christian truth claims only make sense if they correspond to an extra-linguistic reality beyond inherited traditions of belief and practice and the claims of human religious experience.”<sup>41</sup> There is also an inherent acknowledgement of universals here, that is, entities which exist beyond language, traditions and religious experience. Patterson goes on to say that: “On this realist reckoning, the dynamic and innovative character of Christian thought and practice is a function of its participation in a reality transcendent of human formulations” and then continues to compare this with what she calls the ‘revisionist view’ where Christian thought “is a function of (‘classic’ text enabled) engagement with the ‘limit-character of common human experience’ through which we encounter and are able to interpret divine transcendence.”<sup>42</sup> This seems to be a clear distancing of the discussion from the idea of an exclusive plausibility for any nominalist analysis and a suggestion that such textual analysis alone is insufficient as a base for theological reflection in a postmodern age.

The type of classic text enabled structures to which Patterson refers is akin to the kind of hermeneutic interest or the textual determination of reality and its appropriation found within a particular tradition.<sup>43</sup> Such a hermeneutic interest is often found in particular church parties of the Anglican tradition, where a textual calculus and words function to determine meaning without adequate attention to critical and reflective interests.<sup>44</sup>

Patterson goes on to argue that Christians sometimes couch their beliefs in terms of their allegiance to certain views and that any interpretation of reality is often in line with these views. She says that, “inevitably, then, hermeneutics will be done from some position of commitment to certain beliefs ... so that to employ a so-called general hermeneutic will be simply to operate from some faith position other than the one upon which the hermeneutic is being brought to bear.”<sup>45</sup> For Patterson it seems, “there is reality outside of texts and their interpreting traditions, a reality which awaits conversion to the text and the tradition, but

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<sup>39</sup> Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian*, 55.

<sup>43</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> See Douglas and Lovat, ‘The Integrity of Discourse’, 857-858.

<sup>45</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 55.

which itself brings aspects of itself in a dialectical encounter with the special revelation.”<sup>46</sup> This is suggestive of a critical and reflective interest that has moderate realist philosophical assumptions. Patterson explains this more fully in relation to signs and how they work, saying:

For when we adopt something, sensible or intelligible, as a sign for something else our attention does not rest upon the sign but on what it indicates or points to: it is, so to speak, a transparent medium through which we operate. That is to say, the natural orientation of the human mind is, in this sense at least, quite ‘realist’. Accordingly, a sign, if it is to do its job properly, must be to some extent arbitrary, detached from the signified, incomplete or discrepant, or it will be confused with the things it is supposed to be representing. On the other hand, a complete arbitrariness in which the sign has ‘no natural bearing on the reality for which it is said to stand’ renders it ‘semantically useless’. In other words, it is necessary to be able to distinguish between sign and signified, but not to the extent that the connection is purely arbitrary. ... A middle way must be trodden between nominalism and the idealist consequence of the total substitution of concept for object, which is the logical conclusion for correspondence.<sup>47</sup>

Patterson in rejecting both nominalism and immoderate realism helps to do what Macquarrie has suggested, that is, to find the balance between the polarities which leads to the idea of a sacramental universe founded on moderate realist assumptions. Immoderate realism is rejected by the suggestion that the sign must in some way be detached from the signified, thus preventing the sign being strictly or numerically identical with the signified. Nominalism is rejected since the sign cannot be completely arbitrary in such a way that the sign and the signified become self-enclosed and separated entities. The talk of the sign being “a transparent medium” which “indicates or points” to the signified suggests moderate realism. Immoderate realism is excluded in the discussion of the sign being “detached” from the signified. If the sign is not detached from the signified then it is confused with the thing it is representing. This detachment of sign and signified is though, not purely arbitrary, since such nominalism renders the sign useless. The middle way that Patterson is seeking here appears to be moderate realism. Patterson’s work in rejecting strict identity and opting for what she calls “a middle way” can be assisted by the more rigorous philosophical analysis of moderate realism as can any consideration of a sacramental universe. Strict identity between universal and particular is of course not possible in a moderate realist analysis, but this, as David Armstrong suggests does not limit the strictly identical nature of the universal in its different instantiations in the same moderate realist analysis.<sup>48</sup>

Patterson argues further that in Christian theology:

We cannot avoid correspondence in the realism required by Christianity, but it is not the correspondence we thought it was. We are talking, rather, of a correspondence between God’s world-under-God’s-description and a regenerated, redeemed world-under-human-description. The name and the means of the correspondence is incarnation, where this is taken to embrace the whole of human history and rationality, including its eschatological judgment and fulfilment. Its method of verification is revelation.<sup>49</sup>

The incarnation functions in Patterson’s analysis, as it does in the earlier work of Lancelot Andrewes, in a moderate realist way, where the incarnate Christ corresponds to the divine reality, but in a moderate realist way by loose rather than strict correspondence. David Armstrong argues for this distinction between the “strict identity” of immoderate realism and “loose or popular identity” of moderate realism. For Armstrong, “Strict identity is governed by a principle that is called *Indiscernibility of Identicals*. This says that if *a* is strictly

<sup>46</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27-28.

<sup>49</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology*, 27.

identical with *b*, then *a* and *b* have exactly the same properties. Sameness of thing gives sameness of properties.”<sup>50</sup> Identity, Armstrong argues, may also be described in the “loose sense”, that is moderate realism. Something can therefore be “the same”, in the loose sense, without being “the same thing”, in the strict sense.<sup>51</sup> Armstrong says that: “there are two senses of the word “same”, one strict, classical, identity, and the other a looser sense of the word.”<sup>52</sup> Moderate realists, as Armstrong terms them, are those who argue for this loose sense of identity, whereas immoderate or Platonic realists argue that being the same implies a strict identity.<sup>53</sup> To put this in theological terms, the incarnate Christ instantiates Christ’s identity of nature. Patterson helps here, arguing as follows:

Christian theology’s internal logic is such that it is required to be realist, in that its self-consistency requires the upholding of certain central truth claims. However, while on a realist view physical reality has an existence independent of our cultural and linguistic structuring, this view must reckon with the postmodern insight that language (and the language-user) has for good or for bad the power to construct a reality which is also an integral component of the universe, and that both construction and discovery are not only inevitable and inherent in human linguisticity, but also inevitably partial, flawed, perverse and idolatrous.<sup>54</sup>

For Patterson there is a correspondence element inherent in realism, as opposed to anti-realism and nominalism. This implies for Patterson that, “the World under human description seeks verification and redemption in terms of the world under God’s description, that is, in the person of Jesus Christ who is the incarnate meeting place of divine and creaturely reality.”<sup>55</sup> At the same time however, Patterson is acknowledging that for some, such realism is not a viable option, and that meaning is to be found, for such people, in a reality constructed in human linguisticity, that is, where there is a nominalist separation of sign and signified and a dependence on semantic propositionalism. Evidence of both realism and nominalism in the Anglican eucharistic tradition seems to accord with this view.<sup>56</sup> There are those who adopt a realist position in relation to the Eucharist, linking sign and signified, and those who adopt a nominalist position, separating sign and signified.

Williams and Patterson have made the important point that difference, as well as sameness, is vital to any understanding of the sacramental universe. Both difference and sameness, like transcendence and immanence, and word and sacrament, need to be held in balance if an adequate sacramental theology expressing a notion of a sacramental universe is to be achieved. If the link between the sign and what it signifies is made too strongly, thereby lessening the difference between the two, then the focus becomes one of the sacralised and immobilised empirical object found in immoderate realism, the emphasis is on the bread and wine and their offering in the Eucharist, and not the sign-making which has the power of transformation and emancipation for the people of God. If the link between the sign and the signified is broken by an overdependence on semantic propositionalism then the inherent realism of Christian theology ceases to function and so the idea of a sacramental universe no longer operates. Williams provides a valuable corrective to the often expressed and accepted idea that we live in a sacramental universe and that God chooses to work through the material in what is known as the sacramental principle. He does this by describing signs in action as *praxis* with an educative function and by moving away from the idea that the sacramental

<sup>50</sup> David Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>53</sup> Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, 31-32.

<sup>55</sup> Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> See Brian Douglas, *Anglican Eucharistic Theology*, An online website of case studies, at: [http://web.mac.com/brian.douglas/Anglican\\_Eucharistic\\_Theology/Welcome.html](http://web.mac.com/brian.douglas/Anglican_Eucharistic_Theology/Welcome.html). Accessed 29 August, 2010.

universe is merely the static sacred object just lying around. Patterson also helps in clarifying the balance between theology and realism.

### SACRAMENTALITY AS EDUCATION FOR EMANCIPATION

In Williams' thinking, the Eucharist has both an educative and emancipatory function, such that a person, as part of a eucharistic community, comes to know more about the self and, in so knowing, is taken forward and re-moulded. This means that not only do we make signs but we make ourselves through signs. It is in the making of the sign that we know ourselves and it is in the knowing of self that we are truly emancipated. This argument resonates with David Holeton's views in the papers presented as part of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation<sup>57</sup> where he argues that the Eucharist is at the heart of Anglican life, both in terms of its theory and practice. Holeton argues that the Eucharist is the fulfilment of the *koinōnia*<sup>58</sup> we share as a Christian community, and Williams supports this, conceptualising the history of particular communities as "a history of sign-making – in that it is a record of how communities 'make sense' of themselves in the words and practices they evolve."<sup>59</sup> It is in this sense that the Eucharist and its signs have meaning, such that the "particular 'signs' in which the identity of the specific group is stated, reflected on and communicated, tacitly or explicitly"<sup>60</sup> express the ethos and the culture of the group.

This whole idea connects with the notion of the Eucharist functioning as education for emancipation, such that people are free to know more of themselves in the community of which they are part. This is so since Christ as sacrament "means in practice an authoritative and creative freedom, whose effects slowly break the mould of the existing Israel, so that the life of God's people under law can now be read as a sign not only of God but of the *new* work of God in Jesus and the Church."<sup>61</sup> Linear models of education ("the existing Israel") are surpassed by the freedom which the eucharistic community brings in "an ultimate intimacy between God and his people, a radicalising and consummation (and therefore revolutionary modification) of the covenant bond."<sup>62</sup> In such a scheme, Christ "is the sign both of the active pressure and creative grace of God."<sup>63</sup> Christ is therefore not just a "thing" and so Christ instantiates by himself being "sign", the nature of God's active and creative grace, which means that:

Christ proclaims the imperatives of the kingdom, realizes them in his life and death, and so begins to make the possible community actual in the post-Easter experience of his followers. He is thus an effective sign, a converting sign.<sup>64</sup>

This happens not in some empty ritual, but in the *praxis* of the Church. Williams argues that: it is not the fact of doing sacramental things that is special, humanly or religiously, but what the Church signifies in doing these things – the new covenant and new creation in the life, death and

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<sup>57</sup> David Holeton, *Our Thanks and Praise. The Eucharist in Anglicanism Today. Papers from the Fifth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation* (Toronto, Ontario: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Koinōnia* is the Greek word for 'communion' or 'intimate participation' which is frequently found in the New Testament to describe the life of the Christian community. See John 6: 48-69; Matthew 26: 26-28; 1 Corinthians 10: 16; 1 Corinthians 11: 24.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 201.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 201.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 204.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 204-205.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 205.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 205.

raising of Jesus. In these acts the Church ‘makes sense’ of itself, as other groups may do, and as individuals do; but its ‘sense’ is seen as dependent on the creative act of God in Christ.<sup>65</sup>

*Praxis*, in allowing the Church and individuals to “make sense”, is important for Williams since it is in this educative process that people are emancipated to be the people God is making them. It is, he argues:

perhaps because we are so generally inept at recognising that the meaning of our acts and relations rests, moment by moment, on God’s creative grace that we so readily end up in bad-tempered confrontations of a singularly unproductive sort over ‘what we do’ and ‘what he does’ in the sacraments – as if ... the purely spiritual and divine could be thought of as something side by side with the material and human.<sup>66</sup>

## SACRAMENTALITY AND MODERATE REALISM

Williams’ line of thought suggests that education, in the sense of emancipation, seeks to establish general principles, rather than the maintenance of particular traditions proceeding in a linear sense. *Praxis* is what people do with the signs and the sense they make by use of them, and this has the potential to allow people to “make sense”. For Williams, this “making sense” by use of the signs functions using the general principle of realism, since it is the sign that embodies or instantiates the signified in a way that embraces a sacramental principle.

What Williams is arguing here is moderate realism. He rejects the idea of the immobilised sacred object, which has the potential to remove from the sacramental bread and wine their worldly reality in order to make room for the supernatural, thereby destroying the idea of sign in action. The nature of a sacrament, as Williams sees it and presumably as he sees the sense of Article XXVIII in the 1662 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*,<sup>67</sup> is the tension of the sign remaining worldly but, at the same time, communicating the “other”, that is, the signified, in the Eucharist.

Williams also rejects the idea of lifting the faithful to another world in the Eucharist. He says that: “God acts in emptiness by bringing resurrection and transforming union, not by lifting us to ‘another world’.”<sup>68</sup> This seems to be opposed to some Reformation theologies of the Eucharist. Thomas Cranmer’s idea of raising heart and mind heavenward in the Eucharist and there to experience the presence of Christ, is aimed at also denying any realism related to material signs on earth in the Eucharist.<sup>69</sup> Cranmer’s ideas seem to move away from a sacramental world to embrace a heavenly and spiritual experience in another world. Williams rejects that view. The nature of sacrament, for Williams, is in this world and in sign-making in this world, not in too closely linking sign and signified as immobilised objects in this world (immoderate or fleshy realism) or in separating sign and signified out of this world (nominalism). He concludes by saying that:

The hope of the world becoming other is anchored, in the Christian sacraments, by the conviction that all human significant action arises from the primordial action, the art and sign, of a God committed to drawing our lives into the order of healing and communication, who brings things gratuitously into existence, and, no less, gratuitously, renews them and saves them from vacuity and decay. He makes the world, in Christ, to be his ‘sign’ a form of living and acting that embodies his nature and purpose.

<sup>65</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 205.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 205.

<sup>67</sup> *Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1662).

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 207.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Cranmer, ‘An Answer to a Crafty and Sophistical Cavillation devised by Stephen Gardiner, in *Writings and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer, relative to the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper*, ( ed. J.E. Cox) (Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1551/1844), 317.

Christian sign-making – in the whole of the community’s discipleship as in ritual acts – is a working in and with that creative energy. The world is made so as to be everlastingly re-made to God’s glory, and of their sure hope our sacraments speak. The material history of creation is not waste, no persons or transaction, public or private, can finally fall out of God’s purpose. God’s ‘sense’ for the world – which is, as the sacraments themselves intimate, not explanation or justification but eternal renewal, transfiguration.<sup>70</sup>

Williams’ achievement has been to put a case for moderate realism and to argue the case for the nature of sacraments being sign-making, where Christ, the eternal, universal and primordial sign as Logos, becomes part of people’s sign-making in the Eucharist and in the self-reflective process that allows people to know themselves and to be emancipated in the context of both community and their own individuality. The Eucharist therefore is an educative process of emancipation, where people learn about themselves and the way God works in the world. Williams’ emphasis on *praxis*, where sign-making functions in the actions of the people of God and the actions of God, has important educational ramifications for any acceptance of a sacramental principle and sacramental universe, recognising the essential realist link between ecclesial and sacramental notions. Sacramental theology does not just exist in theory nor in an ethereal or heavenly sphere, but in the action of God and people in sign-making. What people do in their sign-making is an integral part of the way God works sacramentally in the world and the way people come to know themselves and others.

Specifically concerning the Eucharist, Williams continues his development of this idea and proposes that:

we are dealing with narratives or dramas of transition. The eucharist recollects an event already complex, already ‘doubled’ – the Last Supper interpreted as a sign of Jesus’ death and its effects, or, from the other end, the death of Jesus metaphorized as a breaking and sharing of bread. The central transition here ... is a death, a death here presented as a passage (once again) into new solidarities: the wine poured out as a sign of the shedding of blood is the mark of a *covenant* being made, on the analogy of God’s covenant with Israel.<sup>71</sup>

It is the presenting of the death of Jesus in new solidarities, such as bread and wine in the Eucharist, that marks Williams’ ideas out as realist. The signs instantiate the signified, where “the material elements of bread and wine are to be made holy by the prayer that associates them with the flesh and blood of Jesus.”<sup>72</sup> For Williams, however, this is “not simply a natural or obvious unity,”<sup>73</sup> that is, immoderate or fleshy realism. Rather:

it is effected or uncovered by a particular act, a particular word in the history of revelation. Jesus ‘passes over’ into the symbolic forms of his own word and gestures, a transition into the vulnerable and inactive forms of the inanimate world. By resigning himself into the signs of food and drink, putting himself into the hands of other agents, he signifies his forthcoming helplessness and death. He announces his death by ‘signing’ himself as a thing, to be handled and consumed. This *further* level of transition is the most basic and the most disturbing here: the passage into the community of those who trust God’s faithfulness is effected by God in Christ passing from action into passion; the act of new creation is an act of utter withdrawal. Death is the beginning of the new order, and this divine dispossession points back to questions about the very nature of the creative act itself, as more like renunciation than dominance. Jesus giving himself over into the hands of the disciples anticipates his own *being given over*, his betrayal.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 207-208.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 214.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 215.

<sup>73</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 215.

<sup>74</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 215-216.

The nature of Christ “passes over” into the signs and into the actions of the Eucharist. Christ, as sacrament, surrenders self in these outward ways, “passing over” into them as a sign of his signified passion and death. Furthermore, he “passes over” into the ecclesial community so that this community becomes a new creation and a new order. This is “an insight about materiality” where:

the material creation itself can appear as the sign of the divine renunciation: the processes of the world have their integrity, their difference from God, and God’s purposes is effected in this difference, not in unilateral divine control, just as the saving work of Christ comes to completion in a renunciation, a surrender of control.<sup>75</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At the heart of the notion of the sacramental universe is the realist notion that sacraments are not created by people but by God. God takes the initiative and is mediated through material signs. God seeks us before we seek God. Since the sacraments are God’s initiative, we humans cannot manipulate them as if they were some sort of magic. We do not produce the encounter with God through faith or through human action, such as the power of a priest. Sacraments cannot be used to summon God into our presence.

The sacramental universe is dependent on the philosophical assumptions of moderate realism where sign and signified function as much according to difference as they do according to sameness. For those who advocate a sacramental universe, material things are seen to instantiate the presence, power and being of God in a real way. God’s very being is to be found in the sacraments, not in some carnal or immoderate realist fashion, not it seems in the dry lucidity of semantic propositionalism but as a deeper, more moderate reality that balances the presence of God as both near and far and where signs and sign-making function to help people find meaning within their own experience of God and themselves.

The idea of sacramental universe is well established in Anglican thinking however some modern Anglican theologians such as Williams and Patterson have helped to move the discussion past the notion of sacralised static and epiphanic “things” to a more dynamic notion of signs, where the action of Christ involves the making of new things and where this rethought idea of a sacramental universe is firmly based on a moderate realist analysis.

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<sup>75</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 217.