In an era of globalization, the great religions appear to be assuming a more global sway, in part because they have always been global realities, exceeding political, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. Their universal language brings together the articulations of reasoned belief and the bearing of bodily practice. These two aspects are inseparable, and their fusion is most fully realized and expressed in ritual enactment.

In terms of numbers and expansion of influence, the increased prominence of religion applies perhaps most of all to Christianity. The latter has until recently been associated with European dominance, with colonization, and with the dominance of specific dogmatic belief over practice. And yet it is the case that Christianity is expanding, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and is tending to take the more emotional, practical form as favored by Pentecostalism. At the same time, however, a far less observed intellectual revival of Christianity is taking place in Europe and to a degree in North America. This revival is marked in part by a rise in church attendance by educated young people in, for example, France, but more by an increased
cultural and political presence of young people formed by a Christian outlook.

The first phenomenon is predominantly Protestant, while the second is predominantly Catholic. Indeed, one might note that Protestantism is becoming bifurcated between those taking a nonintellectual charismatic route and those taking an intellectual “post-Protestant” route, which embraces the entirety of the Christian tradition, both prior to and after the Reformation.

This might suggest a division between a continued European obsession with theoretical belief, on the one hand, and a non-European concern with practice, on the other. Liberal theologians such as Karen Armstrong favor this contrast and espouse the focus on practice as the more authentic religious path.1 According to this position, “faith” once betokened emotional commitment; only in the modern era of the West did it come to indicate abstract cognitive commitment. Global Christianity will therefore recover an older, more authentic emphasis, which will obviate religious conflict. However, both the contrast and this judgment of the contrast are problematic.

To take the judgment first: Armstrong’s verdict perpetuates the very modernism she effects to despise. This modernism denies the cognitive relevance of emotions, desire, commitment, and ritual performance. It is correct to say that at one time “faith” as belief retained a greater connotative force of faith as personal trust, but to deny the aspect of belief altogether, as Armstrong does, is to perpetuate a post-Enlightenment hierarchy that elevates real scientific knowledge above artistic or religious intuition.

The contrast itself is also problematic. Pentecostalism is not a straightforwardly Protestant phenomenon. It accepts, as the magisterial Reformation did not, the possibility of postapostolic miracles; indeed, it concentrates on their claimed continuing reality. And when some Pentecostalists in Asia, Africa, and Latin America engage in theology (as they do in increasingly large numbers), they tend to show the same post-Protestant tendencies as in Europe and North America.

This post-Protestantism is concerned with recovering and reworking a premodern Catholic sense of the fusion of the theoretical and the practical aspects of faith. As has already been said, this fusion is most of all apparent in liturgy. The recovery of the Christian liturgical tradition, which has its roots in the ancient Christian Orient, allows us to grasp better the inherent universalism of the Christian project as spoken of by Alain Badiou and
to understand better why this universalism might be appropriate to a more globalized era.²

A Christian interpretation of liturgy confounds many of our common understandings of the nature of worship. Liturgy is not simply an outward and symbolic honoring of a God whom we know already through internal experience or conceptual reflection. Rather, it is the most important initial way in which we come to know God and the path to which we must constantly return—in excess of the relative poverty of our private emotional experiences and the equal poverty of abstract speculative theology.

Human beings are mixed creatures—part beast and part angel, as Pascal expressed it. This apparently grotesque hybridity is our miniature dignity. Unlike angels, we combine in our persons every level of the created order from the inorganic, through the organic, through the animally psychic, to the angelically intellectual.

And so God must communicate to us through our bodies and senses as a tilting of his sublime thought toward our particular mode of understanding. But this does not denote condescension and economic adaptation. Human beings, unlike angels, have a privileged access to the mute language of physical reality. This is an essential part of God’s creation, for a biblical outlook, part of the plenitude of the divine self-expression. Even if it is less than an angelic or a human rational being, it must be, as part of this plenitude, an essential part, and so reveal something of God hidden even from the angels themselves, just as the angels (according to the New Testament) could not comprehend the mystery of the incarnation. The dumb simplicity and lack of reflexivity in physical things, or the spontaneity of animals, show to us aspects of the divine simplicity and spontaneity itself, which cannot be evident to the somewhat reflective, discursive, and abstracting operation of limited human or angelic minds. This is why sacramental signs have a heuristic function; they are not just illustrative or metaphorical. They prompt us to new thought and guide us into deeper modes of meditation because they contain a surplus that thought can never fully fathom.

Liturgy is not simply a public duty relating to collective concerns (often today almost excessively expressed in the political focus of petitionary prayers) that stand in contrast to inner spiritual formation. Rather, it is itself the primary way in which the Christian, throughout her life from baptism to extreme unction, is gradually inducted into the mystery of revelation and transformed by it.
Mystery for Saint Paul names the primal secret shown to us through Christ’s life and the liturgical participation in that secret: “the wisdom shown in mystery that was once hidden,” as one might translate the phrase in 1 Corinthians 2:7. Mystery is a Greek term whose early context was the mystery religions, especially those of Eleusis, which reenacted the descent of Persephone into the underworld and her partial rescue. While such rites had initially been seen as local fertility cults, when they were later observed by perplexed foreigners, they often became fused with a more metaphysical element and were thought to offer participants an induction into immortal life for their souls. The word mysterion referred to the rite itself that revealed and yet preserved a secret. One can say that Paul’s use of the term for the revelation in Christ as perpetuated by the church implies that he regarded the historical drama of Christ’s life (which indeed began with his obscurely liturgical baptism by John in the Jordan) as itself a liturgy, the perfect worship of the Father that could be performed by the Son alone. However, Paul implicitly saw the liturgy of the church as a genuine making present again, and even as a continuation of, the original salvific drama.

It follows that we are redeemed through participation in the liturgical process; this is at once a speaking, acting, sensorial, and contemplative process, as twentieth-century German liturgist Dom Odo Casel insisted. The Christian mystery, like the pagan mysteries, concerns an induction into things shown, said, and done. Otherwise, Christ would be a human example only and not the God-man who infused into us a new sharing in the divine life by conjoining his own body with the body of the church. However, the Christian mystery, unlike pagan mysteries, is an initiation offered to all—to slaves and metics as well as to freemen, women, and children. It brings together initiation with universal citizenship and an entering of all into a school of wisdom, thereby synthesizing mystical, political, and philosophical elements that classical antiquity had tended to keep apart.

Nor is liturgy merely intended to transform the consciousness of the worshipper by a vivid appeal to his imagination, even if this is indeed one of its aspects. Rather, as early-twentieth-century German Catholic philosopher and priest Romano Guardini emphasized, liturgy is a kind of play, something carried through like a game for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. The only reason for performing a liturgy is that there might be more liturgies and that we might eventually offer ourselves in the eschatological liturgy. That ultimate worship, like all preceding worship,
enacts and celebrates the outgoing of all things from God and the return of all things to God, including the rejection of God by created things through the perverse will of human beings and fallen angels, and the divine overcoming of this rejection through the “mystery” of the divine descent and human elevation.

Yet liturgy is a play more serious than any seriousness. It incorporates the cosmic drama of divine descent and human elevation; to be fallen means to be without the capacity of rising by one’s own account. Once Adam had asserted himself against God and so ceased to offer all back to God in worship, it was not possible for him to recover himself by recovering a true concept of the divine. This concept was available only through the right orientation of the human person—spirit, soul, and body—in worship. In order to restore human worship of God, God must himself descend in person to offer again through the human being such true human worship.

This kenotic movement central to Christian liturgy is repeated within the ordering of the individual human economy itself. Even though the body and the senses can constantly teach the mind something it does not know, requiring the mind’s humility if it is to be properly proud, it is nonetheless the case that the mind should govern the body on account of its greater capacity to abstract, judge, and comprehend. But when Adam and Eve yielded to temptation, they allowed their greedy and power-seeking passions to overrule their intellects. In this way, the natural government of the mind over the passions, the senses, and the body was overthrown.

However, Augustine, other church fathers, and Thomas Aquinas taught that this natural order is paradoxically to be restored through a further humiliation of the mind. The body, the senses, and the passions are relatively innocent; they have simply been given undue weight. The mind, on the other hand, is guilty of a far more positive perversity. So the senses must now be deployed, liturgically, to reinstruct the mind.

Because the means deployed was in the first instance the incarnation of the Logos and this involved, beyond mere instrumentality, the eternal elevation of Christ’s human nature, including his body, to unity with the Godhead, all human sensation is likewise eternally raised higher than its originally created dignity. As the Eastern Orthodox tradition has emphasized, matter—and particularly the human body—is now, after the incarnation, more porous to the passage of the divine light. The play of the liturgy is therefore a play of the newly transformed and heightened senses, beckoning the intellect to follow them back into the divine ludic economy.
Since the passions and the sensations have now become ontologically heightened, the tradition also intermittently recognized a subtle transformation in the ontological order of gender relations: a man, Christ, stands still highest among humanity, yet only as more than human, as divine reason incarnate. But within the ranks of human beings, a woman now stands in the highest place: Mary, Mother of God. Since the supposedly weaker sex first fell subject to temptation, it is the weaker sex that must reverse this temptation and be raised to the status of first among mortals, more elevated even than the cherubim. As certain medieval writers suggested, while it was Eve who seized the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil from the tree, it is Mary who through a passionate yielding to the Holy Spirit now bears in her womb the living fruit of the word of God itself, and this is later transformed into the fruit of the Eucharist, which all may eat for their salvation. The liturgical action is not only primarily a sensory affair, it is also a movement of active receptivity on the part of the church, which is identified with Mary as the bride as well as Mother of Christ. As passionate bride, she is conjoined to the bridegroom of true reason in order once more to engender the bridegroom as human son in the new form of a sacramental food that is nourishing to our entire person—body, senses, imagination, and intellect.

Finally, liturgy is neither passive contemplation nor merely a human work of art; rather, it exceeds this contrast. The liturgy is not our own but is given to us, because the life of Christ is, as we have seen, the first liturgy and continuing inner reality of our own liturgies. This is the way in which the full grace of Christ comes to us—liturgically, in baptism, the Eucharist, and the other sacraments. But because it comes to us liturgically, it is not something in which we must simply passively believe and so be “justified” by extrinsic imputation, as for the Protestant misreading of Saint Paul. Instead, because grace is liturgical, the transmission of a mystery through a sharing in that mystery, the reception of grace has from the outset also a practical dimension. In order for us to receive the action of the liturgy, we must also perform it, and in this respect it is a “human work of art.” The opus dei of the liturgy, as it was known to the Benedictine order, could not be “work” at all unless it were also a human work.

However, as Guardini suggests, liturgy exceeds the pathos of human life and the pathos of human art. The former is all too real, not just falling short of hopes and expectations, but also often lacking in authentic aspiration. Art, on the other hand, offers an idealization of life, a continuous
consolation without which life would be rendered unbearably naked and forsaken. The images of art offer us visions of the good, new possibilities of human self-realization that lie, as it were, just out of sight. These images also redeem and conserve the fleeting passage of the images offered us by nature itself. In this way they half-abolish death and can even portray death itself as suggesting an eternal life beyond life as we know it: much of the grandest human art is funereal art. Nevertheless, between art and life we continue to live in a duality of life without meaning that is doomed to death and meaning that is yoked to a virtual life and a kind of spectral eternity.

Guardini suggests that liturgy overcomes this duality because here the contrast between “real” history and artistic representation is foregone. Within liturgical time and space, we borrow liturgical roles that we put on more intensely than we inhabit our quotidian characters. Just as liturgical symbols and objects are hyper-real, more real than everyday instrumental things or words, so the worshippers become themselves as “works of art.” In this way, we can see how liturgy fulfills the purposes of art as imaging, according to modern Russian filmmaker and photographer Andrei Tarkovsky. The image should displace the original because the original thereby becomes more itself, since created things and especially human creatures are, after all, “images,” the image of God. So when in the course of liturgy we are transformed into a wholly signifying—because worshipping—body, we are at that moment closest to our fulfillment as human beings.

In these four aspects we find a context for thinking about liturgy and the senses: First, sacraments are heuristic not metaphorical. Second, the physical and sensorial liturgical enactment is itself the work of saving mystery. Third, liturgy involves a redemptive heightening of the senses into the playing of the divine game. Finally, liturgy exceeds the contrast of art and life, transforming the human body into transparent image. All these aspects must be borne simultaneously in mind in any further reflection.

Sensation, in a liturgical context, has both a passive and an active dimension, in accordance with the principle that liturgy is a divine-human work because it is a Christological work. In liturgy the participants undergo sensory experiences, but they collectively produce this sensory experience, along with the natural materials they deploy. In liturgy the spectators are also the actors or the other way around, while the roles of acting and spectating keep alternating.

First, let us consider the sensing, spectatorial aspect, remembering that this cannot readily be divided from the sensation-forming, acting aspect.
Sensory experience in liturgy is not a prompt or cue for the intellect to speak the real lines of the drama in its interior chamber. It is not an instrumental pedagogy of the mind. Indeed, insofar as the sensory and aesthetic experience of the Mass is a mode of instruction adapted to our humanity, as Aquinas emphasizes, it incites our spiritual desire to penetrate further into the secret and worship ever more ardently. Were the smell of incense, the sight of the procession, or the savor of the elements mere triggers for the recollection of concepts, they might do their work on one single occasion. But they must be repeated and returned to, and this suggests that they are vehicles for the forward moving of our spiritual desire, which can never entirely be disincarnate and thus separate from these physical lures.

This point can appear to be contradicted by the long Christian tradition of the “spiritual senses.” It was linked with meditation on Solomon’s Song of Songs, an erotic poem about the love between an unidentified man and an unidentified woman, which the church has read allegorically to refer both to the love between God and the soul and between Christ and his bride, the church. Since this poem involves an active catalog of bodily parts and sensations, a luxuriant allegoresis sought to find both spiritual and ecclesial equivalents for every one of these physical aspects. It spoke, for example, following certain beginnings with Paul, of “the eyes of faith,” of the neck as representing steadfastness, of hair that cannot suffer even when cut as representing spiritual endurance, of the ears as actively obedient to God’s word, of the lips as pouring forth the honey of divine praise, and of the feet as the heart’s following in the footsteps of previous saints and hastening to welcome Christ the bridegroom.

This might seem to reduce to the operation of a rather mechanical sort of metaphor: the senses as they function within the liturgy are natural symbols for an inner attentiveness and responsiveness to divine meaning. However, the sacraments are heuristic rather than metaphorical, and so the gestures and actions of liturgy are also sacramental in character. If sensations are essential lures for our true thinking, and all the more so in the order of redemption after the Fall, can it be simply that the “spiritual” sensations are all that really matter?

Jean-Louis Chrétien shows in his discussion of the tradition of commentary on Canticles (the Song of Songs) why this is not so. First, the idea of the spiritual senses, or the notion that there are psychic equivalents for physical sensations and even parts of the body, is traceable to Origen, as earlier thinkers such as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar have pointed
out. This holds a biblical rather than a Greek lineage, since the Bible spoke of the heart of a human being in a way that was both physical and spiritual and that included both thinking and willing as well as suggesting a concentration of the whole human personality. This sense is preserved today in the liturgical *sursum corda*, “lift up your hearts.” It is, however, the Christian reading of the Canticles as referring to our love for Christ who is God *incarnate* that seems to have suggested a kind of physicalization and diversification of the biblical “heart,” which, for Origen, was more commonly thought of in terms of the soul or *anima*, though Augustine often reverts to heart or *cordis*. One should not read this, Chrétien argues, as simply many analogues for the essential unity of the heart or soul: only in God is it the case that the diversity of the spiritual senses is mysteriously “one” in pure simplicity. Rather, there is a real diversity in the human soul, on account of its close link with the body of which it is the form, in Greek philosophical terms. The soul “hears,” for example, in its imaginative recollection or in its mental attention to God, because it is primarily conjoined to the hearing function of the physical body.16

However, Chrétien implies something more radical. The point just made can be reversed. It is not that, in a secondary move, “sensation” is metaphorically transferred from body to soul; rather it is the case that “sensing” has a dual aspect, outer and inner, from the very outset, in accordance with the double biblical meaning of *heart*. When we see something, we see it because we simultaneously imagine and grasp it to some degree with our minds. Unless we see something with the eye of the mind, we will not see anything with our physical eye at all. The same holds for all our sensations, and it is for this reason that (as Chrétien mentions) Martin Heidegger suggests that we have ears because we can hear, just as much or even more than it is the case that we hear because we have ears. Likewise, Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that we have sexual organs because we are sexual creatures, rather than the other way around.17

A related point is that if we see also with the inner eye, then we relate one mode of sensation to another. Clearly our seeing dark trees against the background of the setting sun is affected by our awareness that we can touch the one and not the other. And were it not for our sense of hearing, we would never be able to see the organ in a church as an organ, a musical instrument, at all. The mental operation of synesthesia is in play whenever just one of our physical sensations is at work. The church fathers sometimes spoke in synesthetic terms when they suggested that our eyes should
listen, our ears see, or our lips attend like ears to the word of God through a spiritual kiss. So, for our inner sense, contemplation is also active obedience and vice versa, while all our speaking to and of God must remain an active attention to his presence. But this kind of language does not remove us from our literal bodies: instead an inner and a synesthetic response invade the very surface of our sensitive skin in the course of our original sensitive responses.

What this implies for liturgical practice is that in worship we are always making a response of our incarnate souls—a response of the heart—to the incarnate God. This response is immediately inscribed in our bodies and requires no interpretation—just as, to use Chrétien’s example, a metaphorically stiff-necked person will often be literally just that. Many different psychic postures are immediately given in the stance of the human neck, as we all know. In liturgical terms this means that worshippers are invited to adopt diverse postures appropriate to the various phases of worship and the various stances that we should take before God. Sometimes we should stand before him, alert and ready as his militant troops, as Guardini suggests. Sometimes we should kneel before him, adopting a posture that, according to some writers in the Christian tradition, rehearses both corporeally and psychically the fetal position. Here we express our birth from mother church as well as our dependence on God. The drawing closer together of the knees and the face suggests for some sources a concentration around the eyes, the source of tears that should constantly be shed by the Christian soul, both for sorrow and for joy. This suffering includes a constant spiritual shedding of blood. According to a “synorganic” logic, psychic blood was regarded as blood that is clear with the luminosity of tears transparent to the divine light. At other times, in processions, the soul and body should be in movement toward God, toward other members of the congregation, or toward the world.

As for the feet, so for the hands. Sometimes they are tightly clasped together, as though we were guarding our psychic or bodily integrity. At other times, they are placed palm to palm in serene self-meeting through self-touching, which allows for the beginning of our psychic reflexivity. Equally, however, as every child used to be taught, this gesture expresses our microcosmic identity with the church and its attentive pointing toward God. Hands may also be raised in supplication or openly uplifted by the priest in a gesture of triumphant saturation by the divine. Finally, the priestly hand is often raised in blessing, an acknowledgment of what is
there and what has been done, which is a conferring of grace and allows what is there fully to be at all—echoing the divine benediction, “and God saw that it was good,” in his very act of creation.20

Saint Paul implies that every single part of the body is of spiritual significance, since each has its equivalent as a role within the collective body of Christ within the church. This, he says, applies even to our pudenda, to which the Canticles do not directly refer (1 Cor. 12:2–26). Here also, according to Paul, the Christian kenotic logic of sensation is to be observed: the most “shameful” part of either the individual or the social body is now elevated to play a significant role, since we treat our pudenda with the greatest of all honor by concealing them. But here Paul’s daring has scarcely been followed through by later commentators who, concerning the most secret and so most mysterious parts of our body, have tended to remain silent, even though they will have been aware that their role is implied by the nuptial imagery to which they are making appeal. This Pauline thematic allows us to say that a certain aspect of the eucharistic rite is fulfilled only in the sacrament of marriage by its ritual and actual consummation.

If, as we have seen, bodily postures are also inward, then conversely inner sensation has an outward aspect. Because sensation has an interior aspect from the outset, it becomes possible for this interior aspect to be deepened and so for the sight of material things to turn into the sight of spiritual things. However, the very possibility of this deepening is paradoxically connected with the excess of material things over rational thought. The mind can exceed abstract reflection in the direction of mystical encounter (the inward absorption of the liturgical mysteries) only through the constantly renewed prompting of corporeal sensing of the sacramental realities. The distance of material things from us is a vehicle for conveying the infinite distance of God from us. And because of the incarnation, in the eucharistic liturgy these two distances become one and the same.

This is the sense in which the Eucharist can become an object of contemplation that extends beyond the eucharistic liturgy itself. Here one must be judicious. There is a danger that the reserved sacrament or the elements carried in a Corpus Christi procession will become a spectacle linked with the loss of a sense that they become the body and blood of Christ only in the context of bringing about the church as the true living body of Christ.21 And this danger was historically realized. Yet the encouragement of Corpus Christi devotion that one finds in Aquinas involved no substantial step toward such degeneracy. He did not conceive of transubstantiation as a
miracle merely to be gazed upon, but rather completed the Dominican reaction against the Cathar heresy, which regarded matter as evil, by insisting on the physical manifestation of God within current time and space and our need to dwell on this wonder.

In a similar fashion, the use of complex music can and has encouraged the reduction of the eucharistic rite to the level of a concert for passive listeners. And yet, far more than traditional theology was prepared to do, we can recognize that a complexity of musical response does not betray the message of the words it accompanies so much as it accentuates the hearing of the word in such a way that it acquires a physical richness commensurate with the other sensory and performed elements of the Mass. The accentuated flow provided by music serves to convey more powerfully the truth that the Mass is the repetition and making present of the fundamental story of the world as such.

If the Eucharist renders the distance of matter from us as the distance of God from us, then when we receive the eucharistic elements, God comes to be as close to us as food and drink entering our bodies. G. W. F. Hegel suggests that human religion began when people stopped seeing nature as simply something to be eaten and started to contemplate it instead and, in doing so, considered themselves to attain to “a higher state, distinct from ordinary consciousness.” But this would be to suggest that sacramentality began with the “reservation of nature.” Rather, following modern anthropological research, it appears that human eating has always had a ritual dimension. Religion began with a sacred doing and not a sacred looking, even though the latter was involved as an aspect of the former. Ritual eating has always been at the heart of most religions, conjoined with sacrificial practices. Eucharistic worship sustains this human universality but with the radical stress that the supreme creator God has been sacrificed for us and offers himself to us more than we offer ourselves to him, since he sustains us through a spiritual feeding (Eating Beauty, 227–53).

In the eucharistic rite, moreover, we find a combining of spectacle with feasting. Not merely is the sacred food accompanied by ritual; it is itself the supreme ritual object and the very thing that is most displayed, in the elevation by the priest. Albert the Great spoke of the supreme beauty of the eucharistic host in terms that combine inner and outward aspects. The elements, like the crocus, exhibit claritas, subtilitas, and agilitas, since they show the splendor of the fullness of grace, penetrate to the height of deity, and flow with the fragrant odor of the virtues (ibid., 54–61). There may
seem to be something shocking in the idea that we then proceed to “eat beauty,” but as Ann W. Astell shows, this idea was thematized in the Middle Ages. Whereas under ordinary circumstances to eat beauty would be to destroy it, here we are partially assumed by the very beauty we consume, and so our own being is transfigured and shines with a new inner and outer light. By a further process of synesthesia, we are called on in the Mass to taste and see, not first to see and then to taste, but through tasting literally to see further (ibid., 1–26).

Yet the Middle Ages did not neglect the ugliness of the crucified Christ or the sorrows of Mary, which had distorted the appearance of a woman whose beauty was held to exceed even that of Helen of Troy. The Christ of the Eucharist is the Christ of the passion, a grotesquely wounded divine-human form. However, by grace even this grotesqueness is transfigured into beauty, just as the destruction visited upon Christ on the cross is transformed into a positive, voluntary self-destruction of the body of Christ through our eating, which permits him to nourish the church as his body (ibid., 99–135). Hegel saw in the passion of Christ the source of “romantic” art, an art that combines the symbolism of the monstrous found in most pagan art with the beauty of divinized human form found in Greek art. But for Hegel this spelled the “end” of art and its displacement into philosophy and politics, since the sacred was shown in the ordinary, the ugly, the discarded, all the sufferings of the human subject through which it develops—and which exceed—the idea of beauty. But for a Christian viewpoint, the perspective of art is infinitely opened up and cannot be superseded. In the light of the cross the ugly is not discarded but integrated into the divine beauty itself. God is not identified with the abandoned ordinary by which we come to an abstract self-realization; instead, all our specific human narratives of suffering become suffused with a significance that allows them in their specificity to mediate the divine. Instead of Christ abandoning his broken body for internal consolation, he appears as the resurrected Christ whose wounds are now glorious. Instead of Christian people abandoning the bread and wine as only that, in order to fulfill human unity in the political state, they must again and again find the source of this unity in the transubstantiated physical elements themselves.

This is the Christian truth of paradox rather than the truth of dialectic; the latter never exceeds a merely negative relation between opposites. For a paradoxical perspective God is also man—not God as mere manhood, but both God and man at the same time. By analogy, body and blood are
also bread and wine, and our inner senses remain conjoined with our outer ones. It is this very outerness that allows our interior being to rise and be exalted.

The sensory aspect of the liturgy is, however, not merely something passively received by the individual worshipper; it is also actively and collectively produced. Together, we pray, sing, process, look forward to, and exchange the *pax* through mutual touch. The resultant sensory experience can to some degree be received by an individual worshipper, but it exists more fundamentally for an angelic and a divine gaze.

The collective body of the congregation is nonetheless made up of individual bodies. The individual body stands as the gatekeeper between the two different allegorical senses for the bodies of the lovers in Canticles—allusion to the soul, on the one hand, and to the church, on the other. The parts of these bodies and their sensations have spiritual aspects as the “spiritual senses.” Thereby, as we have seen, Christianity diversified the unity of the soul. And yet bodies and their sensations, following Paul, represent offices in the church, since the latter, more emphatically than the soul, is taken to be the bride of the Canticles. And so Christianity unified the human social community in a very specific manner.

The relationship between the inner soul and the collective body as mediated by the individual body is crucial to a deepened grasp of the liturgical action that dramatizes the relationship between Christ and his bride. In doing so, it draws, like Christianity itself, on a certain fluidity within Canticles, a book that Chrétien suggests the church effectively raised to the status of a kind of “Bible within the Bible,” a hermeneutic key to the relationship between the two testaments.24

It was such a key despite or because of its own obscurity and need for interpretation. Chrétien observes that we do not know who its protagonists are at a literal level, and their status as lover and beloved is not exhausted by any conceptual equivalence. They are God and Israel, Christ and the church, Christ and the soul, but also human marriage partners (given the Pauline notion that these signify Christ and the church) as the supreme model of interhuman love, and so by extension they also represent any human loving relationship. We can see a pattern here: a sensory image elevates us, but does so because of and not despite the fact that it is a sensory image. It can further elevate us only if it is constantly returned to, just as we can grow in love for God only if we are constantly reconfronted with the challenge of our human neighbor.
In the liturgy, all these loving relationships are at stake. Yet the individual, sensing physical body is their pivot. Just how are we to understand its mediating role? One can start with the earlier observation that while Christianity diversifies the soul, it also grants organic unity to the human collectivity. Instead of the polis being compared with the hierarchy of the soul, as for Plato, Paul compares the church polity to the cooperation of the various functions of the human body. However, this is no more a metaphor than was the case with the relationship of the physical with the spiritual senses. If anything, as Chrétien points out, metaphoricity runs from the collective to the individual body. This is because Paul speaks of eye and hand, head and feet, announcing their need for each other like holders of different offices within the church (1 Cor. 12:21). Yet this is to compare eye and hand, which in reality are mute, with individual Christians who are not, rather than the other way around. One might argue that there is an equal metaphoric transference of the unity of the body to the unity of the Christian people. However, the bodiliness of a social body is not a fiction; it is literally the case that human beings physically and culturally depend on one another.

To revert momentarily to the case of the spiritual senses, it might appear that diversity is metaphorically transferred from the body to the soul. Surely the body has hands and feet and can run and smell and eat, whereas the soul cannot? However, we have seen that without the soul there is no sensing at all, and that ears require the capacity to hear, as well as vice versa. It follows that diversity is introduced by the soul into the body as much as the other way round. Considered simply on its own, the body is an undifferentiated mass or a flow within a wider flow—it is a “body without organs” (to use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s phrase) and possesses only an arbitrary, ascribed unity. For the heart is only heart as our heart, as sustaining the lives of ourselves as subjects, and the same goes for livers, kidneys, hands, and feet. The physical body is only one insofar as the soul unifies it and our minds and wills command it.

The parts of the soul-body remain as parts, however, and might be regarded as merely apparent diversifications on the surface of something more fundamentally one. It is rather through the comparison of the eye and hand and other bodily parts to members of the church that this possibility is interpretatively avoided, and so the body, and then in consequence the soul, is dramatically diversified. Only the collective body of the church possesses decisively distinct parts, since these are independent persons
with independent wills, even if they are diversified according to specifically defined offices—priesthood, prophecy, the diaconate, and so on—rather than according to their biological individuality. For this reason the church, unified through the Holy Spirit, uniquely possesses a fully organic or bodily unity, a unification of genuinely independent parts that nonetheless exceeds their sum.

This reflection confirms the priority that traditional theologians have always given to the church reference over the soul reference with respect to the import of the bride. Our bodies and souls are to be conformed to the church more than the other way around. This is why there can be no Christian nonliturgical spirituality. The rich potential of diversity specific to the Christian soul is opened up only through participation in collective worship, just as true unity of individual character is given only as a unique mirroring of the collective character of the church. When we lose ourselves in the liturgical process, then we find ourselves, whereas when we cleave to a supposedly natural unity of our souls and bodies, we will find that this hysterically dissolves.

At the same time, the individual is not absorbed into the congregation as though into a modern mass or crowd, which represents an anticongregation. Individual rumination within and upon the liturgy is crucial, and this is shown especially with respect to the traditional Canticles imagery of the teeth. Collectively speaking, the teeth guard the church, but they also allow entrance of the divine word and a “mastication” of this word by church doctors so that they then further utter through their mouths truths appropriate to time, place, and audience. But this digestive process can be consummated only within the individual person, the organic unity of soul and body.

There is a liturgical tension between the priority of a congregational construction of sensation, on the one hand, and a private sensory meditation, on the other. This tension is benign and perhaps never resolved. All the same, one might suggest that three rites in particular tend to hold this tension in balance. The first is the rite of marriage, in which bridegroom and bride are directly personified, returning both the collective and the psychic allegory to their literal base. Here the inward and the outward sensory responses are at one, since the private is immediately the communal when two bodies become one. In the Eastern churches, the marriage partners are crowned, since they have been restored to the unfallen condition of Adam and Eve, the lone monarchs of creation.
However, in the second place, the rite of the anointing of monarchs, which survives within the Anglican rite and is still technically central for the very constitution of Anglicanism, as it once was for the Byzantine church in practice and still is in theory, suggests a certain synthesis, hinted at by Chrétien at the end of his discussion. Here the unity of the Christian body depends both on a continuous invisible collective body, associated with the eternal church in heaven, and on the actual personal authority of one man (a role by no means abandoned by republics). This dual requirement was theologically thematized in the Middle Ages by the idea of the “king’s two bodies,” his literal body and his fictional undying one, which came to be associated with the mystical body of the church, once this term had migrated from meaning the body of the eucharistic elements to meaning the body of the church itself. Here, the inward spiritual aspect of the body now belongs to the collective body and the outward physical aspect to the individual body of the king. This reversal is linked with the idea that the monarch reflects Christ as king, which is his ultimate eschatological role, since the mediation of priesthood will at the end of time have ceased.

And yet the same modification occurs, in the third place, with respect to his eternal priesthood. Christ as the one High Priest is conjoined to the church and yet in excess of it. As represented by the Bishop or Priest in the rite of ordination, Christ in his concrete person constitutes the church in its spiritual collectivity. But because of this reversal the synthesis achieved by coronation and ordination is not as complete as that achieved in marriage: for the latter, concreteness and mystical symbolism stand equally on either side of the relationship.

From the examples of coronation and ordination we are reminded nevertheless that the church is a hierarchical organism. Following Pseudo-Dionysius, since hierarchy is a matter of instruction and the elevation of person by person, not of fixed positions, we can see how hierarchy tends to fuse the individual with the collective.

The hierarchical offices of the church are provided liturgically and are re-produced through liturgical performance, which is sensory in character. They concern the relative verbal activity of the priesthood and the relative verbal passivity of the laity. Yet they also concern the relatively contemplative vocation of the clergy and the relatively active vocation of laypeople. We cannot escape a mixing of seeing and hearing or of looking at and enacting the word. Since, however, the two are inseparable, the danger of exegesis has always been, as Chrétien points out, to see every office of the church as
ideally fulfilled by its supreme leaders, such as Paul himself. This seems somewhat to destroy the requirement of a necessary diversity. Yet it also emphasizes the nonmechanical fluidity of roles, like the synesthetic fluidity of the spiritual and bodily senses. The liturgical context does not celebrate a fixity of bodily parts and sensations but rather appeals to the unknown, dynamic, and almost interchangeable character of our bodily and sensory powers.

But how is this fluidity compatible with a real diversity? Chrétien suggests that the Venerable Bede supplied an implicit answer; because any role within the church is a charismatoble one, it always repeats differently the “same” Christological shape, whether at the level of general differentiation of offices or the way in which these are individually fulfilled (which requires a certain fluidity between these “official” distinctions). 31

In the liturgy we never leave our senses behind, and we must work together to produce a collective sensation that fuses life with art. But with respect to questions of government and human relationship, we can see how liturgy opens beyond what happens inside church buildings. The redemption of the world means the increasing absorption and fulfillment of human and cosmic life within liturgical celebration. This is what monks still try to do, but today we require a more radical extension of this process by the laity itself. Individually and collectively we need to conjoin the Christian mystery with those natural sequences that were the origin of the pagan mysteries: to remember at each twilight that this moment, in the light of the resurrection, is the dawn of the next day and so to treat each night not only as the herald of our death but also as the expectation of heaven. At the feast of Easter, we recall that this is also the festival of natural rebirth upon which our lives as human beings depend, but which modern worship of mere power has thrown into jeopardy. 32 As G. K. Chesterton suggests, Christianity requires us to be more and not less pagan, with respect to the positive, life-affirming aspects of paganism. 33 In the same way, Christianity requires us to be more and not less attentive to our bodily senses, in order both to fulfill their infinite capacities and yet to rise beyond even their astonishing compass.

The foregoing reflections suggest that when we grasp Christianity as a liturgical practice that includes a theoretical dimension its universal and global import more clearly come to the fore. From the outset, Christian liturgy synthesized diverse cultural elements, especially Jewish public temple worship with Greek esoteric mystery. But it brought together the
practices and discourses of mystical initiation, philosophical paideia, and political citizenship. To be united with God and to know and to participate in the city were combined in the same enactment. Moreover, the city was now a global city, a cosmopolis beyond and outside nations and laws, committed to justice as perfect charity and reconciliation and not just as fair distribution. The rites of baptism and the Eucharist opened citizenship of the cosmopolis, along with saving knowledge and unity with the divine to all human beings: bond and free, women and men, children as well as adults.

In this way, hierarchies, while by no means abandoned, are severely qualified. This applies to the relationship between matter and mind, the senses and reason, within Christian spiritual practice. Even though specific rational and belief claims are made, the Christian liturgy includes also an apophatic “return to matter” and so to the universal “material” of the cosmos, common to us all. In the same way, the senses and the emotions are eschatologically equalized with reason by the force of specifically Christian dogmatic reasoning itself. In part this tends to render it comprehensive and all-inclusive.

There is a further way in which hierarchy is disturbed in favor of the universal. Rival hierarchical outlooks on politics favor either the primacy of the individual or the primacy of the totality. But we have seen how the notion of ecclesia tends to keep these two in balance according to a principle of solidarity. The individual must yield to the whole; yet the whole yields to the dignity of each individual. In the same manner, the interior life of the individual and social life in common are held in tension and are interwoven. The spiritual does not obliterate the political, as for Hindu caste hierarchy, nor does the loyalty to the sovereign political center obliterate the dignity of the person, as for modern secular post-Hobbesian politics.

This balance is liturgically sustained, as we have seen, by the institutions of marriage, ordination, and anointed kingship. The individual yields to tradition and to the whole city only by means of a gesture whereby the city itself yields to the supremacy of the individual person. The city is founded on this supremacy; on this personalism; on a personal and interrelational, rather than merely legal, rule; on the personal mediation to us of the divine reality; and above all, on the sexual and spiritual union of two, which exceeds the alternatives of the individual versus the collective in terms of the primacy of erotic relation, which also equalizes the body with the soul.

The reaching-out of ecclesia beyond hierarchies to the whole globe, and to the cosmos, is of a piece with its reaching beyond the hierarchies, which
tend otherwise to divide the individual person. The current and increasing global sway of Christianity in terms of both belief and practice contains a logic that lies deeper than is first apparent. This is the complex logic of the idea of the “body of Christ” itself.

Notes

3 See also 1 Corinthians 5:51, Colossians 1:27, and Matthew 13:11.
11 Guardini, *Spirit of the Liturgy*.
13 Ibid.
14 See Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*.
16 Ibid., 15–44.
17 Ibid., 35.


This paragraph might be read as a critique of Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 68–123.


Ibid., 45–72.


Ibid., 294–95.

Chrétien suggests that his book is a “preface” to the work of German Jewish scholar Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

