

# Introduction

TALKING ABOUT THE DIVINE and experiencing the divine have served as two basic activities of Western religious persons, whether socially constructed, anthropologically innate, or a combination thereof. Many claim to experience God through particular religious experience. This is spirituality, broadly speaking. Many also talk with others about their experience of God in pursuit of universal knowledge about ultimate reality or, at the very least, a shared narrative or set of complementary narratives that correlate with their own particular experience and posits claims about the divine as such. Talking about the divine, in particular, is the doing of theology. Dwelling either solely on God (or the Gods for that matter) as such or spiritual experience as such, apart from one another can run the risk of forgetting religious roots, ignoring the particular experience of others, and lacking a shared significance. Dwelling solely on experience can lead to missing the forest for the trees while dwelling solely on the divine can lead to missing the trees for the forest. A good forester will account equally for both the particular trees and the forest as such, as well as paying attention to both the emergent undergrowth and the old deadwood. In this book, I advocate for becoming like the forester in the exploration of theology and spirituality, without losing sight of one for the other. In so doing, theology and spirituality via (pansacramentalism) are held in intimate conversation with each other while paying attention to both classical and contemporary claims about God as such and spiritual experience. To maintain sight of both forest and trees, God and experience, this book puts forth a method of mediation: (pan)sacramental and symbolic mediation.

The tension between theology and spirituality, and the need to retain their interdependence, is by no means a new endeavor. In this book, I offer one promising approach for maintaining their interdependence while recognizing that it is certainly need not be the only approach. I term this approach a philosophy of pansacramental and symbolic mediation, in

which all things hold the potential to function as sacramental and symbolic mediators between God and the experience of God. Sacraments (not just the “seven” or “two,” but all things), as symbols, mediate between particular spiritual experiences of the divine and the universal theological implications that arise from them. They maintain the tension between our metaphorical forest and the trees: God and our experience of God respectively. Sacramentality, sacraments, and symbols, remain a part of all religious traditions, both explicitly and implicitly. They beckon a continual return to them for critique and (re)evaluation, both new and old, in emerging contexts.

In what may seem like a journey through a forest comprised of an eclectic collection of diverse trees (and whole forests), this book represents the inherent interdisciplinary nature of the study of religion, theological reflection, and especially the study of spirituality. For this reason, the voices represented in the following pages are diverse, but all strive to express the divine while respecting the particularity of their contextual experience of the divine. In an interdisciplinary field such as the study of religion, one of the main tasks is to strive for an understanding of the relationship between and amongst the trees in order to see the forest. Further, it is to recognize that there are multiple forests and it is appropriate to attempt to strive to make some sense of the relationship between and amongst whole forests. Lurking among the trees within the forests, while at times attempting to climb them into the canopies in order to catch glimpses of the forests both below and beyond, in this book I set out as the forester seeking understanding. Remaining a part of the forest and trees, I tread with, hopefully, a sense of great humility. With this in mind, I strive for, to some degree, but not wholly, what Raimon Panikkar strove for, in his 1988–89 Gifford Lectures, when he said, “these meditations do not constitute a system of a scientific hypothesis intended to prove something else. I would like to believe that they are truly *philo-sophia*, which is perhaps the only true human *Sophia*.”<sup>1</sup> This project does not advocate for a system, but rather seeks *Sophia* from a philosophy of sacramental and symbolic mediation.

Part I (chapters 1–6) sets the stage by introducing the main categories of the book: sacramentality, theology, and spirituality. Chapter 1 reviews the history of the problem of theology and spirituality becoming divorced from one another while also tracing the history and development of the term spirituality. This leads to the proposal of a working definition of the term spirituality drawn from scholars of the contemporary study of Christian spirituality such as Sandra M. Schneiders, Bernard McGinn, and Philip Sheldrake. Finally, chapter 1 previews the approach of constructing

1. Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, 14 (italics his).

a philosophy of sacramental mediation, which carries implications for the remainder of the book. Chapter 2 opens by establishing the history of the relationship between theology and spirituality before providing a view of the current situation today. Chapter 3 turns to the foundation of sacramentality by offering a brief history of sacramental theology and its philosophical foundations. It begins with an explanation of the Hebrew root *-zkr*, “to make memorial,” in so far as it serves as a foundation for understanding the functionality of sacramentality. New Testament sacramentality is then reviewed in the context of the Latin term *sacramentum* and Greek term *mysterion*. A review of the Last Supper serves as a model for sacramental experience and functionality going forward. *Sacramentum* through the middle ages is then reviewed in more detail in the work of Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas. Chapter 4 raises the caution of the Protestant Principle in approaching sacramentality represented by Luther and Paul Tillich. It might be argued that no purview of the concept of sacrament in the Christian West is complete without a recognition of the influence of the Reformers. The aim of chapters 3–4 is to provide a foundational history of sacramentality prior to exploring the sacramental theology of twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner. Thus Chapter 5 narrows from the broad scope of sacramental theology in general to the particular sacramental theology and vision of Karl Rahner. According to a 1978 poll of North American theologians, Karl Rahner ranked behind only Aquinas and Tillich, and ahead of Augustine and Luther, as having the greatest influence on their own thinking.<sup>2</sup> Over three decades later, it is hard to imagine that Rahner has fallen too many positions on such a list. In fact, while interest in his theology remains strong, some of the unexplored corners of his work are continually being probed and illuminated. His writings on spirituality, for instance, continue to elicit wider interest and acceptance evidenced by the recent publication of his compiled essays, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this emerging interest in his mystical and spiritual theology prove accurate the insightful comment by Phil Endean who recognizes that, “the problem is not that Rahner’s theology and spiritual vision have been tried and found wanting; they have been found difficult and left untried.”<sup>4</sup> Rahner has offered one of the major modern sacramental theologies in the West, proffering an organic grace-filled cosmos which sacramentally expresses God in and through all things; I refer to this theological cosmology as pansacramental. In order to examine Rahner

2. Kelly, *Karl Rahner*, 1.

3. Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*.

4. Endean, “Introduction,” *Spiritual Writings*, 29.

properly, chapter 5 necessary reviews some of his basic Thomist tendencies followed by an overview of his theological project in general. His “symbolic reality” is then explained, after which I stress his pansacramental cosmology and explore panentheistic possibilities therein. Rahner’s theology of symbol and sacrament provide the basis for the philosophy of sacramental mediation and pansacramental vision put forth in this book. Chapter 6 moves the conversation beyond Aristotle and Aquinas by reviewing the postmodern sacramental theology of Louis Marie Chauvet as an alternative, but no less inadequate, to an Aristotelian substance metaphysics-based sacramental theology.

Part II (chapters 7–10) shifts the focus from the universality of sacramental theology to the study of particularity in sacramental spirituality. Chapter 7 examines the spiritual implications of the Ignatian Principle, a principle that in many ways formed Rahner’s spiritual identity as a Jesuit. Since the study of spirituality, as lived religious experience of the divine in the world, involves the examination of particular lived experience, part two presents three particular case studies in sacramental spirituality. Chapter 8 examines Thomas Merton and the theme of place in his later years. Merton’s contemplative method is correlated with the narrative from his later journals as he sought to find a new semi-permanent place to live. Chapter 9 examines the spirituality of Nicholas Black Elk through the lens of interreligious theology while entertaining the possibility of, and offering an attempt to de-scandalize, multiple religious belonging. In particular, it examines the role of sacramental mediation in the spirituality of his native Lakota tradition and its promise for learning across religious traditions. Chapter 10 turns to the medium of literature and examines the sacramental worldviews that come out in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and Wendell Berry’s Port William novels. These three case studies provide data of particular lived religious experience in three different contexts.

Part III (chapters 11–14) provides the most constructively robust and original theological work of the book in laying out a proposal for understanding of finding all things in the divine via pansacramentalism. Chapter 11, drawing on Hegel’s method of *sublation*, sets out to reconcile the universality of theology (part I) with the particularity of spirituality (part II). After applying Hegel’s method to theology, spirituality, and sacramentality, it discusses the philosophical functionality of sacraments as symbols. Great care is taken to correlate with, and distinguish from, one another both symbols and sign. Inspired by Paul Ricoeur, I propose a criteriology of sacrament as symbols by suggesting that sacraments, as functional religious symbols, concretize by a) particularizing the universal, b) subjectifying the objective, and by c) rendering inner-reflection experiential. Further, sacraments, as

symbols, invite transformative participation. Finally, this chapter suggests that emphasis on sacramentality offers a boon to the turn to relationality in contemporary philosophy by exposing, and therefore abolishing, false dichotomies. Chapter 12 explores panentheism, both classical and contemporary approaches. As an emerging concept in philosophical theology, panentheism posits all things in God and God in all things in order to combat pantheism's radical emphasis on God's immanence and classical Christian theism's alleged emphasis on God's transcendence. In this way, it strives to balance God's immanence with God's transcendence. Given panentheism's diversity, chapter 12 reviews seven prominent panentheists in so far as they contribute to the conversation on "panentheistic pansacramentalism" in chapter 14 and the relationship between and among God, world, person and the place of suffering in chapter 13. The seven panentheists (some explicit and others implicit) are Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Schelling, Karl Rahner, Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, Gregory Palamas (and *theōsis* in the Eastern Orthodox Christianity), and Matthew Fox. Chapter 13 turns to the reality of suffering in the world and the challenge it presents to a panentheistic and pansacramental worldview. A view of reality that advocates for all things having the potential to serve as representations of God in time and place ought to take seriously the reality of suffering in the world. Further, it ought to wrestle with the implication that suffering too might serve as a sacramental representation of God in the world. In this regard, this chapter turns to the work of Martin Buber's Hasidic pansacramentalism, Abraham Joshua Heschel's theology of divine pathos, Jürgen Moltmann's Christian application of Heschel's thought, and entertains the possibility of a provisional panentheism in the context of a Polkinghornian realized eschatology and soteriological panentheism. Chapter 14 attempts to set the pansacramental view proposed in the book into a context of doing theology interreligiously. It proposes "panentheistic pansacramentalism" as a new model for understanding the God-world relationship. This view relies on the metaphors of the relation of the artist to her art and the mother to her child. This model is then applied to the context of interreligious encounter by sketching a beginning to a pansacramental theology of religious pluralism. A method for doing theology interreligiously follows which offers an example based on the content of this book, and is then placed within the context of the interdisciplinary field of interreligious studies. It concludes with some very brief comments on potential avenues for theological exploration going forward.