

**Regina M. Schwartz's
*Sacramental Poetics at
the Dawn of Secularism:
When God Left the World***

A Review

*Ed Simon**

Regina Schwartz's *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* enters into the fray of a long conversation that in many ways has been happening since the advent of Renaissance and Reformation studies (or "early modern studies" if you're of a more contemporary bent). Schwartz is explicit with her allegiances when she confesses in the book's afterword that "I would be surprised if readers did not discern a tone of lament in this study" (140). Indeed the title itself is clear on the books' perspective, we are to read "secularism" as meaning "when God left the world." Schwartz's argument is straight-forward: she contends that the incredible richness of English renaissance literature in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was in part a reaction to the loss of a certain sacred aspect to everyday life that occurred with the arrival of reformation. Schwartz is particularly interested in the ways that a rejection of Eucharistic transubstantiation (either in favor of Lutheran-style consubstantiation or more symbolic understandings of communion) would find itself reflected in the seemingly Protestant poetics of figures like Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, and Herbert. In Schwartz's under-

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standing the pre-modern Catholic worldview allowed for points of contact between the sacred and profane as exemplified by the incarnational aspects of Eucharistic transubstantiation, and an abandonment of this world-view necessitate the invention of a “sacramental poetics” to compensate for the loss of holiness in the everyday. She writes “But a striking and in many ways counter-intuitive phenomenon took place during the Reformation when the doctrines of transubstantiation was rejected by many Reformers. Aspects of the Eucharist began showing up in the poetry of the Reformation, albeit in completely unorthodox ways” (7-8).

Schwartz writes that “Debates about the Eucharist became the occasion for the worldview we regard as ‘modern’...understandings of the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible, immanence and transcendence were revised” (8-9). Her understanding of early modern secularization while not unproblematic, is nuanced. Schwartz claims that “...instead of God leaving the world without a trace, the very sacramental character of religion lent itself to developing the so-called secular forms of culture and that these are often thinly disguised sacramental cultural expressions” (14). Much as Victorian writers supposedly sublimated their sexual urges with deep repression and projection, Schwartz claims that even militantly Protestant poets like Milton evoke a sacramental longing that was triggered by God’s supposed burgeoning absence at the dawn of modernity.

Across three sections Schwartz elucidates a critical theory of what sacramental poetics is and applies it to four canonical English Renaissance authors. Her first section “Poesia Mystica” details across two chapters the contours of a theory of sacramental poetics, locating its development within a specific time and place as well as hypothesizing as to its function within literary analysis. The second section, “Justitia Mystica” looks at how the soteriological elements of the Eucharist are manifested within the work of Shakespeare (specifically in the unheeded calls for justice in *Othello*), as well as in seemingly the

most militant of Protestants, Milton. The final two chapters of the book compose its third section, “Amor Mysticus” which looks at how the Eucharist channels itself in the erotic poetry of John Donne and then in the conversational sacrament of Herbert’s poetry. Each one of these chapters supplies at times an interesting though problematic analysis of the individual poets that Schwartz is engaged in the reading of.

Schwartz doesn’t cite any of the major new theorists of secularization in her study, be it Carl Schmidt, Alain Badiou, Paul Kahn, Talal Asad, or Charles Taylor. Because of this identifying the exact contours of her theoretical perspective proves difficult. It is clear that she sees Protestantism as heralding a type of desacrilization that is a prerequisite for modernity and secularism. We are told that “sacramental thinking is completely alien to the way modern secularism has conceived matter, space, time, and language” (11) but that “disenchantment of the world does not happen all at once” (18). Rather she interestingly and paradoxically argues that “It seems that God is abandoning the world, or dying, all the time” (12). But her readings seemingly belie this, as she claims that these four authors are reacting to a profound sense of singular loss. Schwartz argues that something has changed – that with the revision of Eucharistic theology the possibility of divine connection has somehow been altered and it is the role of poetry to compensate that loss.

“Sacramental poetics” is a neologism that both theory and criticism need. Schwartz has identified a textual property inherent in some works that harken back to a divine lacunae. She is correct in argued that many works try to fill this hole with an aestheticized sacramentalism. It is a useful phrase for discussing the ways in which sublimated theological desire is inherent in texts. Perhaps the difficulty with *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* is that the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is less when God left the world and more when He started to get ready to go. Of the four writers Schwartz reads the only one who could seriously be consid-

ered secular is possibly Shakespeare, and even there his language is so determined by the Geneva Bible and Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* that if a similar artist existed today they'd be considered so religious as to make Marilyn Robinson look profane. Her presupposition that the various reformations signal secularism and modernity (which could very well be true) is too literally stated and left unexamined, leading to certain predeterminations in her readings. If the challenge against the literal presence in the communion host marks God leaving the world this certainly wasn't the intention of the reformers like Luther and Calvin (though one is sympathetic to a historical interpretation that sees this as an unintentional result). The book also suffers from a certain lack of explicitness when it comes to the actual theological terminology. When we discuss the Protestant reformers arguments against transubstantiation (and we anthropologically associate this with a certain cultural "disenchantment") it's important to remember that the Aristotelian metaphysics that explains how the substance of bread and wine can alter while the accidents remain the same was only codified in the thirteenth century (and in its most complete form not until the Council of Trent, which is of course in reaction to the Reformation). Luther and other detractors of the doctrine chronologically live closer to its explicators like Thomas Aquinas than they do to us. If the attack on transubstantiation marks a disenchantment of the world that particular God hadn't taken up residence for very long. While revisionist historians like Eamon Duffy have amply demonstrated that lay people in England were horrified by the Henrician and Edwardian reformations, one imagines that the obtuse details of transubstantiation and consubstantiation were of more interest to ministerial divines. It's the sheer scholastic technicality of the issue that makes its alteration and abandonment by some denominational groups relatively insignificant in terms of the question of "disenchantment" (though certainly it may have had a role in some overall process). Because Schwartz makes this assumption she has a tendency

to make the Eucharist and transubstantiation synonymous (even though it's obvious that she knows they are not). As a result Eucharistic enthusiasm – even in a clearly Protestant context – is taken to be a melancholic maneuver towards a lost Catholic path. Yet Protestant traditions can be vehemently passionate in their Eucharistic practice, one only need think of the incarnational enthusiasms of the Moravians or the obsessively Eucharistic verse of the Puritan Edward Taylor. This reading of magisterial Protestantism as non-sacramental results in readings that though interesting, seem fundamentally flawed. All of this being said, the book offers us an important contribution in supplying us with a powerful new term. It will be fascinating to see if other critics, especially those working in more contemporary time periods, take up its use. As a concept it seems perfect for discussing the late Victorians like Arnold and Hopkins, American Romantic figures like Whitman and Dickinson, or twentieth century modernists like Elliot.