

Theology of Disclosure and Eucharistic Revelations?

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This paper focuses on the phenomenologically oriented philosophy and theology of Robert Sokolowski – with a particular emphasis on his assessment of the Eucharist. The central topic of the discussion is centered around Sokolowski's notion of a Theology of Disclosure as a phenomenological method, as well as the question of how the Eucharist can be an integral part of revelation.

1. Theology of Disclosure – a Phenomenological Method

Sokolowski sets out to introduce a unique type of theology that he believes is well-suited for addressing theological matters in the present era. He refers to this approach as 'The Theology of Disclosure' or in a similar manner 'The Theology of Manifestation'. He advocates for complementing the existing forms of theological inquiry, namely the positive and the speculative¹, with the Theology of Disclosure. Sokolowski points out that next to speculative and positive theology, there is not only room but even need for a third and new form of theological thinking: the reflection of how Christian 'things,' which are taught by the Church and described by speculative theology, *appear*; – i. e., how they *manifest themselves*. This is, according to Sokolowski, a genuine form of reflection because it investigates the specific structures of the appearance of Christian 'things.' It is concerned with the general and essential way of how Christian 'things' are disclosed to us as *Christian* 'things'.²

Thus, it is about the fundamental and context-independent form and structures of manifestation:

“The Theology of Disclosure examines structures of disclosure; it describes the forms of manifestation proper to Christian things. It tries to describe how Christian things must display themselves, in keeping what they are, and how they must distinguish themselves from things

¹ Sokolowski provides the following descriptions for these two existing forms of theological Thinking: “Positive theology attempts to show how the articles of faith are found and developed in Scripture and Tradition; it also attempts to formulate the truths of Revelation in contemporary terms. [...] [I]t tries to shed light on these truths by discussing the historical context in which they have been presented to us, and it also tries to formulate them again in terms appropriate to our own context. [...] Speculative theology attempts to [...] provide an ordered and comprehensive understanding of these truths, using distinctions, definitions, causal explanations, and analogies. [...] Its primary task is to reflect on God, his divine nature and attributes, and his actions in the world” (*Robert Sokolowski*, Eucharistic Presence. A Study in the Theology of Disclosure, Washington DC 1994, 5 f.).

² Cf. *ibid.*, 6 f.

that resemble them and with which they may be confused. [...] [I]t is concerned with essential structures of disclosure, which would hold in all times and places [...].”³

For this form of theology to be a study of appearance, it must use phenomenological methods because phenomenology is the study of appearance. In contrast, studying appearance is not just some sort of mental activity that cannot reach the ‘thing itself,’ rather it investigates how things display themselves to us who are the addressees of the display, which offers a genuine source of insight into the reality of things. Since phenomenology is not merely psychological, the Theology of Disclosure is not a merely psychological study of religious experience. Instead, it claims to bring something genuine and objective to light.⁴ To understand the Theology of Disclosure as an apt and complementary method of how faith is seeking understanding, we must first show what a phenomenological access has to offer, then justify why it is apt to serve as a method of inquiry for theological issues.

Phenomenology is a specific philosophical method introduced in the work of Edmund Husserl.⁵ It is concerned with the appearance of things and investigates differences in appearance or the manner of presentation – in Sokolowski’s words: “Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience.”⁶ So, phenomenology is centered around the term ‘intentionality’ and focuses on the insight that every conscious act and every experience is intentional. This means there is no contentless or objectless conscious act but always a consciousness of something or an experience of something:

“If I see, I see some visual object, such as a tree or a lake; if I imagine, my imagining presents an imaginary object, such as a car I visualize coming down a road; if I am involved in remembering, I remember a past object; if I am engaged in judging, I intend a state of affairs or a fact. Every act of consciousness, every experience, is correlated with an object. Every intending has its intended object.”⁷

So ‘intending,’ in the phenomenological understanding, does not mean to have a certain purpose in mind but indicates a conscious relationship one has to an object. The mind is not a closed enclave, which can somehow reach out to the (delimited) world, rather the mind operates publicly and is correlated with the world: Things are truly disclosed to us, and at the same time, we disclose ourselves to ourselves and to others. The phenomenological reflection discovers not only that consciousness is always intentional but also that intentionality is structured in different ways, which can be described as follows:

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 7 f.

⁵ Sokolowski refers mainly to Husserl for his account of Phenomenology.

⁶ *Id.*, Introduction to Phenomenology, Cambridge 2000, 2.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

“There are different kinds of intending, correlated with different kinds of objects. For example, we carry out perceptual intentions when we see an ordinary material object, but we must intend pictorially when we see a photograph or a painting. We must change our intentionality.”⁸

Sokolowski underlines that, in order to understand phenomenology, we must distinguish two forms of attitudes: the natural attitude as the original intentional perspective we have ‘on the world’ and the phenomenological or transcendental attitude as a reflection of the natural attitude and our basic intentionality. In our everyday life, we are usually caught up with many things, which are given to us in various manners of presentation. So, in our natural attitude (which includes many different attitudes and viewpoints of our ordinary life), we are occupied with identifying all sorts of things. Thereby we have a fundamental conviction that guides our natural attitude: that of belief or trust. This means nothing else but that we simply accept the things in the world and the world itself as given. Belief is the way in which we are intuitively and spontaneously correlated with the intended objects. This is the necessary basis for having other intentions like doubt or suspicion.⁹

This insight into one fundamental structure of the natural attitude is already accomplished in the phenomenological attitude because it is completely disengaged from the natural attitude: “From the phenomenological viewpoint, we look at and describe, analytically, all the particular intentionalities and their correlates, and world belief as well, with the world as its correlative.”¹⁰ To do this, we must make a phenomenological reduction to neutralize the intentionality we are examining. If we suspend our belief, we can analyze the correlation between mind and world, between intentions and intended object. Thereby the focus is not just on subjective intentionalities, but also on the object and how it manifests itself in our natural attitude.¹¹

How can this form of philosophical thinking be transferred to theology? Sokolowski attempts the Theology of Disclosure to reflect how things in the Christian faith come to light and how they are presented to us. His aim is to get to the essential structures of disclosure and appearance that are proper to Christian things and to investigate the correlation between intentions and intended objects regarding faith, church life, and teaching. This allows us, according to Sokolowski, to recognize more deeply the things that are revealed to us.¹²

So, if phenomenology is the appropriate method of investigation, one might wonder what the research object of the Theology of Disclosure actually is. Sokolowski refers to so-called ‘Christian things’ and ‘Christian realities,’ which are also the object of investigation for so-called speculative theology. Nevertheless, in the context of the Theology of

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 42–46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 49–51.

¹² Cf. *id.*, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding. Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person*, Washington DC 2006, 115.

Disclosure, not the 'nature' of these things is crucial but their specific *appearance* and distinctive *manifestation* as *Christian* things.

However, we have to clarify what actually is meant by the term 'Christian things' and 'Christian realities.' For instance, the articles of faith, church life, etc., are typical 'Christian things,' but to understand clearly what a 'Christian thing' or a 'Christian reality' is, one must be aware of the so-called 'Christian Distinction.' It was in his Book *The God of Faith and Reason*¹³ when Sokolowski coined the phrase 'Christian Distinction.' Sokolowski argues that the Christian understanding of God and the distinctiveness of Christian faith is related to a fundamental distinction, i. e. the distinction between God and the world, whereby God is the absolutely free, transcendent, and independent creator. Sokolowski explains that the specific way creation has to be seen through the lenses of Christian faith discloses an understanding of the divine, which cannot be achieved by pagan religions or natural theology or philosophy. Instead, the absolute dependence of the world on God's creative choice of love, classically expressed with the term *creatio ex nihilo*, refers to a God who is primary to everything, even to the distinction between world and God, and, thus, indeed not in the world, i. e. he is truly transcendent. According to Sokolowski, this distinction is nothing one can conceive of based on rationality alone. Rather it is rationally accessible once this distinction has been established and acknowledged, but it has to be revealed first. This sense of God being creator was, as Sokolowski pointed out, fully and fundamentally disclosed in the life of Jesus and in the church's understanding of *what* and *who* Christ is.¹⁴

The Christian Distinction is, therefore, the ultimate context of Christian faith and lies on the ground of Christian things and Christian realities. This distinction is meant to open a fundamentally new understanding of the whole reality, a specific Christian view in contrast or in opposition to other views (like the natural one). Mysteries of faith, like the Incarnation, can be accepted as mysteries and be understood as being coherent and reasonable in this Christian perspective, even if they appear to be contradictory in another setting.¹⁵

However, the question of how this distinction becomes achievable for us is still important. On this point, the Theology of Disclosure becomes relevant since "the reflective study of how the Christian Distinction between God and World is presented to us is called the Theology of Disclosure."¹⁶ For Sokolowski, the Theology of Disclosure and his Christian Distinction are two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, here we have to ask how exactly the relation between the Theology of Disclosure and the Christian Distinction can be conceived of and to what extent it is a matter of revelation. This discussion will be resumed later.

To sum up, the Theology of Disclosure tries to observe and describe how Christian things *manifest* and *disclose* themselves. As a phenomenological method, it is concerned with the objective and essential structures of the disclosure of Christian things and asks how they

¹³ Cf. id., *The God of Faith and Reason*. Foundations of Christian Theology, Notre Dame IN 1982.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 21–25.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 90–92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

are distinguished from others. To make use of this form of theology, one must start with the things that are presented to us, with things that appear to us, like the eucharistic celebration.

2. Eucharistic Manifestations

According to Sokolowski, the eucharistic celebration, along with the belief in the sacramental and real presence of Christ effected through the transformation of the eucharistic gifts, opens up a wide range of phenomenological themes. In the following section, I will analyze and discuss how Sokolowski uses the Theology of Disclosure to investigate three phenomenologically significant topics regarding eucharistic performance and eucharistic faith.¹⁷

2.1 Presentation and Identity

Corresponding to the phenomenological insight that the *manner* of appearance is significant for the *being* of the appearing thing, we must look at the appearance of the eucharistic ritual and see how it discloses itself as proper Christian reality. Sokolowski argues that in the presentation of the words and actions, used in the eucharistic consecration, we can find an objective and genuine peculiarity in the manner of presentation. This is very clear because, during the praying of the *Canon* of the Mass, the way the words are presented is changing dramatically: It is not only a back and forth between the priest, the participants, and the assembled community, but we also have to note a change in the linguistic act that is accomplished (thanking, answering, and so on). Especially the way of how the so-called 'words of institution' are liturgically presented stands out compared to other linguistic acts within the liturgy: The priest does not just narrate or depict what Christ was saying and doing at the Last Supper but *quotes* the words and actions of Christ. There is clearly a manifest change in the grammar from 'We' to 'I'. Because the words are given to us in this manner, we have to notice a real phenomenological distinction: What appears to us is not a matter of the intention of the celebrant but an objective difference in the presentation of things. This mode of presentation, determined through the nature of the rite, discloses that the priest (personally) is not the subject of action in this moment since he is *quoting* and not depicting. It is also not the community (alone), since the 'We' changed to the 'I', while Christ is acting as the subject of the consecration.¹⁸

Next to these analyses of how the 'words of institution' are presented, we must ask what the eucharistic rite shows us. Sokolowski tells us that celebrating the mass means

¹⁷ For a short overview see *John F. Baldovin*, Book Review: Eucharistic Presence. A Study in the Theology of Disclosure, in: *Theological Studies* 56/4 (1995) 801.

¹⁸ Cf. Sokolowski, *Christian Faith & Human Understanding* (see fn. 12), 88–91. The emphasis on Christ as the acting subject of the liturgical rite may rightly be viewed with some critical reservation, insofar as it risks obscuring the anamnestic and ecclesial dimensions of the consecration – dimensions that are considered essential within contemporary liturgical theology. Nonetheless, it must be granted that the analysis in question is explicitly concerned with the phenomenological content of a particular element of the rite and, as such, does not purport to offer a comprehensive account of the consecration in its fullness or its theological structure.

participating in the celestial liturgy; its appearance is directed beyond its particular and concrete form towards God. One specific event is at the center: "The Eucharist brings us into this action and this life, and it displays, until the end of time, the one saving action that is the point of the created world."¹⁹ It is a fundamental Catholic belief that the Eucharist is indeed a sacrifice. However, it is not a new, additional sacrifice but instead the one and the same Sacrifice of Calvary, which is present sacramentally to fulfill the one and only redemptive action of Christ. Sokolowski suggests that we refrain from reinforcing speculative discussion in order to redirect our attention to a more phenomenological question: How is the presence of the Sacrifice of Calvary, the one and only saving action of Christ, *manifested* in the eucharistic celebration? During the rite, the Sacrifice of Calvary is not directly represented, but instead *symbolically and sacramentally reenacted* through the lens of the Last Supper, when Christ himself had anticipated this sacrifice. This shows that the way in which the saving event of the redemption and resurrection of Christ is displayed in the Eucharist is unique – it is one and the same sacrifice in manifold appearances and therefore appears in a unique sense of sameness and otherness. But – one might ask – what kind of unique sense is pointed out here?²⁰

We have already seen that the display of death and resurrection is presented through the lens of the Last Supper, ultimately celebrated by Christ. So, the perspective of the mass on the sacrifice is mediated through another perspective on the same event – that of Jesus Christ himself, as he was anticipating this event during the Last Supper.²¹ Within the setting of a Passover Meal (or a setting which had Passover Meal elements in it), Christ himself pre-enacted the Sacrifice of Calvary at the Last Supper as the first Eucharist. Within a commemorative perspective, however, the mass represents and identifies the one redemptive sacrifice of the cross but only through the representation and identification of it performed by Jesus during the Last Supper within his anticipating perspective:²²

"The Eucharist is not a ritualized Passion Play. Our Celebration does reenact the sacrifice of the cross, but it does so only through the perspective on that sacrifice that was held by Jesus at the Last Supper. [...] In the Eucharist we look back at the death of Jesus, but we look back at it as profiled through the Passover anticipation by Christ. Only because the sacrifice of the cross

¹⁹ Ibid., 84 f.

²⁰ Cf. ibid., 80–82.

²¹ Therefore, the celebration also discloses a unique sense of time and tenses. As in the narrative of the Last Supper itself, the past (Exodus), present (the meal with the disciples), and future (Death and Resurrection) somehow come together, in the liturgically reenactment of the past (Christ's life and especially his Death), the present (the Communion of the Church) and future (the heavenly meal before God) come together. The interplay of temporal modalities – coinciding and passing – has been extensively examined in phenomenological thought; see, for example *Rene Dausner*, *Realpräsenz und Diachronie. Die Eucharistielehre in zeittheoretischer Perspektive*, in: Florian Bruckmann (Ed.), *Phänomenologie der Gabe. Neue Zugänge zum Mysterium der Eucharistie* (QD 270), Freiburg i. Br. 2015, 219–242; *Erwin Dirscherl*, *Wandlung als Transitus. Präsenz als vor-über-gehende Gegenwart, die bleibt*, in: ibid., 243–268.

²² Cf. *Sokolowski*, *Eucharistic Presence* (see fn. 1), 27–29.

was embodied and preenacted at the Last Supper can it be reenacted and sacramentally embodied now.”²³

The manifold appearances of the redemptive action of Christ, which are proper to identify such a thing (which is, of course, a unique thing), are the perspectives of anticipation and commemoration, and their interweaving in the Eucharist and its representation as a sacramental sign, i. e., as a sign that accomplishes what it signifies. Just as the redemptive action of the incarnate Son was brought ‘before the Father’ and for the glory of God, the mass as such is essentially brought ‘before the Father.’ Both events manifest themselves not primarily before us but before the transcendence of God.

2.2. *Disclosure of the Mystery of Faith?*

Besides directly exploring the celebration of the Eucharist, it is – with the help of the aforementioned Theology of Disclosure – also possible to delve into deeper theological dimensions, which are, as Sokolowski states, somehow disclosed and ‘refracted’ to us. In the disclosure of the sacramental reenactment of the one sacrifice, the broader theological context – in which this is embedded and made reasonable – is also on display, especially how Christians understand God as the free and loving creator who is radically incomparable, transcendent, and eternal. Only against this background and the theocentric understanding of the action of Christ as the Son, and of the inner character of the mass, is the effective presence of one and the same sacrifice possible.²⁴

We also have to look more closely at the things that are, according to Sokolowski, indirectly disclosed by the Eucharist. He argues that the Eucharist reveals the risen and glorified Christ, whose holy life can become the ‘fruit of life’ for us. Especially in the revealing of the resurrection, the Eucharist discloses the Incarnation, whereas the revealing of the Incarnation discloses the mystery of creation and the trinitarian God:

“The Eucharist, celebrated in our moment of time, reveals to us the truth of the Resurrection, showing us that Christ did not just rise from the dead but that he shares his glorified life with us now; [...] The Resurrection in turn reveals what the passion and death of Christ were, the triumph of divine life over sin and death. The Redemption in its turn shows what the Incarnation was: not just God becoming part of his creation, but God the Son assuming the humility of the fallen condition of man in all respects except sin, [...]. The Incarnation in turn reveals the Godhead: it reveals that God lives as Father, Son, and Spirit and that he is so transcendent to the world that he cannot become part of it without diminishing divinity.”²⁵

Beyond the Incarnation, the topic of creation comes to light. According to Sokolowski, the fundamental and original Christian understanding of God and the world is grounded in the Christian understanding of God as creator whose transcendent being exists in perfection, sufficiency, and absolute goodness. So, God did not need to create anything. Because

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 52–42.

²⁵ Ibid., 117.

he nevertheless created, creation is truly free and comes from pure divine generosity. The existence of the world is not necessary, but God's existence is. God and world are truly distinct.²⁶ This fundamentally peculiar understanding of the nature of God is disclosed in the sacraments because "it is only the transcendent biblical God who could have redeemed us in Christ and who could act toward us in a sacramental way."²⁷

As we have already seen, this understanding of God and creation is one of the crucial points of Sokolowski's thinking. Based on this argument, the Theology of Disclosure presents the so-called Christian Distinction as a significant and fundamental structure that can be considered essential to the way Christian things appear – especially in how they manifest themselves to us as distinct from other things. Nevertheless, what is the relation between the Theology of Disclosure and the Christian Distinction? This question is addressed in detail in part three of the paper. Before that, I will discuss one further significant point in Sokolowski's theological approach: What can the Theology of Disclosure offer when it comes to the substantial presence of the body and blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine?

2.3 Theology of Disclosure and Metaphysics

In contrast to other theologians, who are also using the phenomenological method for exploring the Eucharist, Sokolowski emphasizes the importance of metaphysical models for the eucharistic real presence. He argues thereby in favor of the classical theory of transubstantiation. But understanding a metaphysical model of the real presence is just one dimension of the whole mystery. The conviction that in the Eucharist the glorified body and blood of Christ are substantially present and embodied, discloses a fundamental Christian understanding of the Incarnation and of the world.²⁸

The Eucharist reveals within the presentation and embodiment of the glorified and risen Christ the mystery of the Incarnation. Moreover, the Mystery of the Eucharist stands in continuation of the Mystery of Incarnation. So, the Incarnation must, in disclosing the Mystery of Creation and God's being, be understood as the "entering of the almighty Creator into what He has made and become part of it."²⁹ This first mode presence and self-manifestation of the divine can continue in a sacramental manner and can bring its effects to us in time. Furthermore, this manner of manifestation of the 'first' presence vouches for the sacramental continuation. This means that the material and bodily quality of the Incarnation calls for continuation, which must be similar in some ways, i. e. in its bodily and 'material' quality. It is the core of eucharistic faith that Christ himself is present in his divine and human nature. First, because the Eucharist is the continuation of the Incarnation, it must have a bodily and 'material' dimension. Second, because it is the whole Christ, who is present, he has to be present with his body and with his substance. But wherever there is

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 176 f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁸ Cf. Sokolowski, *Christian Faith & Human Understanding* (see fn. 12), 95–97.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

one substance or body, there cannot be another substance or body. So, the presence of Christ's body implies the absence of the bread's substance. This presence-absence duality is best understood (metaphysically) with the help of the theory of transubstantiation.³⁰

"While the material character of the Incarnation makes Transubstantiation necessary, it is the divine aspect of Incarnation, the presence of the divine nature in the Incarnation that makes Transubstantiation possible."³¹

But of course, the belief in Christ's real presence in the eucharistic gifts seems like a scandal. How should an object like bread be *transformed* substantially without any change in its empirical quality? How should matter become somehow a vehicle, an instrument for the presence of the eternal and transcendent God? Again, Sokolowski points us to the appearance and manifestation of this Christian reality instead of debating metaphysical models or possibilities. He argues that faith in the embodiment of Christ in the Eucharist reveals a new understanding of the relation of matter and spirit. Because in a merely natural perspective on the world, the world is either just material or is a duality of matter and spirit. Within a naturalistic or dualistic setting, the idea of a real presence is rather unreasonable. But within a Christian setting, a different understanding emerges – i. e. the insight that the world was created freely and out of generosity by God implies that it is spirit that precedes matter: "Before there was matter, there was and is God, who is spirit and life [...] the personal dimension brings into being the material. Matter and all created beings are because of a personal choice."³² This new perspective on matter discloses that any matter and every material being is, from the beginning, spiritualized and, therefore, open to further spiritualization. Precisely this happens in the Eucharist. Through the declaration of Christ (and not due to human agreements) the eucharistic elements change: they remain material, but they are elevated into a new sacramental use: God is effectively present in the world.³³

The discussion of Christ's real presence shows how Sokolowski sees the relationship between the Theology of Disclosure and speculative theology: They are complementary and, to a certain extent, must supplement each other. Theology of Disclosure shields speculative theology from falling into mere rationalism, whereas speculative theology shields the Theology of Disclosure from falling into subjectivism or being transformed into a mere psychological method. For examining the eucharistic presence, a duality of the Theology of Disclosure and speculative theology is especially appropriate, even if their focal points differ due to their specific nature of investigation. The faith of the Church which holds that it is one and the same Sacrifice of Calvary which is present in the Eucharist is a good example: Whereas the Theology of Disclosure investigates the manifold manners of appearance of one and the same sacrifice, speculative theology focuses on the sameness of the sacrificed entity. It makes this intelligible by the doctrine of transubstantiation.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 106–108.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

³² *Ibid.*, 102.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 102–104.

3. Theology of Disclosure and Revelation

The third part offers a discussion of some critical points in Sokolowski's proposal and asks about the connection between the Theology of Disclosure, the Christian Distinction, and revelation in general as well as what kind of revelation, according to Sokolowski, occurs in the Eucharist.

3.1 *Transcendental vs. Radical Phenomenology*

One major objection to Sokolowski's proposal can be found in a critique of his general phenomenological approach, which can be seen as a version of classical transcendental phenomenology, particularly shaped by Edmund Husserl. Considering developments within the field of phenomenology, his transcendental method can be confronted with the call for a phenomenology that goes beyond Husserl by *radicalizing* the reduction itself.

For the classical understanding still focuses on intentional structures and thereby maintains a distinction between subject and object, which prevents the phenomenon from being encountered in radical givenness. This becomes especially problematic in relation to religious phenomena such as the sacraments, where mystery is both manifest and yet remains beyond our conceptual grasp.³⁴ Based on alternative phenomenological approaches, one can argue that Sokolowski's 'Theology of Disclosure' is ultimately unable to account for the fundamental reality of the eucharistic phenomenon. The Eucharist is, in its very essence, the sacrament of givenness – an excessive, overflowing gift.³⁵

One of the most prominent philosophers who not only advocates for a radical phenomenology but also writes about the Eucharist as a phenomenon of givenness is Jean-Luc Marion. In the following considerations, his treatment of the phenomenality of the Eucharist will be briefly discussed as an alternative approach to Sokolowski's – one that takes the givenness of the sacraments to its radical conclusion. Nevertheless, possible advantages of Sokolowski's approach will be highlighted through a critique of Marion's understanding.

Marion frequently and prominently speaks of the Eucharist as a radical and ultimate gift, as it constitutes the self-giving of Christ – a self-giving that is total and complete, even to the point of abandonment.³⁶ Thus, the sacramental phenomenon is gratuitous, excessive,

³⁴ For an overview of the development of the phenomenology of religion, see *Christina Gschwandtner*, What is Phenomenology of Religion? (Part I). The Study of religious phenomena, in: *Philosophy Compass* 14/2 (2019) 13–28. For a well-rounded discussion of the scopes and limits of the phenomenology of religion, see *Robyn Horner*, Rethinking God as gift. Marion, Derrida, and the limits of phenomenology, New York 2010.

³⁵ For a concise introduction to the discourse on gift – particularly in relation to the Eucharist – see *Donald Wallenfang*, Sacramental Givenness. The Notion of Givenness in Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion, and Its Import for Interpreting the Phenomenality of the Eucharist, in: *Philosophy and Theology* 22 (2010) 131–154; as well as *Christina Gschwandtner*, Mystery Manifested. Toward a Phenomenology of the Eucharist in its liturgical context, in: *Religions* 10/5 (2019) 315–333; as well as *Florian Bruckmann*, Einführung, in: Bruckmann (Ed.), *Phänomenologie der Gabe* (see fn. 21), 7–10.

³⁶ This understanding of the Eucharist as the radical gift or givenness of Christ's self-giving is found in both his earlier and later works, see especially *Jean-Luc Marion*, Believing in Order to See. On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of Some Believers, transl. Chr. M. Gschwandtner, New York 2017, 125–133; id., *God without*

and resists all appropriation. It radicalizes the notion of presence and pushes phenomenology beyond intentionality, toward a horizon of pure givenness.³⁷ This of course fits perfectly to Marion's broader understanding of radical phenomenology as one

"in which the phenomenon takes the initiative, and its manifestation and meaning are unfolded entirely from how it gives itself, rather than imposed on it by the consciousness of the one experiencing it."³⁸

In this sense, the Eucharist serves as the *paradigm* of phenomena in general, as it exemplifies what it means to be an excessive, saturated phenomenon. Saturated phenomena manifest themselves through a specific mode of givenness: a radical presence that is so overwhelming, unexpected, and saturated with meaning – or bursting with significance – that it cannot be constituted by consciousness. Rather, it imposes itself in overwhelming givenness. What is crucial here is that saturated phenomena can only be received; they cannot be anticipated, produced, or controlled. In the moment of givenness, the subject and its intentionality are captivated – and even suspended – by the phenomenon's self-giving and are thereby transformed as recipients of meaning.³⁹ The Eucharist is a moment of grace precisely because, in it, the self-giving of Christ is experienced as pure presence – a presence that seizes and transforms the subject entirely into the mode of gift and abandonment.⁴⁰

On the one hand, Marion's understanding of the Eucharist as a radical and self-abandoned gift seems highly fitting for the sacramental reality of the Eucharist. On the other hand, however, it appears to be deficient in certain respects:

In Marion, the eucharistic phenomenon seems to be portrayed as an isolated, individual event that does not sufficiently take into account the ritualistic and liturgical dimensions of communion and the broader context in which the Eucharist is embedded. Following Christina M. Gschwandtner's critique⁴¹ of certain phenomenological approaches to the Eucharist – such as Marion's – this paper aligns itself with her concerns in two main respects:

(i) Eucharistic experience occurs within, and is manifested through, a broader, specifically liturgical horizon; the communal realization of the eucharistic celebration is of central importance.⁴²

(ii) In contrast to Marion, the intentionality of the participants should not be dismissed. On the contrary, eucharistic experience is both shaped by and, perhaps more importantly, actively shapes a specific liturgical intentionality.⁴³

Being, transl. Th. S. Carlson, foreword D. Tracy, Chicago 1991, 170–172; id., *Prolegomena to Charity*, transl. St. E. Lewis, New York 2002, 130–145.

³⁷ Cf. Marion, *Believing in Order to See* (see fn. 36), 106–111.

³⁸ Cf. Gschwandtner, *Mystery Manifested* (see fn. 21), 3.

³⁹ Cf. Marion, *Believing in Order to See* (see fn. 36), 132–135; id., *Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Stanford 2002, 134–141.

⁴⁰ Cf. id., *Believing in Order to See* (see fn. 36), 132–135.

⁴¹ Cf. Gschwandtner, *Mystery Manifested* (see fn. 21), 315 f., 326 f.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, 328 f.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, 329 f.

Liturgical horizon: At the heart of every liturgical act lies the orientation toward the ultimate mystery, with the human person – as a person, with mind and body – fully engaged. Especially, though not exclusively, the Catholic tradition offers a form of liturgical ritual that engages not only aesthetic and intelligible dimensions but also bodily and sensory experiences – experiences that are both shared by and sustained within the *communio* of many. In receiving the Eucharist, the participants are not merely passive recipients; rather, they actively perform a shared ceremony that is not only preparatory for reception but constitutes an integral part of the sacramental action itself. Moreover, the faithful must be prepared and are encouraged regularly to renew their participation in the sacrament of the altar.⁴⁴

Liturgical intentionality: The sacraments are mysteries that transcend human comprehension, yet they are manifested within the realm of human experience. Otherwise, the sacraments would remain fundamentally external and alien to the human person. This brings us to the second ‘condition’ for the phenomenality of the Eucharist: intentionality.

“The liturgy forms a disposition, an expectation, that is, an intentionality that prepares consciousness to intend and receive Eucharist in particular ways. We can prepare for liturgy and Eucharist – indeed, we must prepare for them. This does not imply that we impose concepts on it arbitrarily or exercise total control over it. [...] To form a dispositionality that allows for reception is not tantamount to forming a Cartesian subject in total control of the objects it encounters.”⁴⁵

Not only is it the implicit intention of liturgical events to shape our consciousness toward God, to anticipate Christ’s presence, and to strengthen the communion of the body of Christ in preparation for receiving the Eucharist, but the sharing in the sacrament of the Eucharist itself is the ultimate nourishment for this kind of intentionality.⁴⁶

With a ‘liturgical horizon’ and ‘liturgical intentionality’ in mind, Sokolowski’s approach clearly has more to offer. Not only is the concrete liturgical practice of the Church the explicit context and starting point of his phenomenological investigation, but the outcome of the ‘Theology of Disclosure’ is not merely an overwhelming or excessive phenomenon – it yields specific, content-rich insights: for example Christ’s acting as the one and only subject of consecration, the identity of the eucharistic sacrifice with the one sacrifice of the cross, etc. But this apparent strength of Sokolowski’s approach is at the same time also one of the biggest problems: Is his phenomenological method really open to experience, or is it already shaped by certain dogmatic presuppositions?

⁴⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 328 f.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 329 f.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 329 f.

3.2 Revelation and the Eucharist

3.2.1 Diversity and Limits of Eucharistic Manifestations

After all, we need to inquire whether an examination solely focused on the appearances and manifestations of the eucharistic celebration can provide what Sokolowski elucidates. For example, it seems far-fetched that deeper theological dimensions like the Incarnation and creation can be disclosed in the appearance of the eucharistic celebration alone. The crucial point is: 'alone.' Sokolowski argues that through the analysis of how the Eucharistic rite is manifested for us also the mysteries of faith are disclosed to us – or, as he puts it, somehow refracted. Of course, the rite encompasses vast, rich, symbolic, and performative dimensions. Topics such as resurrection, incarnation, and creation are symbolically, sacramentally, and performatively present. To be aware of these dimensions requires not only a well-informed and trained Christian faith but also some understanding of theology and liturgy. To put it bluntly: If a person already believes in the resurrection of Christ, it is, of course, possible that she finds this article of faith to be present and manifested in the performative act of the Eucharist.

But it remains questionable whether the 'Theology of Disclosure' truly yields *independent* insights derived *purely* from the phenomenological method if the experience of the Eucharist is already shaped and framed in advance by the Roman Catholic doctrine. At this point, any critique which holds that Sokolowski is unable to think of the self-givenness of the phenomenon on its own terms regains its force and impact.

Next, it is questionable whether Sokolowski's account suits all the diverse eucharistic celebrations, even within the Catholic framework. He prefers, for example, the classic mass, where all participants and celebrants face the same direction. According to him, this manifests that the Eucharist, as an action of the church, is brought 'before the Father.' This theocentric focus is extremely important for Sokolowski. In a similar fashion, he focuses on Eucharistic Prayer I – the *Canon Romanus* – to support his strong theocentric as well as celestial understanding of the Eucharist. At this point, it begs the question whether an application of the Theology of Disclosure to other versions of eucharistic celebrations – such as those where the celebrants face the people or when Eucharistic Prayer III is used – could lead to differing 'phenomenological' insights. It is simply a fact that, even within one denomination, there is a diversity of eucharistic performances. If some form of revelation occurs in the Eucharist and if the Theology of Disclosure describes essential and objective structures of the appearance of Christian things, this diversity within one and the same performative type must not be a problem.

Lastly, Sokolowski's account seems to overlook the ambiguity and potential discontinuities within the eucharistic experience. This critique can take various forms; within the scope of this paper, however, only two aspects will be outlined: First, it must be recognized that every sign – especially liturgical and sacramental signs – is not self-contained or transparent, but always already shaped by cultural, linguistic, and historical mediations. The sacramental reality of the Eucharist does not occur in a realm detached from the world but

is given precisely through the symbolic order of human experience. It remains fully a *mysterion*, yet this mystery is accessible only in and only through signs and practices. Therefore, any phenomenological approach to the Eucharist must necessarily be accompanied by a hermeneutical one.⁴⁷ Secondly, liturgical – and especially eucharistic – phenomena do not always manifest themselves as coherent experiences of faith or encounters with Christ. Instead, they may present themselves as confrontations with radical absence, silence, or even emptiness. Just as divine experiences in general can range from mystical intimacy to a crisis of God's absence, so eucharistic experiences, too, are diverse, disruptive, and ambivalent.⁴⁸ It remains difficult to see how these aspects could be integrated into Sokolowski's account.

3.2.2 What Kind of Eucharistic Revelation?

Now we must ask the question: What kind of revelation, according to Sokolowski, occurs in the Eucharist? He states: "As the central action in the life of the Church, the Eucharist continuously discloses the mysteries of the Christian faith."⁴⁹ Sokolowski frequently uses synonymous verbs like 'disclosing,' 'revealing,' 'displaying,' 'bringing to light,' 'manifesting,' 'presenting,' and so on regarding the appearance of the Eucharist and its analysis by the Theology of Disclosure. So, what is the difference between disclosure, manifestation, and divine revelation? Or is there no real difference at all?

The latter interpretation is supported by Sokolowski's argument that we have access to the main mysteries of faith through the Eucharist. In the end, the Eucharist manifests the Christian Distinction. The former understanding is also supported by the insight that disclosing, presenting, and so on are part of our typical epistemological vocabulary under a phenomenological perspective, and Sokolowski strongly connects revelation with the life and death of Christ as incarnated *Logos*.⁵⁰ The Eucharist is, in Sokolowski's understanding, the continuation of the Incarnation, which, however, also means that it cannot be the same. So, it remains unclear how Sokolowski distinguishes between divine revelation and what is – phenomenologically – revealed to us in the appearance of Christian things.⁵¹

In addition, the connection between revelation, truth, and natural theology is unclear. For Sokolowski, revelation was necessary to bring the Christian Distinction to light, but

⁴⁷ A symbolic-hermeneutical approach to sacraments and liturgical action has become indispensable to contemporary sacramental theology. A decisive turning point in this development was marked by *Louis-Marie Chauvet's* *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, translated by Madeleine M. Beaumont and Patrick Madigan SJ, Collegeville, MN 2018 (originally published as 'Symbole et sacrement' in 1987). Chauvet profoundly reshaped theological thinking in this field – and his work continues to shape current discourse. See, for instance, *Julia Knop*, *Glaube im Symbol. Anmerkungen zu Louis-Marie Chauvets symbolhermeneutischem Vorstoß*, in: Martin Stuflesser (Ed.), *Fundamentaltheologie des Sakramentalen. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Louis-Marie Chauvets „Symbol und Sakrament“* (Theologie der Liturgie 9), Regensburg 2015, 135–148.

⁴⁸ The notion of liturgical experience as rupture – or even as non-experience – is for example prominently explored by *Jean-Yves Lacoste*, notably in his work: *Experience and the Absolute. Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, New York 2004. For a concise overview, see *Joeri Schrijvers*, *Jean-Yves Lacoste. A Phenomenology of Liturgy*, in: *The Heythrop Journal* 46/3 (2005) 314–333, especially 318–321.

⁴⁹ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence* (see fn. 1), 4.

⁵⁰ Cf. id., *The God of Faith and Reason* (see fn. 13), 38–40.

⁵¹ Cf. id., *Christian Faith and Human Understanding* (see fn. 13), 71–72; 111 f.

once this truth has been revealed, it is naturally observable as truth. However, this needs to be revised. How can a truth require revelation and be naturally knowable once revealed? Sokolowski makes a great effort to show how phenomenological accounts – like that of Hans Urs von Balthasar – and classical scholastic thinking, especially Thomistic theology, are compatible.⁵² In his view, scholastic thinking is based on the insight of the Christian Distinction, which is given to us through revelation. Because of our faith in the transcendent creator and the understanding of the world's contingency, God's being is theologically expressed as eternal, independent, and self-sufficient. Whether this is genuinely compatible remains doubtful: to argue that some truths must be revealed first and are then comprehensible as natural truths is not the same understanding of naturally achievable truths as the scholastic tradition had emphasized.⁵³

Nevertheless, Sokolowski attempts to show a 'third way' in the relation of faith and reason. Here again, the Christian Distinction serves already as the starting point – because for this 'third way' faith in the absolute dependency of the world and the true transcendence of God is not one truth among others, but the basis for any other truths. It is the fundamental distinction that guides our understanding and any other distinction.⁵⁴

This seems, in a sense, to be advocated by Hans Urs von Balthasar and is implied in his understanding of the relation between faith and reason. Von Balthasar also speaks about a 'third way' and argues that reason needs faith:

„Erstlich gilt, daß die Welt, so wie sie konkret existiert, eine Welt ist, die je schon positiv oder negativ in einem Verhältnis zum Gott der Gnade und der übernatürlichen Offenbarung steht, und daß es in diesem Verhältnis keine neutralen Punkte und Flächen gibt. Die Welt, als Gegenstand der Erkenntnis, ist immer schon in diese übernatürliche Sphäre eingebettet, und so steht auch entsprechend das Erkenntnisvermögen des Menschen immer schon unter dem positiven Vorzeichen des Glaubens oder dem negativen des Unglaubens.“⁵⁵

With help from Balthasar, the Christian Distinction could be understood as the intentional and positive relation to God, which enables us to have positive and new knowledge about the world – truths we cannot achieve if we stand in a negative relation to God. But to have a positive relation to God, grace and divine revelation must come first.⁵⁶

It may be also helpful to draw on Balthasar's account of revelation to rethink the previously raised issue regarding the relationship between revelation and the Eucharist. This

⁵² See for Sokolowski's argumentation about the compatibility of Thomistic Metaphysics and Phenomenology: id., *The Relation of Phenomenology and Thomistic Metaphysics to Religion. A Study of Patrick Masterson's "Approaching God: Between Phenomenology and Theology"*, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 67/3 (2014) 603–626.

⁵³ The problematic relationship between the Christian Distinction and Revelation is well illustrated in the following Paper: *Joseph G. Trabbic*, *By Revelation Alone? Some Objections to Robert Sokolowski's 'Christian Distinction'*, in: *Heythrop journal* 59/3 (2018) 456–467.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Sokolowski*, *The God of Faith and Reason* (see fn. 13), 23–24; For Sokolowski, distinctions are a presupposed for human thinking and the basis of any philosophical inquiry. See for this id., *The Method of Philosophy. Making Distinctions*, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 51/ 3 (1998) 515–535.

⁵⁵ *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *Theologik I. Wahrheit der Welt*, Einsiedeln 1985, 20.

⁵⁶ For an interesting presentation of the idea of truth in Balthasar see *Isabella Guanzini*, *Anfang und Ursprung*: Massimo Cacciari und Hans Urs von Balthasar (ratio fidei 58), Regensburg 2016, 144–148.

requires a closer look at his salvation-historical, dramatic approach.⁵⁷ In this context, the Eucharist must be understood as an essential performative act of the church in the mission of proclamation – and as a dramatic act made possible by revelation.⁵⁸ Revelation takes place in God's salvation history with the world. Since two freedoms intertwine here, revelation can only take place in the form of a drama, whose climax consists of the life and death of Christ. Here, God enters the stage, and the mystery of God's absolute transcendence manifests itself in absolute immanence.

„Deshalb kann diese Provokation für den, der Gottes eigenes Wort sein will, nur tragisch enden. Und nur so, daß die Tragödie des Kreuzes, die von der Provokation selbst heraufbeschworen wird, von Ewigkeit her vorausgesehen, ja vorausgewollt sein muß, als die einzig mögliche Konsequenz der Prämisse, daß Gott endliche Freiheit aus sich selbst entläßt.“⁵⁹

What is decisive is that this drama of salvation is actualized in the form of the church. The church's mission begins with the end of Christ's mission. The performative character of revelation needs a space of apprehension and response – a space of faith. The Church, with its sacramental-performative realities, is thus the continuation of the drama.⁶⁰ In this sense, there is no new revelation in the church, especially in the Eucharist. However, the salvation-historical action of God and the dramatic call-response event are performatively manifested. One could say: the Eucharist reveals (in manifold symbolic, sacramental, cultural, etc., manners) (divine) revelation.

3.3 *Revelation and the Christian Distinction*

As we have seen, the Christian Distinction is extremely significant for Sokolowski's work. It describes the originality and distinctiveness of the Christian faith. It is a truth, a new perspective, revealed in the life, teaching, and person of Christ. Faith is not only the response to this revelation but the lived assumption of this new perspective. In faith, we see the world as created, and we understand and love God as transcendent – something reason alone cannot achieve or think. The Christian Distinction opens a distinctive Christian setting.⁶¹

⁵⁷ For a brief account of the salvation-drama approach see *Peter Neuner; Gunther Wenz* (Eds.), *Theologen des 20. Jahrhunderts. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt 2002, 195–203.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Nicholas Healy; David L. Schindler*, *For the Life of the World*. Hans Urs Von Balthasar on the Church as Eucharist, in: *Edward S. J. Oakes; David Moss* (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, Cambridge 2006, 56 f.

⁵⁹ *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *Theodramatik III. Die Handlung*, Einsiedeln 1980, 406.

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 368–373.

⁶¹ One must ask critically whether the so-called Christian Distinction truly reflects an exclusively Christian understanding of God and the world. In this view, God is radically transcendent and absolute independent, while the world is God's free creation and thus entirely dependent on God. Independence and transcendence appear as key divine attributes; God's role is that of the sovereign creator. According to Sokolowski, this is revealed in and through Christ and marks the decisive difference from pagan and natural religions. Yet this distinction not only addresses the context of early Christianity but also frames a specifically Christian perspective, allegedly unlike any other. However, it must be questioned whether this understanding of God, creation, and the world is not equally central to all three major Abrahamic religions. Do Jewish or Islamic perspectives differ significantly in this regard?

The final critique seeks to demonstrate that Sokolowski's interpretation of the 'Theology of Disclosure' and the 'Christian Distinction' ultimately leads to a fundamental dilemma.

As already argued, it seems that based on the Theology of Disclosure, we can reflect that the Christian Distinction is somehow disclosed to us in the manifestation of the Eucharist. In the eucharistic performance, the death and resurrection of Christ are represented, and within this manifestation, deeper theological levels of Incarnation as well as the nature of God as transcendent creator are disclosed. So, it seems reasonable to state that the Christian Distinction is an essential and objective structure in the appearance of Christian things. The first definition of the Theology of Disclosure as "the reflective study of how the Christian distinction between God and world is presented to us" seems to support this understanding: the Christian Distinction is presented to us in the appearance of Christian things as *Christian* things. This means it is an objective and genuine structure of the manifestation of Christian realities, discovered by a phenomenological method.

However, on this point, we are confronted with a dilemma that seems to lie at the very bottom of Sokolowski's thinking. The Christian Distinction itself, as described by Sokolowski, is the specific perspective we can achieve in our faith, which opens the specific Christian setting. The Christian Distinction seems to be the condition that differentiates Christian things from other, non-Christian, things. So, we already need the Christian Distinction to have and access Christian things and realities whose manifestations and appearance can be investigated. However, if that is the case, the Christian Distinction could not be a new and real insight from phenomenological investigation. It would instead be trivial. But for Sokolowski, the Theology of Disclosure is an appropriate new form of theological investigation – because it is not only a proper form to deal with the challenge of modernity but also able to bring objective and genuine new insights.

This outlined dilemma is even more challenging when we look at the relationship between Christian Distinction, revelation, and faith in Sokolowski's work: It is crucial for Sokolowski that there is a fundamental difference between the Christian understanding of God and the world, expressed and lived in our faith, and the natural or pagan understanding of God and the world. The Christian understanding can love and conceptualize God as genuinely transcendent, which is something reason alone is not able to reach. This understanding is revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ. Faith is the appropriate answer and – one could say – the living embodiment of this revelation. So, it seems that faith is in every respect formed and animated by the Christian Distinction. With the Christian Distinction, we see the world through new eyes and live a new life toward real Transcendence. This understanding of the Christian Distinction and Sokolowski's emphasis on the need for

Especially in Sunni Islam, God's radical transcendence and freedom are fundamental both theologically and in everyday faith. Thus, the exclusivity of the Christian distinction remains unclear; it might be more accurate to speak of an Abrahamic distinction. For a comparison of the similarities in the belief in God as free and ultimate Creator, see for example *David Burrell*, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, Chichester 2011, 9–24. For an introduction to Sunni theology cf. *Ayman Shihadeh*, *The Existence of God*, in: Tim Winter (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, New York – Cambridge (UK) 2008, 197–217; as well as *Lutz Berger*, *Islamische Theologie*, Wien 2010, 79–85.

revelation also support the primacy of the Christian Distinction before any application of the Theology of Disclosure.

To summarize the dilemma, we can ask: Does the Theology of Disclosure need the Christian Distinction to investigate the appearance of Christian things as *Christian* things? Or is the Christian Distinction something the Theology of Disclosure discovers by investigating the appearance of Christian things as *Christian* things?

4. Conclusion

Sokolowski's Theology of Disclosure offers a rich and interesting approach to theological investigations and is, as applied phenomenology, especially suited for analyzing the Eucharist and its manifested performance. Yet, as laid out in this paper, there remain a few crucial details that need further clarification. Most importantly, a comprehensive understanding of the relation between the Theology of Disclosure and the notion of the Christian Distinction is needed to avoid the dilemma outlined above.

Dieser Artikel widmet sich der Philosophie und Theologie Robert Sokolowskis und setzt sich insbesondere kritisch mit seinem Eucharistie-Verständnis auseinander. Im Zentrum der Untersuchung steht das Konzept einer ‚Theology of Disclosure‘ als phänomenologischer Methode sowie die Frage, ob die Eucharistie als Ort der Offenbarung verstanden werden kann.