

## *Preface*

The Eucharist has always been mysterious to me. As a Jewish child, nothing in my tradition could prepare me for such a ritual. The *separation* between the Creator and his Creation is the fundamental tenet of Judaism.<sup>1</sup> God may have spoken, but in disembodied words. God may have molded man, but man could not mold God. The divine was utterly unimaginable and to create any image was the ultimate idolatry. Maimonides, among others, inveighed against naïve readings of the Bible that took anthropomorphism literally. As for God, “He gives orders without appearing” as a contemporary philosopher wryly observed.<sup>2</sup> Certainly God does not manifest himself in bread, does not give himself to man to be materially ingested.

And yet, I also knew that the Eucharist was the heart of Christianity: it was taking communion that made my Christian friends Christian, and taking communion that even created the Church itself. How did that happen? I wanted to understand how a wafer could become God. Passover offered little help, for the matzoh we ate to commemorate the Exodus was neither God, nor Moses or Elijah—it was only bread that was flat because the ancient Israelites had to flee before it had time to rise. Flat bread becoming God, and for that matter, God becoming man—this was completely different.

My fascination prompted me to attend Mass now and then, but when it came to communion, I would leave church inconspicuously (or so I imagined). And then one wet Sunday in London, alone and free of obligations, I seized the opportunity to attend services at St Giles at Cripple-gate, the church John Milton attended (when he attended) and his burial place. Doubtless, I thought I would be communing with the soul of the poet who has engaged so much of my imaginative life. I encountered,

however, another communion. Singing hymns his father had composed, and wondering how Milton, that iconoclastic “sect of one,” felt about joining in any communal ritual he did not invent himself, I heard my own voice blending with the other voices in the congregation, and I distinctly felt the comforts of community.

Until communion. When the priest invited everyone to forge the mystical body of God by partaking of the body and blood of Christ together, to accept the invitation Christ himself offered at the last supper to “take, eat, and do this in remembrance of me,” my fellow feelings dissipated with the awareness that I could not join. But why not, I asked myself? No one here will prevent me, no one knows me, knows that I am Jewish, and as far as my faith is concerned, I need not bother myself too much, for I could take communion as a scholar of ritual, adopting an anthropological pose. And so, instead of electing to stay behind in my pew while everyone filed past me toward the altar, I resolved to join the movement forward. But while I gave my limbs the command to stand and walk, they did not move. Frozen and embarrassed, I began to reassure myself that I was neither sinner nor convert, but someone who simply wanted to join. I tried again, loath to interrupt my spiritual communion by failing to complete that last ritual gesture, but again I was unable to move.

What had happened? Did my terror that Yahweh would strike me down for committing idolatry overcome me? Oh yes. Did I fear that my anthropological experiment was disrespectful of others’ meaningful experience? Indeed. Was I afraid that if I ate Christ’s body, I would turn into a Christian? That too. But clarification of my inability to take communion only emerged during the years I worked on this study. Then, on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, it came. There, I had another opportunity to take communion among dear friends in the small chapel at Ignatius Loyola’s house that we visited during our journey. A private Mass had been arranged for our group. This time, I did not fear the wrath of an ancient Israelite deity nor did I have any reason to question my respect for communion or the gravity of my intentions. Indeed, they were so serious that the priest and I had discussed the question of my taking communion at considerable length. But that day began with my visit to Guernica where harrowing visions of human violence cry out from museums and memorials; so, when the priest spoke movingly of Christ’s sacrifice, I was haunted by the specter of war victims, including my own ancestors.

On that day I knew that I could not take communion because the world was not yet redeemed. When I explained to the priest that if ever justice reigns, then I will surely be able to take in the body of the Lord, he nodded sadly, so sadly. It is, therefore, with genuine sympathy for those who felt real hunger for the real presence, the sacramental presence of the Lord, that I try to heed the responses of Reformation poets. Rather than import an Enlightenment arch-secularism back to a time when the sacramental world view was challenged, that is, rather than offer another reading of the cultural productions of the Reformation through post-Reformation secular lenses (that celebrate reason as liberation from the bondage of human superstition), I try to listen to the many people who believed that human pain was the legacy of Adam's sin, that human nature was first made in the image of God and subsequently tarnished, and that only the sacrifice of God could restore it. I want to be attentive to how deeply felt the loss of God was in a world once believed to be filled with "the glory of the Lord."<sup>3</sup>

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