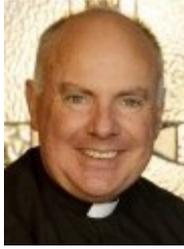


Wed 10 April 2013



In previous columns I've looked at evidence from tradition and Scripture for the notion of a sacramental universe as well as alternative to this view provided by some leading evangelical Anglicans.

Realism is the philosophical assumption underlying the notion of a sacramental universe and sacramentality. Realism argues that signs, such as the water, bread and wine used in our liturgies and in the Christian sacraments, convey what they signify, that is the grace of God in a real way.

Rowan Williams has argued for this realist theology of the Eucharist in his book *Tokens of Trust*, where in speaking of the Eucharist he tries to hear the words, "This is my body; this is my blood" as Jesus saying of the bread, 'This too is my body; this is as much a carrier of my life and my identity as my literal flesh and blood'". (p. 116)

Williams argues that Christ is strictly identical in both instantiations, that is, Christ is present in both the bread and wine and his body and blood.

Williams says that:

The force of the Gospel text ... seems to be more to do with a kind of extension of the reality of Jesus' presence to the bread and wine. They too bear and communicate the life of Jesus, who and what he is. By eating these, the believer receives what the literal flesh and blood have within them, the radiant action and power of God the Son, the life that makes him who he is. (p. 116)

This means nothing more than Christ is in both bread and wine on the one hand, and Christ's body and blood on the other without the particulars of bread and wine and Christ's body and blood being strictly or exactly identical.

Bread therefore does not change into a piece of Christ's literal flesh and wine does not change into a cup of Christ's literal blood but there is nonetheless a strict identity between the universal divine property, the nature of Christ as Word or Logos and the instantiation of Christ in both particulars in a spiritual manner.

Christ's nature, argues Williams, using sacramental realism, is found in both particulars of bread and wine and his body and blood and it is this notion of difference in the particulars which is essential to any sacramental understanding, even though he is keen to affirm that the nature and presence of Christ is in both.

Williams is a very careful thinker and writer and is keen that his words are not read and understood in a wrong way that is opposed to the idea of a sacrament.

Williams argues that to immobilise the object by concentrating too much on the empirical particular in this world, that is, the bread and the wine, is to destroy the nature of sign-making, as well as the nature of a sacrament and to suggest the philosophical assumptions of a fleshy realism. Anglicanism has always rejected this since it 'overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament' (Article XXVIII of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*). Williams seeks a balance where signs are seen to instantiate the divine identity they signify really and spiritually but not in any carnal or fleshy manner.

By Reverend **Brian Douglas**