

PETER MARTYR AND THE EUCHARISTIC CONTROVERSY

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The two most excellent theologians of our times are John Calvin and Peter Martyr, the former of whom has dealt with the holy Scriptures as they ought to be dealt with – with sincerity, I mean, and purity and simplicity, without any scholastic subtleties.... Peter Martyr, because it seemed to fall to him to engage the Sophists, has overcome them sophistically, and struck them down with their own weapons.¹

In Martyr's *Commonplaces* there is great perspicuity of diction. In Calvin's *Institutes* as well as in his Biblical commentaries, though industrious and studious, it seems that a tortuous serpent deceives and conceals from the reader the form which meanders so much that he sees only the tail which he can scarcely hang onto.²

What these two seemingly contrary estimates have in common is their ranking together of John Calvin (1509-64) and Peter Martyr (1499-1562) as the twin titans, the Atlas and Axis, of the Reformed faith. The quotations originate from very different men: the first, from the French Reformed humanist Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), historian, linguist, philo-Semite and anti-Jesuit, champion of religious freedom; the second, from the Roman Catholic controversialist Cornelius Schulting, who in 1602 undertook to refute Calvinism in five volumes, identifying it with the teachings found in Calvin's *Institutes* and Martyr's *Commonplaces*. Clearly Martyr had a quite brilliant reputation among friends and foes alike in the sixteenth century. Calvin himself commended Martyr to archbishop Thomas Cranmer as 'the best and purest of men', and said of the eucharistic controversy that, 'The whole was crowned by Peter Martyr, who has left nothing to be desired.'³

This brilliance, however, has been strangely effaced by the passage of time. Few today have more than a passing acquaintance with Martyr.

¹ Quoted in B.B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian* (London, n.d.), pp. 1-2.

² Quoted by M.W. Anderson, *Peter Martyr* (Nieuwkoop, 1975), p. 55.

³ J. C. McLelland, *The Visible Words of God* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 279 (referred to hereafter as McLelland).

Gordon Rupp compared Martyr's *Commonplaces* to an extinct dinosaur;⁴ T.F. Torrance called Martyr's demise one of the tragedies of Reformation history.⁵ The question, then, inevitably arises: what was it that made the Florentine Reformer so special to his contemporaries, but which subsequent generations have missed?

Influence of Aristotle

A clue may be found in Scaliger's description of Martyr's method as 'sophistic', and Schulting's esteem for its clarity. Undoubtedly both are referring to the fact that Martyr was a committed Aristotelian in matters of logical discourse. In Martyr's own day this reflected praise on him, even from enemies like the Roman Catholics who heard his lectures on 1 Corinthians at Oxford and 'much admired his learning and the methodical arrangement of his discourse'.⁶ However, in our own day Martyr's Aristotelianism has led to his being pejoratively bracketed with Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and Jerome Zanchius (1516-90) as one of the founding fathers of Reformed scholasticism – of a theology logical at the expense of the Bible, decree-centred at the expense of Christ.⁷ Is this correct? From what I have read of Martyr, I do not think so, and I hope a fairer, more attractive picture will emerge in the course of this article. I intend to begin by looking precisely at the vexed question of Martyr's Aristotelianism, since its methodology (and to some extent its epistemology) shaped his doctrine of the sacraments.

Martyr imbibed his Aristotelianism at the university of Padua, where he studied as a young Augustinian friar from 1519 to 1527. Padua University 'boasted one of the proudest traditions of Aristotelianism in Christendom'.⁸ During Martyr's stay it also boasted two outstanding Aristotelian thinkers. One was Branda Porro of Milan, 'without any question called the prince of the philosophers of his time',⁹ who according

⁴ Gordon Rupp, 'Patterns of Salvation in the First Age of the Reformation', *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 57 (1966), p. 63.

⁵ Introduction to McLelland, p. vi.

⁶ M. Young, *The Life and Times of Aonio Paleario* (London, 1860), p. 477.

⁷ E.g. by Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvin and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison WI, 1969).

⁸ P. McNair, *Peter Martyr in Italy* (Oxford, 1967), p. 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

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to Philip McNair was a 'potent formative influence on Martyr's mind'.¹⁰ The other was Marc Antonia de Passeri, 'in his own time the most famous peripatetic [Aristotelian] in the world' and an ardent Averroist.¹¹ The version of Aristotle dominant at Padua was indeed that of the Spanish Muslim philosopher Averroes (1126-98), as interpreted by the French scholastic Siger of Brabant (1235-82); among its unorthodox teachings, combated by Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura, were a denial that reason could prove the soul's immortality, the assertion that the highest human bliss was to be found in the present life (consisting in philosophical meditation), and too carefree an admission that the truths of reason could contradict the truths of revelation. Martyr was never to propound such views, but he may have reacted against them, in his insistence on the rationality of God and Scripture. At any rate, he learnt Greek at Padua specifically to read Aristotle in the originals, and he found in Aristotelian logic a lifelong method for clear thinking and lucid argument.

Two other powerful influences on Martyr at Padua were Aquinas and Augustine. Aquinas was one of the two theologians he chiefly studied. Padua itself was a bastion of neo-Thomism, and it was while teaching here that cardinal Cajetan (1464-1534) wrote one of his famous Thomist works, *De Ente et Essentia* [*On Being and Essence*]. However, Martyr's references to Paduan Thomism were scornful after his conversion to the Reformed faith.¹²

The other theologian Martyr studied in depth was Gregory of Rimini, the fourteenth-century Augustinian (d. 1358). Gregory was a Nominalist of sorts. A disciple of William of Occam (1285-1347), he denied the independent existence of universals, holding that they are simply mental concepts constructed from the particulars of experience. This probably influenced Martyr's philosophical outlook, which was strongly empirical. Gregory was also an ardent devotee of Augustine's soteriology, and spent much of his time seeing Pelagians under every doctrinal bed. Human nature, he argued, is totally corrupt, human beings cannot will what is morally good without grace, and election to salvation is wholly gratuitous. The similar hue of Martyr's own soteriology must have been partly derived from his studies in Gregory. Martyr also read Augustine himself. The library of St Giovanni of Verdara at Martyr's Paduan monastery was a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

'fortress of Augustinianism'.¹³ In McNair's words: 'of the three A's who contended for the mastery of [Martyr's] mind, Aristotle outrivalled Averroes, but Augustine outclassed them both: in the life of this Augustinian, Augustine was to remain his favourite reading after the Bible'.¹⁴ Augustine and Aristotle – a rare combination of expertise in Martyr's day.

With respect to Martyr's 'scholasticism', we should observe that he often qualified his use of Aristotle. Accused by Lutherans like Johann Brenz (1499-1570) of defiling Christology with Aristotelian logical categories, Martyr replied that human reason must indeed be 'formed by the Word and Spirit of God'.¹⁵ Likewise in his lectures on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* at Strasbourg (1553-6), Martyr warned that 'human reason will never be sane and right unless it is formed by the Word of God'.¹⁶ In fact, throughout these lectures Martyr tested Aristotle against the Bible. Sometimes he found the Greek in error. Aristotle's doctrine of happiness, for instance, was in Martyr's view profoundly false in itself, because Christians place their happiness not in the good life but in 'reconciliation with God through Christ'.¹⁷ Theology, Martyr pronounced, must be based solely on Scripture; philosophy was but human wisdom, and could be made compatible with Scripture only within certain limits.¹⁸ Martyr especially avoided the perils of importing Aristotelian ontology into Christian theology. In his *Oxford Disputation* of 1549 he wanted to reverse Aristotle's order of first determining something's being, then its manner and purpose. He also refused to use the terms *realiter* and *substantialite* because they were unscriptural.

Union with Christ and Incarnation

Above all, Martyr's doctrine of predestination – the hallmark of scholastic Calvinism – was in crucial ways not scholastic. Karl Barth, so critical of the Reformed tradition on this score, noted two examples in his *Church Dogmatics* of what he considered the correct, biblical, Christocentric presentation of election: Calvin's first draft of the 1537 *Genevan*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ McLelland, p. 212.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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Catechism, and Martyr's *Commonplaces*.¹⁹ I cannot survey this in any detail, but it is worth looking at a few points to see how Martyr's predestinarian thought was primarily scriptural rather than metaphysical.

First, the governing concept in Martyr's doctrine of election was union with Christ – the foundation, in fact, of all his theology. This means that predestination was, for Martyr, not structurally part of the doctrine of God, but rather an important postscript to justification by faith. Hence Barth's praise for the Christocentric architecture of Martyr's presentation of election. 'Free justification should perish if we were not rightly taught of predestination', argued Martyr, for unless we know that our salvation is wholly of God we will be incapable of showing him proper gratitude, depending on him unreservedly, and enjoying full assurance of his grace.²⁰ For Martyr, predestination's practical function as a doctrine came only after saving union with Christ.

Second, the elect are not predestined to salvation as such, but to union with Christ; 'none is predestinate, but only to this end, to be made a member of Christ'.²¹ All the blessings and benefits of salvation are the incidental though natural fruit of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. By earthing predestination so deeply in the salvation-history soil of Christology and soteriology, Martyr demonstrated that Christ and the sanctified life, rather than the eternal decrees, were his central concern.

Third, Martyr refused to follow Calvin in teaching predestination to damnation. 'Under the name of predestination we will comprehend the saints only.... I separate the reprobate from the predestinate, because the Scriptures, nowhere that I know of, call men that shall be damned predestinate.'²² Human beings are damned solely by their own culpable refusal to trust God.

It seems unfair, then, to characterise Martyr's Aristotelianism as a metaphysics of causation dominating the way Scripture is read. It was for Martyr basically a tool, a method of thinking, organising data and arguing. But there can be no disguising Martyr's optimistic affirmation of this tool: 'Dialectics is a noble gift of God: nor is there any other art of more value to the refuting of error.'²³ This Hellenic note of reason, clarity, directness,

¹⁹ J.C. McLelland, 'The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination according to Peter Martyr', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955), p. 255.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 263, and McLelland, p. 73.

²³ McLelland, p. 182.

was a constant in Martyr's thought. Also, as befits a disciple of Aristotle (and Aquinas and Gregory of Rimini), Martyr retained a strong grasp on the certainty of the external world, and worked with an empiricist form of epistemology, as we will see in his polemics against the Roman and Lutheran doctrines of the eucharist. Before examining Martyr's eucharistic thought, however, we must first look at his important teaching on the knowledge of God, without which his sacramental theology will be unintelligible. Martyr's thinking here fell into two distinct but related categories: the doctrine of analogy, and the incarnation. Let us try to probe each of these.

The Reformation saw a fresh and powerful accent placed on the transcendence and incomprehensibility of God. Calvin expressed it classically:

All men have sought to form some conception of the majesty of God, and to make Him such a God as their reason could conceive Him to be. This presumptuous attitude to God is not, I maintain, learned in the philosophical schools, but is innate, and accompanies us, so to speak, from the womb. It is evident that this evil has flourished in all ages, so that men have allowed themselves every liberty in devising superstitious practices. This arrogance, therefore, which is here condemned [Romans 1:18ff.] is that, when men ought in humility to have given glory to God, they sought to be wise among themselves, and to reduce God to the level of their own low condition.²⁴

God in his own essence was, for the Reformers, utterly beyond human comprehension. To bridge this awesome metaphysical chasm, Peter Martyr developed a complex doctrine of analogy. It was not his own invention; he learnt it from Aquinas (although there was a basic difference between Aquinas's and Martyr's use of analogy, as we shall see). For Martyr as for Calvin, humanity cannot know God in his essence, 'for finite things cannot fully receive what is infinite, nor is the creature able to comprehend fully and perfectly his Creator'.²⁵ Human reason stands mute before the divine majesty. Two things must therefore happen if human beings and God are to meet: divine revelation and divine accommodation, in which God graciously condescends to show humanity not what he is in his own infinite essence, but who he is as far as humanity is concerned. Human knowledge of God is thus not direct or immediate, but rather the kind of

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh, 1961) on Romans 1:22.

²⁵ McLelland, p. 78.

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knowledge which is appropriate to humanity's creaturely status – a finite, limited, anthropopathic knowledge.²⁶ In Calvin's famous analogy, revelation is God's baby-talk, like the prattling of a mother to her cradled infant.²⁷ The truth communicated thereby did not, in Martyr's view, sustain a one-to-one univocal correspondence with the ineffable essence of God, not even when God ascribed to himself moral perfections: 'He is far otherwise good, just and wise than men either are or are called.'²⁸ Human beings know God mediately, by analogy.

However, the decisive point for Martyr is that it is the self-revealing God who sovereignly chooses the analogy. And he does not choose arbitrarily or irrationally; the analogies are always appropriate and fitting. For 'if signs had no similitude with those things that are signified, then they should not be their signs'.²⁹ There is both likeness and diversity of proportion in the God-given analogy, a distinction crucial to Martyr's doctrine of the eucharist. Where Martyr differed from Aquinas was in subordinating all other analogies in a relationship of proportion to what he saw as the supreme analogy, the normative revelation of God which controlled all human knowledge of God: Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate. We cannot directly know God in his essence, but we can know analogically, and by grace, what he is like. He is Christlike.

It would be hard to overstress the significance of the incarnation in Martyr's theology. Everything else flowed from this fountain. It comes as no surprise to learn that Martyr had drunk deeply of patristic sources; and indeed, none of the first or second generation Reformers was so intellectually and spiritually drenched in the fathers as Martyr, except perhaps Bucer, Calvin and Cranmer. Martyr's knowledge of patristic literature was immense, and his facility for quoting the fathers in debate almost uncanny. His written works bristle with patristic quotations – Tertullian, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose of Milan, Chrysostom, Gelasius, Theodoret of Cyrillus, and of course Augustine. Martyr could cry *ad fonte* as fervently as any humanist:

When innumerable corruptions, infinite abuses and excessive superstitions have grown everywhere into use in the Church of Christ, it is impossible that a proper reform can be effected unless those things

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁷ *Institutes* 1:13:1.

²⁸ McLelland, p. 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

which have been perverted to abuse be restored to their true origin, their most pure sources, and unadulterated beginnings.³⁰

The Christology of the fathers constituted one of these 'pure sources' because it articulated with richness and clarity the central Christological and soteriological truths of Scripture. Martyr summed them up thus:

The humanity of Christ is like a kind of channel, through which not only sanctification, but also all the life-giving graces can flow from God to us.... For the Spirit and Word of God, that is, the divine nature, is the efficient cause of our sanctification. But the medium through which He transfuses that sanctification to us is the humanity of Christ. Therefore if we would speak rightly, the human nature is rather the instrument of the divinity, that is, of the Word and Spirit.³¹

Consequently the deity of Christ was the lynchpin of Martyr's soteriology: 'He that sees not the divinity of Christ, sees nothing.'³²

In Christ, then, divinity and humanity have been united, so that the former may transfuse its life and immortality into the latter. However, if sinful human beings are to share in this life, they must be united with the humanity of Christ. Union with Christ – here is Martyr's central theme, pervading all his teaching. Following Cyril of Jerusalem, Martyr expounded the 'three degrees' of union in which inhered the saving bond between Christ and his Church. The first degree was incarnational union, in which Christ is organically one with the whole human race, our kinsman according to the flesh, 'the later Adam, who to enter upon marriage with the Church in the highest union, took flesh, blood, bones and true human nature from the Virgin's womb, that He might communicate in all these with us'.³³ Martyr was insistent that this was a universal union, involving every human being: 'the Son of God is joined with all men, because He took upon Him human nature'.³⁴ Christ is the new head of the race, the Second Adam, bonded to all as brother; this fact provides human beings with the assurance of God's philanthropy, his common fatherly love for humankind.

This generic incarnational union is the context of the second degree, the mystical union, by which human beings are made one with Christ through the Holy Spirit, 'the middle, secret and mystical degree...

³⁰ Young, p. 433.

³¹ McLelland, p. 103.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

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expressed in holy Scripture under the metaphor of members and head, husband and wife'.³⁵ The key on the human side to the mystical union is faith, 'for just as soon as we believe in Christ, we are made partakers of this communion'.³⁶ Although it is inward and spiritual, Martyr fused the mystical union with the outward and visible institution of the church, for she, through her ministry of word and sacraments, is the mother of faith, begetting it, nourishing it, maturing it.

Itself founded on the first degree of incarnational union, the second degree of mystical union supplies the third degree, the sanctifying union, whereby Christ sends his risen humanity streaming into his members, through the Holy Spirit, making them alive with his glorious life: 'from the immortal and heavenly head, whom we now possess in actual fact through faith [the mystical union], are derived unto us various gifts, heavenly benefits and divine properties'.³⁷ Through the sanctifying union, believers are conformed to the perfect humanity of Christ.

Approaching the Lord's Supper

This doctrine of threefold union with Christ, then, is the conceptual framework for Martyr's eucharistic theology. He defined a sacrament as follows: 'A sacrament is a divine promise concerning the remission of sins through Christ, signified and sealed by an outward or visible symbol according to the divine institution, in order that faith should be raised up in us and we should be more and more bound unto God.'³⁸ Elaborating on an idea of Augustine's, Martyr called the sacraments 'sensible words of God' – divine words addressed to the senses in physical form. The eucharist is 'the visible gospel'.³⁹ God's word is accommodated into physical, sacramental form according to the analogy of faith: union with Christ, which means rebirth (the visible word of baptism) and new life (the visible word of the eucharist).

Martyr's doctrine of analogy is the key to this. Subordinating sacrament to incarnation, he explained that the sacramental clothing of the proclaimed word in eucharistic bread and wine was in proportion to the incarnational clothing of the eternal Word in human flesh and blood. As in the incarnation divinity and humanity were united without confusion, so

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

by analogy in the eucharist Christ's humanity and the bread and wine are united without confusion. Yet there is a crucial diversity in this analogy, for the incarnation is not and cannot be re-enacted in the eucharist. The substance and reality of the sacrament are the unique person of Christ the God-man, present not incarnationally (the first degree of union) but mystically (the second degree), for it is in the Holy Spirit that Christ is savingly united to his Church, and through the Spirit that he sanctifies her.⁴⁰ The sacramental elements of bread and wine, although simply symbols in themselves, become through the Spirit 'an instrument with effect. Because these symbols are not only signs of the body and blood of Christ, but also instruments which the Holy Spirit uses to feed us spiritually with the body and blood of the Lord.'⁴¹ This feeding is by faith – by apprehending Christ as he is visibly, tangibly and saporifically proclaimed to us in the sacramental word, looking to him alone for our justification, sanctification and glorification. If we wish so to feed on him, we must (in a metaphor of John Chrysostom) fly away in spirit to heaven where Christ is, at the right hand of the Father, and not dote like papists on the bread and wine:

For there [at the Lord's table] you must not think either of the bread or of the wine – your mind and sense must cleave only to the thing represented unto you. Therefore it is said 'Lift up your hearts' [*sursum corda*, the ancient patristic exhortation at the start of the eucharist], when you lift up your mind from the signs to the invisible things offered you.⁴²

Here was one of Martyr's deepest concerns – to make the person of Jesus Christ himself central in the eucharist, that Christians may hold communion with him in the Spirit by faith, rather than trusting in the magic of a rite.

Martyr used an illuminating analogy in this regard. The written words of the Bible, he argued, do not physically 'contain' Christ. There is no corporeal presence of Christ in the printed page. But these scriptural words bear witness to Christ and present him to our souls by way of signification. So there is an analogical relationship between the written words and the incarnate Word, and the Holy Spirit uses this relationship to draw the believing soul up through the words to the Word, to a heavenly and spiritual union with him. The Bible itself is a sacrament!

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

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And the Holy Spirit uses the sacraments to give us Christ spiritually, to be embraced by the soul and faith: just as we are said to receive salvation by the words of God; not that salvation lies hidden in those words, or stands in a real presence, but is contained by signification. And this comparison with divine words is very agreeable to the sacraments, since by Augustine's judgment they are visible words.⁴³

Still, if we have the Bible and Christ conveyed to us therein, what need of baptism or eucharist? Martyr answered this question in what seems to be a somewhat Lutheran fashion. We need sacraments, he argued, because human beings are physical, flesh-and-blood creatures. Rejecting any Platonic body-soul dualism, Martyr mocked the ancient Greek sages with cutting sarcasm, advising us to slay ourselves into incorporeal bliss if their views are true. For Martyr, 'Flesh is the workshop of spirit', the body is 'the most fit instrument' of the soul, the physical, the fleshly, is the appropriate God-ordained context of the spiritual.⁴⁴ Martyr indeed showed a pronounced distaste for spiritualising. He affirmed, for example, in his *De Resurrectione* that the resurrection body would be fully physical and human in continuity with the body's present condition. It would be a 'spiritual' body only in the sense that it would wholly serve the Spirit. Moreover, he taught that our bodies are themselves nourished for eternal life in the eucharist. This is patristic:

We understand our union with Christ to extend not only to spirit and soul, but also to body and flesh. Whence no wonder the old fathers said, in the Lord's Supper not only is our soul and spirit quickened by the flesh and blood of Christ, but also our body and flesh are fed from thence, so that they are restored more fit and firm to the use of good works, by which Christ is served.⁴⁵

In the eucharist our bodies and souls enjoy a mystical foretaste of resurrection life.

In the controversy over the eucharist, Martyr had three fronts on which to fight: the Anabaptist, the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic. Of these the last two were the most important, and to a considerable extent involved the same issue, the bodily presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Before examining them, however, I will briefly look at Martyr's treatment of the Anabaptist view.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Martyr certainly had no great liking for Anabaptists. To him they were 'the furors and plagues of our time'.⁴⁶ Of their sacramental views he was dismissive. He proved the truth of infant baptism by the continuity of the Christian church with Israel, with special reference to birth membership of the covenant community. 'We judge the children of the saints to be saints, so long as by reason of age they do not declare themselves to be strangers from Christ.'⁴⁷ As for the Anabaptists' symbolic-memorialist interpretation of the eucharist, 'they take no account of the Holy Spirit'.⁴⁸ Their metaphors are irrelevant. The common one of remembering a friend, Martyr disqualified ironically: 'For a friend, being comprehended in thinking and conversant in mind, does not change him that thinks of him; he does not nourish his mind, nor restore his flesh so that it is capable of resurrection.'⁴⁹ In fact, both corporealists and memorialists make the same mistake about the eucharist. Neither can imagine a real presence of Christ except in physical terms: the former accept this, the latter throw the baby out with the bath water, and say that if Christ is not present physically, he cannot be present at all. They take no account of the Holy Spirit. Even worse, Anabaptist and Romanist both reverse the whole movement of the eucharist from God-to-us to us-to-God, thus evincing themselves to be unholy partners in legalism. The Romanist offers up his mass to God to acquire merit, the Anabaptist offers up his precious faith to show God and the world what a good Christian he is. Therefore 'the Anabaptists sin, who make the sacraments only outward tokens in which they publicly declare their faith and are distinguished from the rest of men, promising a holy life and manners worthy of a Christian'.⁵⁰ I thank you God, that I am not like others...

Refuting Transubstantiation

Martyr's polemic against transubstantiation was much more extensive than this. It is to be found in two major works: the *Oxford Disputation* of 1549, and the *Defence of the Ancient and Apostolic Doctrine concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, against Stephen Gardiner*, published in 1559. Playing a prominent role in the English Reformation during Edward VI's reign as Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford from

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

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1548 to 1553, Martyr's performance at the public disputation on the eucharist was decisive in dispelling the corporeal-presence/no-presence antithesis. A distinctive non-Lutheran doctrine of the real presence of Christ was at last sounded forth clearly. This paved the way for the acceptance by the Reformed English church of the sacramental doctrine of Bucer, Martyr and Calvin. Martyr's work against Gardiner was written on behalf of a group of Marian exiles in Zurich. McLelland considers it 'probably the greatest single work on the Eucharist of the entire Reformation'.⁵¹ With lucid Aristotelian logic, Martyr marshalled Scripture and the Fathers to refute transubstantiation, which he saw as a philosophical faux-pas and a theological heresy offensive alike to reason and revelation.

'O thou holy Supper of the Lord, how many ways art thou here miserably dishonoured and polluted! O mass, mass, mass, what remains sound in thee?'⁵² Martyr shared all the standard biblicist objections to the distracting ritualistic gaudiness of the late medieval mass, and could be very severe against this.⁵³ However, his central objections were philosophical and theological. This devoted disciple of Aristotle accused the Catholic scholastics of perverting his master's teaching. Transubstantiation, Martyr declared, was a 'new philosophy'.⁵⁴ According to Martyr, Aristotle's true teaching distinguished between substances whose accidents were separable – e.g. God and the soul – and those whose substance was inseparable from accident – e.g. the human body which cannot exist without *locus*, a defined space. Thus in the external world, the world of bodies and bread, there is an indissoluble connection between substance and accidents. Here we encounter the powerful element of empiricism in Martyr's thought; he held it as a sacred philosophical truth that sense-experience is trustworthy. Without this basic supposition (and its implicate that accident corresponds with substance), Martyr believed that human beings would fall under a 'despotism of accidents'.⁵⁵ That is, we could never tell whether any given sense-data were true, for bread and wine might turn out really to be flesh and blood.

On this basis, Martyr charged Romanists with transgressing a first principle of philosophy when they affirmed that Christ's body was present

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

corporeally but non-quantitatively in the eucharist. This, Martyr argued, was a logical impossibility. A body could not non-quantitatively occupy space. It was literally nonsense to apply the term 'body' to something that flouted the known characteristics of a body. The standard defence of such doctrines – God's omnipotence – Martyr strongly rejected, for he judged it no compliment to God to credit him with the ability to perform logical absurdities. Reason might be unable to comprehend God's essence, but God had demonstrated a consistent rationality in his works. The Creator esteemed his creation, and he worked in and with and through created things according to the nature he had apportioned them.⁵⁶ We must therefore maintain, concluded Martyr, that the human body of Christ is a true quantum, for the sake of avoiding nonsense in philosophy and docetism in doctrine. 'It is a perilous matter to delude the senses by transubstantiation, because the proof of the true resurrection of Christ then perishes... The Marcionite heretics would soon have said that Christ had no true human body, but only its accidents and figure, as you say of bread.'⁵⁷

In dealing with the key text, 'This is my body,' Martyr marched out on parade the familiar figurative interpretations. The 'is' was a 'topical substantive'; other scriptural examples were the texts which said that John the Baptist is Elijah, Christ's words are spirit and life, the gospel is the power of God, circumcision is the covenant, the cup is the New Testament, the blood is the life, and God is a consuming fire.⁵⁸ Martyr cited impressive patristic support for this view from Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome and Augustine. However, we must not think that Martyr was wholly negative on this point; indeed, a strikingly positive feature of his eucharistic theology is found precisely here. He contended that the words of consecration, 'This is my body,' referred only secondarily and derivatively to the bread. Their primary and essential reference was to the congregation. 'Yes, we ourselves are more joined unto Christ than is bread. For Christ is joined in the way that He is to bread to this end, that we should truly be united to Him. And the words by which bread is called the body of Christ belong more unto us than unto that which by nature understands nothing and believes nothing.'⁵⁹ The true transubstantiation takes place in the congregation: 'We ourselves by a faithful participation

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

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in the Lord's Supper are fed and in a manner transelemented, by a certain kind of spiritual change, into the body of Christ.'⁶⁰ Turning the Roman dogma on its head, Martyr used transubstantiation as a cipher for the edification of the church by the ministry of its presbyters:

I would to God the Romish priests would also consider this, and not count all their honour to consist in their transubstantiating the nature of bread (which is but legerdemain and a vain device) but that they would finally understand themselves to be called by God to this, that by Word and doctrine as by good manners and examples, they should transubstantiate men into Christ and make them His lively image.⁶¹

Having denied transubstantiation, Martyr also rejected Rome's propitiatory-sacrificial perception of the eucharist. In line with the other Reformers he stepped over the later Western medieval doctrine, which had tied the eucharist ever more exclusively to the passion of Christ, and instead drank deeply of the early patristic sources, where he learned to relate the eucharist to the person of the risen, ascended, exalted Saviour, who now quickens his people in the Spirit with the power of his resurrection, by virtue of the once-for-all atoning sacrifice offered on Calvary. Gregory Dix thought that this was a rediscovery of 'the eschatological conception of the primitive rite', at least partly.⁶² Like Luther, Martyr affirmed the indissoluble bond between Christ's dying and rising, for if he did not rise, we have no living Redeemer with whom to be united, that we may taste the efficacy of his death. Again the centrality of union with Christ in Martyr's theology is apparent. In a vivid metaphor, he described how this union with the risen Lord gave life to the church: 'Tell me, I pray you, will you not judge him to have escaped the danger of death who, falling into a swift river, holds up his whole head above those deep and dangerous waters, even though the rest of his members are still drowned in them?'⁶³ The eucharist, therefore, rather than being a propitiatory sacrifice, was the transfusion of the life of the crucified and risen head into his body the church, through the mystical union of the Spirit.

Did Martyr leave any room for a sacrificial interpretation of the eucharist? Yes; in his view, the Lord's supper was quite literally a eucharistic sacrifice, a sacrifice of thanksgiving. This sacrifice was both

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁶² Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1945), pp. 621ff.

⁶³ McLelland, pp. 112-13.

inward and spiritual, as the congregation offered its praise and gratitude to God for the all-sufficient expiation of Calvary, and outward and visible in the symbolic breaking of the bread. In Martyr's words: 'Inasmuch as by the same action we celebrate the memory of the death of Christ, give thanks for the benefits received, [and] consecrate and offer ourselves to God, it is and may be called a sacrifice, since we give most acceptable oblations to God.'⁶⁴ Based on Romans 15:16, Martyr portrayed the evangelical preacher as the true priest, who in contrast to the mass-monger must sacrifice his hearers to God through the gospel: 'God is so desirous of our salvation that He counts the conversion of every one of us a most acceptable sacrifice.'⁶⁵

This, then, is the substance of Martyr's polemic against the Roman mass. It is philosophically false, a perversion of Aristotle, and theologically offensive, undermining the perfect sacrifice of Christ. However, it would give an unjust impression if this picture of Martyr in controversy were left unqualified by his ecumenical willingness to discuss the matter with his opponents in search of unity. This aspect of Martyr is best illustrated by his role in the French colloquy of Poissy in 1561, a year before his death.

The colloquy was a complex affair. Summoned by the Italian regent of France, Catherine de Medici, in the interests of reconciliation between French Catholics and Huguenots, it reflects the confused situation of France on the eve of her 'religious' wars. Gallicanism scored against papalism when Catherine deliberately opened the colloquy before the arrival of the papal legate, cardinal Hippolyte of Ferrara. During the inaugural ceremonies, Catholic liberals cocked a snook at conservatives by celebrating a rival mass in both kinds in the parish church, while high pontifical mass was being sung officially in the abbey.⁶⁶ Most of the Roman delegates simply failed to turn up; 113 were summoned, but only 46 appeared (6 cardinals, 40 bishops). To prejudice things further, the Jesuit general, Diego Lainez, arrived at Poissy a few days after the assembly had legalised the Jesuits in France, only to inform the fathers and brethren that the colloquy itself was illegal, because canon law forbade provincial councils to meet after a general council (Trent) had been proclaimed. Most of the Roman Catholics proved intransigent, especially

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-3.

⁶⁶ Henry O. Evennett, *The Cardinal of Lorraine and the Council of Trent* (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 288-9.

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after Lainez's advent.⁶⁷ The Reformed delegates, led by Martyr and Theodore Beza, kept complaining that they felt as if they were on trial, rather than at an amicable colloquy. The remarkable thing is that out of such a gathering an agreed joint statement on the eucharist could emerge.

The statement was drafted by a committee of ten theologians, five from each side. Martyr, Beza and three Huguenot pastors met with the bishop of Séz, bishop Montluc of Valence, Claude d'Espence, Jean Bouteiller and Jean de Salignac. The five Roman delegates were all 'Catholic Evangelicals'; d'Espence, a Sorbonne divine, was well known for his ecumenism, while Montluc, Bouteiller and Salignac had all taken part in the rival utraquist mass at the opening of the colloquy. Their appointment shows how determined the French crown was to secure an agreement. After much discussion, the ten committee members drew up and submitted the following joint Catholic-Reformed statement:

We confess that Jesus Christ in the Supper offers, gives and truly exhibits to us the substance of His body and blood, by the operation of the Holy Spirit; and that we receive and eat, spiritually and by faith, that true body that was slain for us; that we may be bone of His bones and flesh of His flesh, and so be vivified by Him and made to partake of all that is wanted for our salvation. And whereas faith, resting on the divine Word, makes what it perceives to be present; and we by this faith receive truly and efficaciously the true and natural body and blood of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit; we acknowledge in this respect the presence of the body and blood themselves in the Supper.⁶⁸

Martyr had some private reservations about the statement. He wanted more emphasis on the upward movement of faith which 'lifts up our soul to heaven and gives it opening and entrance to the throne of His majesty'.⁶⁹ But he did not publicly dissent. Thus we have the spectacle of a doctrinal agreement on the eucharist between Roman Catholics and Reformed – indeed with Reformed representatives as illustrious as Martyr and Beza – reached after Trent's decree on transubstantiation, and reached in France four months before her first religious war.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 367-9.

⁶⁸ Cited by John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia, 1846), p. 78.

⁶⁹ McLelland, p. 287.

However, it did no good. The Sorbonne rancorously condemned the agreement, which sealed its doom at the colloquy. The Catholic Evangelicals were always in a minority: the five who had collaborated with the Reformed heretics in producing the statement spent the rest of their days under a cloud of dark suspicion, except for Salignac who burst the cloud and became a Calvinist. The affair at least reveals that not all openings were closed, and Martyr's involvement shows his willingness to discuss doctrinal differences reasonably and face-to-face, although never to yield over what he was persuaded was the truth of God.

Refuting Lutheran Eucharistic Teaching

This brings us to Martyr's polemic against the Lutheran doctrine of the corporeal presence of Christ in the eucharist. It had a sweeter tone than his anti-Roman controversial work, for however much Lutherans and Reformed differed in their views of the eucharist, they were united in repudiating the meritorious, sacrificial character imputed to it by Rome. Martyr recognised this unity and sought to uphold it. In the *Oxford Disputation*, for instance, he reviewed the Luther-Zwingli quarrel of the 1520s, and ruefully concluded that 'there was stirred up a contention more than was meet, and was a cause of great mischief. Whereas, indeed, the contention was rather about words than about the matter.' With a broad ecumenical gesture, Martyr then said with judicious indifference, 'which of the two [doctrines] is appointed we do not greatly care, if it be understood soundly'.⁷⁰ This exhibits a rare breadth of outlook, especially in the perception between 'words' and 'matter'. Many Reformed churchmen were not so tolerant of the Lutheran view. For example, John Parkhurst (1512-75), Reformed bishop of Norwich, communicated the following gem of charity to his mentor Heinrich Bullinger in 1561: 'I wish the Ubiquitarians [Lutherans] a better mind; if indeed they have a mind at all.'⁷¹

Martyr himself did not adopt a controversial pose against the Lutherans until his second period in Strasbourg (1553-6). That he was then driven to it was the fault of the strict Lutherans, led by Marbach, who tried to force him to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession and Wittenberg Concord, which taught that unbelievers receive the true body and blood of Christ in the eucharist. Martyr refused. The controversy became increasingly bitter.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205. Ubiquitarian refers to the Lutheran belief in the ubiquity of Christ's human nature.

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Particularly infuriating to Martyr was the fact that the Lutheran ministers denounced the Reformed from the pulpit, but would not enter into open debate. Finally in 1556 Martyr departed from Strasbourg in disgust to become professor of Hebrew at Zurich on Bullinger's invitation, where he referred to the Strasbourg Lutherans as 'those who are daily prepared impudently to declare – but not to prove – that cakes and pieces of bread are the very body of Christ'.⁷²

In 1560 one of these Corporealists, Johann Brenz, published a work entitled *Concerning the Personal Union of the Two Natures in Christ and the Ascension of Christ into Heaven*, a striking defence of the corporeal presence from the standpoint of Christology. The hypostatic union, Brenz asserted, makes Christ's human body share in the omnipresence of his deity. Martyr felt moved to respond, and in 1561 produced his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Natures in Christ*, his only anti-Lutheran controversial work.

The Dialogue is between two characters called Pantachus (from the Greek *pantachou*, 'everywhere') and Orothetes (Greek for 'fixer of boundaries'). The central issue is the ubiquity of Christ's human nature. Martyr's anti-Roman arguments against the corporeal presence still applied. In the *Dialogue*, he concentrated on a defence of God's rationality and an attempt to prove that ubiquitarianism was the Eutychean heresy revived.

Martyr had already accused Roman Catholics of absurdity in his *Defence against Gardiner*. Against Lutherans he was even more stringent. For sheer irrational nonsense, he declared ubiquitarianism to be worse than transubstantiation 'by a great length'.⁷³ Pantachus is shocked by such heaven-storming rationalism: 'I marvel greatly that in beginning, you cannot shake off thoughts of the dimensions of geometry, when there is dispute about the body of Christ.'⁷⁴ He accuses Orothetes of staining Christology with the maxim of Aristotle that the body is, by nature, locally circumscribed. Orothetes retorts with a quotation from the master himself, St Augustine: 'Remove spaces of places from bodies, and they are nowhere: and because they are nowhere, neither do they exist.'⁷⁵ The aim of this argument for Martyr was to vindicate the truth and integrity of Christ's humanity, and his burden can be reduced to a simple antithesis: if

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Christ is a real human being, his human body cannot be ubiquitous; if his human body is ubiquitous, he cannot be a real human being. It was only the dogged insistence of Luther, Marbach and Brenz on God's freedom from such rational considerations that detained Martyr on the point. His attack on the Lutheran position was basic: God's omnipotence could not effect logical contradictions; God could not make Christ's human body ubiquitous and yet authentically human. 'I truly affirm against you that no power can make a created thing ubiquitous,' says Orothetes. 'For what things are facts cannot by any power be undone.'⁷⁶ God will not and cannot alter the fact that 'two contradictory things cannot be true at once'.⁷⁷ Martyr agreed with Calvin that God was not exlex, lawless, for he was bound by the inner law of his own righteous and rational being. He was 'free' neither to be wicked nor to be absurd.⁷⁸

Even more crucial for Martyr was his conviction that the absurdity of ubiquitarianism was based on a Eutychean Christology. Eutyches had been condemned by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 for teaching that in the incarnation Christ's deity had so impacted on his humanity that the latter had been effectively robbed of its human substance and transformed into deity. Martyr detected the same error in ubiquitarianism. To Pantachus' assertion that the hypostatic union entailed the ubiquity of Christ's flesh, Orothetes replies: 'That does not follow – you are guilty of false reasoning.... In this you follow Eutyches, who confused and mingled the two natures.'⁷⁹ Martyr believed that this confusion resulted from a failure to grasp the analogical nature of divine revelation. Brenz, he said, spoke of Christ's humanity as though its relationship with his deity were equivocal – that one could directly say of the human nature the things that were true of the divine nature – thus destroying the correct proportion between them. Brenz's doctrine would 'annul the sacramentum incarnationis' and 'dissolve the hypostatic union' into Monophysitism.⁸⁰ To establish this claim, Martyr took the argument of the fifth-century fathers, Theodoret of Cyrillus (393-460) and pope Gelasius (d. 496), and reversed it. Theodoret and Gelasius argued that the bread underwent no change of substance in

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 3:23:2. See also his *Commentary on Romans*, on 3:6 – God cannot be unjust, *etc.*

⁷⁹ McLelland, p. 207.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.103. Monophysitism is the heresy that blends Christ's deity and humanity into one.

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the eucharist, therefore neither did the flesh of Christ in its union with deity. Martyr simply put it the other way round – the flesh of Christ underwent no change of substance in its union with deity, therefore neither did the bread in the eucharist.

Martyr's underlying concern in this *Dialogue* was to set forth the meaning of the incarnation, not so much as a static union of substances, but as a person acting divinely and humanly in history, focally in his dying and rising again. It was this dynamism of incarnate personal action which revealed God, saved humankind, and made possible a personal union and communion between the two. Consequently, the *res ipsa* of the eucharist was not a substance – the flesh of Christ considered as a material thing – but the living person of Jesus Christ himself; and his saving relationship with his church was not substantial and static, but personal, dynamic, in the Holy Spirit.⁸¹ The dimension of time was as important as that of space. In the eucharist, therefore, the sacramental *action* was the medium of communion with Christ. 'This is my body' was inseparable from 'Take and eat.' Or as Martyr put it, 'The whole eucharist is founded on action: outside of that, not even its name can be retained.'⁸² It was in the taking and eating of the bread, and in the drinking of the cup, that Christ communicated his life to his people. The eucharistic elements were instruments and vectors of Christ's self-giving in this process. The Lutheran view (so Martyr feared) was dangerously preoccupied with a merely static spatial concept of Christ's presence, and this, he felt, did not do justice to the true nature of the church's union with her Saviour in the Spirit.

This, then, is a brief overview of Peter Martyr's doctrine of the eucharist. Along with Calvin, he pioneered the distinctively Reformed understanding of this sacrament, and his theology both here and in general had widespread and lasting influence in the sixteenth century. The time has come, I think, for his name to be reinstated among the very front rank of Continental Protestant Reformers, so that they read Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, Calvin and Martyr, if we are to pay history's due debt to Italy's most famous Protestant.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 185ff.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 185.