

Article

Sacramentality, Chaos Theory and Decoloniality

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Abstract: This essay considers how an expanded understanding of sacramentality is enhanced by engagement with chaos theory and decolonial theory. These unique lenses enlarge traditional Roman Catholic frameworks for considering God’s self-communication through sacramental action as well as the agency of ordinary believers and even non-believers in the sacramental enterprise.

Keywords: coloniality; decoloniality; chaos theory; sacrament; post-colonial theory; pandemonium tremendum

1. Introduction

It is well established doctrinally and empirically that sacramentality is core to Roman Catholic teaching and practice. A traditional expression of the doctrinal centrality of this belief is found in the “sacramental principle”, that everything in the created world has the potential for revealing God (Himes 2014). The centrality of the sacraments and their liturgies to the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic church—especially the Eucharist—is magisterially epitomized in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s teaching that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed ... [and] the source from which all its power flows” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1996, no. 10). From an empirical perspective, already in the 1990s sociologist Andrew Greeley (d. 2013) believed he could prove statistically that sacramentality was at the heart of the Roman Catholic imagination (Greeley 1991), a position he espoused throughout his lifetime (see Greeley 2001). This stance was supported by the work of other sociologists (e.g., Dinges et al. 1998) and theologians (e.g., Tracy 1998).

While the “catholic” imagination might be decidedly sacramental, data yet demonstrates that sacramental practice among Roman Catholics in the United States is in steady decline. According to recent figures from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), over the past decade there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of infant baptisms, first communions, confirmations, and priestly ordinations, while the number of self-identified Roman Catholics in the U.S. is holding steady or showing a slight increase (CARA 2019).

Although some might suggest that this decline in engagement with the official sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church signals a waning of our sacramental imagination, another explanation seems more likely: Roman Catholic sacramental practices and their accompanying imaginations and spiritualities are becoming more liquid.

In 2000, Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman christened the current era one of “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000). While previous periods in history witnessed cycles of sometimes radical disintegration and renewal, Bauman argues that current modernity is different. Whereas the “solids” of a previous era (e.g., monarchy) were replaced by new solids (e.g., communism in Russia), in this modernity melting solids are not being displaced by new and improved solids. Rather, the state of commerce, relationships, education, society and even self-identity are characterized by liquidity, deregulation, liberalization and what Bauman calls “flexibilization”: constantly poised for change (Bauman 2000, p. 3).

In a parallel vein, there are yet those who contend that we are witnessing liquid forms of religion and even an era of a liquid church. British theologian Pete Ward asserts that this liquid moment is an opportunity to promote a new way of being church within contemporary culture: more diffuse and less institutionalized (Ward 2002). Kees De Groot has a different image of liquid church that he believes takes the work of Bauman more seriously. His approach to “liquid *koinonia*” attempts to value momentary types of community in which people take part in various degrees (De Groot 2007, p. 189).

The ritual version of this phenomenon is what some have deemed “liquid ritualizing”. Liquid ritualizing is characterized by an openness to ritual transfer, i.e., the reshaping of ritual to respond to a transformed context, including the borrowing of elements from other traditions (Arfman 2014, p. 23). According to Arfman, ideas freely seep, ooze and flow from one tradition to another. While not new, Arfman contends that there is an overabundance of ritual transfer today (Arfman 2014, p. 4). Decades earlier, in her discussion of “ritual invention”, Catherine Bell agrees that while ritual invention is not a new phenomenon, the freedom people now feel “to eschew any claims for ritual antiquity may be relatively unprecedented” (Bell 1997, p. 225).

In my own work, I have espoused the need for the Roman Catholic Church to be more intentional in liquidizing our sacramentality in teaching and practice (Foley 2019). Previously, my proposals were rooted in the theological concept of *sensus fidelium*, i.e., “a basic means of understanding the faith and as such exercises a truth-finding and truth-attesting function that has as its special characteristic that it takes into account the faithful’s experience in the world” (Rush 2009, p. 2; also, Rush 2017).

This exploration moves that discussion forward with two new dialogue partners: chaos theory and decolonial theory. These diverse yet complementary lenses provide unique optics for reimagining sacramentality in this liquid era. In particular, these offer singular avenues for expanding—maybe even exploding—the classic frameworks that honor both the mystery of God and the agency of human subjects in the sacramental interchange in fresh ways. The reason for engaging both of these concepts in this sacramental exploration is that chaos theory brings new frames for understanding God’s action in the sacramental enterprise, and decolonial theory does the same for pondering people’s action in this enterprise. If sacraments are actions requiring engagement—or as Edward Schillebeeckx would have it “encounter” (Schillebeeckx 1963)—of both God and people (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1996, no. 7), then it seems both appropriate and necessary when expanding our sacramental imaginations to address both of these actors. Chaos theory provides a fresh optic for reimagining the nature of God’s action in sacraments often framed through the theological shorthand *ex opera operato*, and decolonial theory an intriguing lens for reimagining people’s action often framed as *ex opera operantis*. To that end, this essay will first examine the nature and contribution of chaos theory with particular attention to its theological ramifications concerning the gracious self-communication of God in the visible world. Next, we will turn to a consideration of decolonial theory and its contribution to a more liberated view of human subjects, especially but not exclusively the baptized, in sacramental practice. We will close with a brief conclusion.

2. Chaos Theory and the Mystery of God’s Sacramental Self-Giving

It was the 1993 blockbuster *Jurassic Park* that introduced the concept of chaos theory to the masses through its character Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum), a self-styled “chaotician.” The language and foundational principles of chaos theory, however, had been around for decades before. The work of French mathematician Henri Poincaré (d. 1912) concerning the so called “*n*-body problem” (Poincaré 1890, 2017) about the predictability of planetary movements is often placed at the birth of this theory (Oestreicher 2007). Another key figure was the Soviet mathematician Andrey Nikolaevich Kolmogorov (d. 1987), particularly his studies of integrability and the unexpectedly complicated nature of simple deterministic equations (Livi et al. 2003, p. 4). The development of advanced computers in the mid-twentieth century provided the tool to challenge forever the prevailing deterministic theories rooted in the work of Isaac Newton (d. 1726). Pivotal was the work of meteorologist Edward Lorenz (d. 2008), sometimes called the “father of chaos theory” (Chang 2008). Lorenz was attempting to

understand the chaotic behavior in weather and was encountering difficulties in creating a mathematical model that could accurately predict the weather. In running an experiment on weather modeling in 1961, Lorenz discovered that even the divergence of one thousandth of a decimal point would render vastly different results (Lorenz 1963). His conclusion was “that any physical system that behaved nonperiodically would be unpredictable” (Gleick 1987, p. 18). His insight is sometimes referenced as the “butterfly effect.” That moniker stems from a lecture Lorenz offered at the 1972 conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, entitled “Predictability: does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” (Lorenz 1972). The actual term “chaos theory” was coined by mathematician James A. York and his student Tien-Yien Li in their 1975 article on the topic (Li and York 1975).

While multiple aspects of this relatively young theory continue to be debated, and consensus around a clear definition of chaos theory remains difficult to establish, its influence increasingly expands. Besides serious engagement in the previously noted fields of physics, mathematics and meteorology, the impact of chaos theory is also emerging in fields such as theoretical biology and engineering (Strogatz 2001), medicine and pharmacology (Kumar and Hedge 2012), and even theology.

Early on, this discussion in theological circles was broached from the perspective of “chance.” The British statistician David Bartholomew (d. 2017), who published a groundbreaking work on the relationship between theology and chance (Bartholomew 1984), maps out some of this work in his article “God and Chance,” though his later writings show a preference for the language of “unpredictability” rather than chance (Bartholomew 2016). Bartholomew does not ground his theological engagement with the topic of chance in the work of Lorenz, but more in quantum physics, biology and evolutionary theory. These fields and their penchant for stressing the unpredictability of nature provoked serious challenges to understanding Divine action and the nature of God’s providence. In response, Bartholomew and others have argued that “since chance is such an integral part of creation, it must be part of God’s plan . . . [and] that everything which happens is ultimately God’s responsibility” (Bartholomew 1984, p. 118). The theologian’s task, therefore, is to muse respectfully about this divine mystery—at least unpredictable if not chaotic from a human perspective—while still charting a path for responsible living and believing.

One who does that deftly is James Huchingson in his theological reflection on what he calls the *pandemonium tremendum*, which is an apt analogy for chaos theory in theological mode. According to Huchingson, *pandemonium tremendum* “is the state antecedent to the creation, the comprehensive, unconditioned, and indeterminate source or ground of diversity among determinate things. It is the formless and the void of the *tohuwabohu* and the agitated deep of the *tehom*” (Huchingson 2001, p. 109). A former researcher for NASA, then associate professor of religious studies, Huchingson is attempting to develop “a model of God derived from an account of the primordial chaos” (Huchingson 2001, p. 222). Part of that project is embracing the Genesis revelation (1:2) of the abyss (אֲהוּמָה) as a resource for holy inventiveness rather than some vat of useless or even demonic phenomena. As theologian An Yountae affirms, *tehom* is not merely raw chaos, but also “the womb of creative potential” (Yountae 2017, p. 11). Drawing upon communication theories and informed by the revolution in quantum mechanics, non-linear chaos theory, and the recent theory shattered accomplished through the use of computers (à la Lorenz), Huchingson is committed to this cosmological exploration in the hopes of generating a useful and credible metaphysic. A central theological dialogue partner for him is Paul Tillich.

What seems most useful about Huchingson’s reflections is his contention that this *pandemonium tremendum* does not contradict any notion of an all-powerful God. Rather, he argues, that it is completely consonant with Tillich’s understanding of “inexhaustible abundance”, without which God could not be God (Huchingson 2002, p. 396). In this metaphysic, God does not police the chaos, but witnesses to it, bringing the divine will to bear upon it when necessary, and employing it as a virtually limitless storehouse for creation. His riff on God’s question to Job, “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow” (Job 38:22) illustrates this point:

Snow consists of delicate hexagonal flakes of ice, each with an intricate and novel geometrical design. As a deluge of countless exquisite flakes, a blizzard is an accurate and revealing symbol for the infinite variety of the *Pandemonium Tremendum*. Snow is sent by God, but what is its origin? A scientifically innocent fantasy would imagine a storehouse for the snow, available to God to send upon the earth. In like manner, but placed in a metaphysical framework, the primordial chaos is the storehouse of variety that God likewise releases upon the earth to create, constitute, and sustain its integrity and order. If this image is accurate, God is necessary as the power that contains the primordial chaos, the one who “stores” it and places it “at hand” as a ready source of nurturing variety. (Huchingson 2002, p. 398)

Analogously, one could imagine the “sacramental principle,” with its presupposition that everything in creation has the potential for revealing the divine, as positing its own form of *pandemonium tremendum*: or more aptly a *pandemonium sacramentum*. In this imaginary, sacramentality like snow is an inexhaustible resource upon which God draws in self-communicating to the world and shaping a sacramental people. God does not “police” this *pandemonium sacramentum* but is a witness to it as an inexhaustible and divinely willed invitation so that humanity might attend to God’s manifestation in one of its infinite varieties, and respond in gratitude and gracious living.

Such a framework respects the ambiguous New Testament language of *mysterion*, especially as it appears in the Pauline literature: much less concrete than its Latinization as *sacramentum*. Paul advances the concept of *mysterion* as the mystery of God in Christ (Col. 2:2), prepared before the world existed (i.e., in the *pandemonium tremendum*, 1 Cor. 2:7), kept hidden in God (Eph 3:9), concealed from the rulers of this age (1 Cor 2:8), but which breaks into the world and human history (Rom 16:26).

Augustine (1954, d. 430) anticipates the blizzard of sacramentality in his wide-ranging use of the language of *sacramentum*, employing that term for over 300 ecclesial actions (Coutourier 1953). This expansiveness is echoed in his teaching that a sacrament is a kind of “visible word” (Augustine, *In Johannis evangelium tractatus*, 5.6 & 80.3). While Augustine’s sacramental imagination seems bound by ecclesial frameworks, contemporary scholars have gone further. Alexander Schmemmann (d. 1983) was a pioneer in his 1965 publication “The World as Sacrament” (Schmemmann 1965a, 1979). Schmemmann believed creation to be an essential means “both of the knowledge of God and communion with him” (Schmemmann 1979, p. 220). As an “epiphany” of God, Schmemmann contends that “the world was created as a matter of a sacrament” (Schmemmann 1979, p. 223). Kristine Suna-Koro moves even further, contending that creation itself—not Christ, as in the Schillibeeckxian universe (Schillebeeckx 1963)—is the *Ursakrament* (Suna-Koro 2017). While he does not explicitly employ the language of sacramentality, Pope Francis seems to concur with this cosmic perspective. In his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Francis (2015) speaks of the entire world as “a caress of God” (no. 84), considers the world a “divine manifestation” (no. 85) and hymns the “sacredness of the world” (no. 85) that not only manifests God but is actually a “locus of [God’s] presence” (no. 88).

One of the startling ramifications of such a *pandemonium sacramentum* is that, even wider than Augustine could image, sacramentality thrives outside of Roman Catholicism and beyond Christianity. Thus, Herbert Vorgrimler, among others, can ponder the existence of “natural sacraments”, i.e., expressions of sacramentality that existed before Judaeo-Christian revelation, or in non-Christian and non-Jewish humanity up to the present (Vorgrimler 1992, p. 16). Maybe even more unsettling is the possibility that sacramentality can thrive in the work of self-professed agnostics, apostates and atheists. Thus, Richard Kearney can posit a sacramental imagination in literary figures such as novelists Marcel Proust (d. 1922), James Joyce (d. 1941) and Virginia Woolf (d. 1941). Furthermore, Kearney argues that the “methodic suspension of confessional truth claims . . . allows for a specific ‘negative capability’ regarding questions of doubt, proof, dogma or doctrine, so as to better appreciate the holy *thisness* and *thereness* of our flesh and blood existence . . . allowing us to attend to the sacramental marvel of the everyday without the constraints of any particular confession” (Kearney 2009, pp. 245–46).

The empirical fact of unpredictability foundational to chaos theory provides a challenging but refreshing lens for reimagining sacramentality today. Edward Lorenz attempted to craft a theoretical

model that would predict weather patterns with a significant degree of reliability. In the end, however, he came to understand that such was simply not practical. Analogously, Roman Catholicism has attempted to teach—sometimes impose—a theoretical model of sacramentality, still broadly influenced by scholastic thought, that presumes to explain the number, nature and effect of sacraments (e.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, nos. 1113ff). Given the unpredictability of the very mystery of God from a human standpoint, the fluid and pliant workings of the Holy Spirit, and the *pandemonium tremendum* that resources God's holy will, such ecclesial modeling is similarly impractical and brittle. In Jurassic Park, chaotician Ian Malcomb chided financier John Hammond for trying to control evolution. Malcomb summarizes his critique by noting "life will not be contained. Life breaks free, it expands to new territories and crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously" (Koepp 1992). To paraphrase, sacramentality similarly will not be contained. It breaks free, it expands to new territories and crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously.

3. Decoloniality and the Mystery of God's Sacramental People

While chaos theory can be a fresh framework for pondering God's self-giving in sacramental terms, decoloniality provides a different lens, useful in considering how human beings are agents of sacramentality.

Decoloniality is a form of critical theory emerging largely out of South America and gaining prominence over the past few decades. Coloniality is sometimes conflated with colonization, though theorists such as Walter D. Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel and others vigorously dispute such a conflation. Mignolo distinguishes these parallel but distinctive critical theories genealogically: with colonial theory lodged in French post-structuralism whereas coloniality is an epistemic shift away from European paradigms of rationality rooted in the "canonical jargon of the historiography of the Americas" (Mignolo 2011a, "Epistemic Disobedience", p. 47). Rather than genealogy, Grosfoguel distinguishes colonialism from coloniality around the presence or absence of a colonial administration. Thus, colonialism references situations "enforced by the presence of a colonial administration." Coloniality, on the other hand, continues "in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system." For him, coloniality concerns both economic exploitation as well as the production of "subjectivities and knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2006).

Central to the decolonial turn is a fierce rejection of the "underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization from the Renaissance to today" (Mignolo 2011b, *The Darker Side*, p. 2). Such logic is epitomized in René Descartes' (d. 1650) *je pense, donc je suis*. This assertion created a new moment in western thought that placed "western man" as the foundation of a knowledge; in the process "Descartes was able to claim non-situated, universal, omniscient divine knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2006) that the decolonial turn systematically analyzes and voraciously rejects. Consequently, in large measure the decolonial turn is an "epistemic reconstruction" (Quijano 2007, p. 176), that in counter distinction to Eurocentrism honors border thinking, indigenous knowledge, and minority discourse.

Besides an epistemic venture, decoloniality is also political and economic. As an embodied enterprise it is about both thinking and doing (Mignolo 2011b, *The Darker Side*, p. xxiv). The incarnational side of the decolonial turn is manifest in concerns about the market place, labor, political structures, but also symbolization and the arts (Maldonado-Torres 2011). Decolonial pioneer Enrique Dussel recognizes that art is an ideology. Because of that, he argues that it is essential to study "the aesthetic production of works of art which express in their 'fidelity' to the face of the oppressed . . . critical, prophetic and eschatological 'beauty'" (Dussel 1980, p. 50). While not explicitly a decolonial theorist, Alejandro García-Rivera's emphasis on a theological aesthetic that lifts up the lowly is a parallel confirmation of the critical role of prophetic modes of beauty (García-Rivera 1999).

One key mode of symbolization critical to our reflection here is ritual and its sub-genre of liturgy. From a political perspective, rituals of many forms have been used as tools of coloniality. Thus, in his reflection on the repressive role of images, symbolization and belief patterns in colonialism, Quijano notes,

In the beginning colonialism was a product of a systematic repression . . . of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing . . . images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. (Quijano 2007, p. 169)

Marc Ellis is pointed in his unmasking of liturgy as a technology of colonization and coloniality when he notes that “liturgy often pretends that its domain is primarily or only religious,” and recognizes that many “experience the proclamation of liturgy’s innocence as naïve” (Ellis 2015, p. 48). Kristine Suna-Koro contends that “liturgy has been part and parcel of the coloniality of being, power and knowledges. Many Christian liturgies . . . are still permeated with unexamined imperialistic symbols, images of conquest, patriarchy, and racism” (Suna-Koro 2015, p. 250). For Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Christian ritual is not only an instrument of social control but can also be an instrumental of *cultural genocide* (Johnson 2018, p. 6).

Parallel to post-colonial theorists, scholars of coloniality recognize that the decolonial turn is essentially a rejection of the matrix of power controlling “authority, labor, sexuality and subjectivity—that is, the practical domains of political administration, production and exploitation, personal life and reproduction, and world-view and interpretive perspective” (Martinot 2008). Mignolo argues that the appropriate response to this Eurocentric matrix of power is what he calls “dewesternizing” through a process of “delinking”: be that political, economic or epistemic delinking. As examples of political and economic delinking, Mignolo notes the need to end international dependency on institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. A critical arena for this work, according to Mignolo, is the World Public Form (WPF) “where ‘delinking’ is the norm, the method and the orientation” (Mignolo 2012).

In his discussion of delinking, Mignolo makes an explicit turn to Christianity. He notes:

Another sphere of civil society in which dewesternization currently is being discussed is within a domain that I refer to as religious-political and epistemic delinking. The most visible, though certainly not the only line of thinking, has been advanced by Islamic scholarship Related and parallel to Islamic dewesternization, there is a movement among Christians to “dewesternize the Gospels.” If these tendencies persist it will facilitate a dialogue among civilizations that the WPF is seeking, and make visible that both Islam and Christianity are, in a way, forces of liberation that are captive within their own institutions and belief systems. To do so, Christians must delink from the imperial/colonial trap of Christianity in different ways and through different routes. Dewesternizing Christianity is a more complex phenomenon than Islamic dewesternization. Although Christianity was, originally, a non-Western religion, it became Westernized and imperial. (Mignolo 2012)

Key to that delinking for Roman Catholicism is a rethinking of the nature of sacramentality so central to its self-definition and theologies. Decoloniality is about returning agency in “thinking and doing” to indigenous peoples, local practices and contextual epistemologies. For Roman Catholics, a key route of this empowerment is returning and nourishing sacramental agency to the baptized. Whether one approves or not, increasing numbers of Roman Catholics are “delinking” from official church teaching and prescribed practices. They are engaging with new found freedom in the liquid ritualizing and reinvention noted above. Seldom, however, is such ritualizing honored as an authentic mode of sacramentalizing by leadership and, instead, is at best tolerated as acts of personal piety or dismissed as ritual deviance by unauthorized laity.

In our teaching and preaching, however, in our pastoral care and training of church ministers, the task of delinking sacramentality from clerical control and canonical imperatives is a critical route. Many baptized are incapable of recognizing or admitting a sacramental act without the presence of clergy. Even in the sacrament of marriage, in which the spouses are the acknowledged ministers and subjects with Christ of the sacrament (Belcher 2019, pp. 13–14), confusion about sacramental

agency abounds, evidenced in the frequent query by an engaged couple to a priest: “Will you marry us, Father?”.

Surprisingly, there are tremors of sacramental chaos even within official teaching and law: for example, allowing baptism to be administered by someone who is not Roman Catholic, Christian, or a believer of any stripe. Archetypic are nurses in neo-natal units in cities with a large Roman Catholic population such as Boston and Chicago, who are trained to baptize if an infant of Roman Catholic parents is deemed to be in danger of death. When a Hindu or Muslim or agnostic nurse alone in a neo-natal unit in such a situation baptizes, there is literally no “Christian” in the room, but “Christ is present” ([Sacrosanctum Concilium 1996](#), no. 7).

Sacramental chaos in revelation and agency expands much further, however. In the incarnation, God chose to wed divinity with humanity, but not only in one time and place. As Anthony Kelly has aptly noted, Jesus resurrection and ascension did not result in an “exarnation”. He elaborates:

Though he is indeed “out of sight” as far as his physical, historical presence among us as Jesus of Nazareth is concerned, he is not so lost in the clouds . . . as to be removed from all human communication and dematerialized into some other realm Rather, it is better to admit that we human beings are not yet fully embodied in the Body of Christ. From this viewpoint, the resurrection-ascension of Christ is an expanding bodily event, in according with God’s continuing incarnational action in the world. ([Kelly 2010](#), p. 803)

God continues to wed with humanity; every human being—not just the baptized—is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). That renders human beings not only capable of imbibing in the very sacramentality of creation and life but also, through a decolonial lens, renders every human being as potential agents of the same. Mignolo argued that delinking from the colonial power matrix would neither destroy it nor ignore. Rather, he posited a conflictual co-existence of rewesternization with dewesternization ([Mignolo 2012](#)). Delinking sacramentality from the hierarchical power matrix analogously will not necessarily destroy or displace hierarchy or official church. Rather, it will balance it—admittedly in a sometimes conflictual yet necessary co-existence—with the agency of human beings who are not simply *recipients* of sacraments but actually commissioned through holy invitation to be *agents* of sacramentality ([Sacrosanctum Concilium 1996](#), no 7).

Here, the *pandemonium tremendum* that renders God as God, transformed into *pandemonium sacramentum* that honors the infinite ways in which God self-communicates to creatures and creation, transmutes into *pandemonium hominum*. It is no longer the storehouse of snow that dazzles in its abundance and diversity, but the storehouse of humanity, each human being analogous in particularity to each snowflake. The decolonial turn urges that this seven-billion-plus storehouse of incarnate particularity—grounded in untold forms of native knowing, contextual believing, and indigenious ritualizing—be honored and empowered as agents of sacramentality across the range of joys and sorrows, resurrections and crucifixions that shape the liturgies of their lives.

4. Conclusions

In the theological imagination of Alexander Schmemmann, “the basic definition of man [sic] is that he is the *priest*. He stands at the centre of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God” ([Schmemmann 1965b](#), p. 16). Schmemmann also believes that after the Fall of humanity narrated in Genesis, human beings became less “priests” and more consumers”, forgetting the sacramentality of the world.

There is no doubt that *homo adorans*, as Schmemmann would have it, has become *homo consumens*. As Vincent Miller has incisively explained, religion itself has become one of those consumables ([Miller 2003](#)). Suggesting that all of humanity has forgotten the sacramentality of the world, however, seems to be an inappropriate, even simplistic binary. Sometimes it is not human beings or societies that have lapsed into forgetfulness, but organized religions such as Roman Catholicism that have forgotten to recognize the unpredictable self-communication of God in the cosmos, and similarly failed

to recognize the unpredictable responses in the ritual inventiveness and liquid sacramentality that human beings instinctively practice.

Katy Payne is a one-time musician turned zoologist who spent decades studying the sounds of whales, eventually credited along with colleague Linda Guinee for discovering the songs of humpback whales. Later in her career, she was visiting the Portland zoo, when she “felt” more than heard rumbling communication between two Asian elephants standing on opposite sides of a concrete wall. Enlisting the help of acoustic biologists, they discovered infrasonic communication, low frequency elephant discourse inaccessible to human ears. This led to the development of the Elephant Listening Project (<http://elephantlisteningproject.org/>). Published in *Silent Thunder*, her fascinating work documents how these goliaths developed a sophisticated communication system capable of broadcasting over many miles through African forests, but well below the auditory radar of humanoids (Payne 1998).

Just as Payne did not create this infrasonic communication between the world’s largest land mammals, so tools such as chaos theory and decoloniality do not so much create new aspects of sacramentality as much as they help reveal in startling ways what is already at play. They pull back the veil on the mystery of God’s abiding invitation for creaturely engagement in divine life, as well as our erratic yet enduring attempts to respond in all of our human particularity to the holy blizzard of that invitation. They supply tools, especially to church leaders, to apprehend the uncalibrated sacramentalizing constantly emanating along wavelengths that clerical training and colonized ritually have unfortunately not prepared us to perceive. As the character Ian Malcolm reminds us: sacramentality will not be contained. It breaks free, it expands to new territories and crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously.

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