

OCKHAM AND WYCLIF ON THE EUCHARIST

A comparison of the eucharistic doctrines of Ockham and Wyclif exemplifies the opposition between what are traditionally called nominalism and realism. The opposition is made more manifest by the sustained manner in which each thinker sought to explain the eucharist according to his own philosophical and theological principles. Both incurred official censure of their efforts, Wyclif's views being declared heretical and becoming one of the main hallmarks of Lollardy.¹

What both thinkers had in common was a rejection of the prevailing explanation — associated especially with St. Thomas Aquinas — of how the original bread and wine of the host continued to appear as bread and wine after their substance had been converted into Christ's body and blood. This was that the appearances as bread and wine were maintained by the quantity belonging to the real bread and wine as it existed before their transubstantiation into Christ's being. Such an explanation involved two assumptions; first the belief — almost universally held until Wyclif — that accidents (i.e. the appearances) could be separated from the substance or nature to which they ordinarily belonged; and second that quantity could exist independently of substance as an absolute accident. Ockham opposed the second assumption; Wyclif both of them, including Ockham's alternative explanation which merely compounded Wyclif's indictment of existing doctrines, above all for reinforcing the first assumption, to Wyclif the most heinous blasphemy of all.

The differences between Ockham and Wyclif spring essentially from a divergent ontology and with it a conflicting conception of what God can legitimately do. For Ockham all being was exclusively individual; species and genera were merely universal terms describing individuals of varying degrees of similarity; they represented no independent essences or natures, whether existing in or separately from individuals. The same applied to all properties or qualities; beyond their individual signification they had no real import. That left substance and quality as the only real — or, in Ockham's terminology, absolute — constituents of being; all the other eight categories of Aristotle — quantity, relation, movement, time, place, and so on — merely described substance and/or quality in their different states, and not something self-subsistent. Thus, relation was a connotative

term standing for two or more substances — such as father and son — or qualities — such as whiteness — in some kind of connexion; paternity, filiation, similarity. And quantity connoted a substance or a quality having physical extension, in which its separate parts had their own location in space.² For that reason the doctrine that the accidents of the bread and wine were upheld by quantity, after the conversion of their substance into Christ's body and blood, was to Ockham quite untenable. Quantity had no independent existence, but was merely a shorthand term meaning 'something (substance or quality) having part distant from part'. Without something which was extended there was no quantity. Hence quantity could not be separated from substance, as Aquinas and Scotus held it could be, because in itself quantity was nothing: it was not therefore an absolute accident; and the explanation of how the accidents of the bread and wine could subsist after their substance had vanished could not be had through recourse to quantity.

Wyclif agreed; but from a very different standpoint which led to a diametrically opposed account both of transubstantiation and what became of the bread and wine as a result. Where Ockham denied the reality of all but individuals, Wyclif saw the source of all reality in the universal natures in essences informing every being. These derived from the archetypes or intelligible being (*esse intelligibile*) which God had of all possible and actual creatures. Now, as part of his own being, his intelligible being was eternal and indestructible; so therefore, Wyclif concluded, was all created being in belonging to it.³ Accordingly, he refused to accept transubstantiation as the supersession of one substance by another; for that would entail the annihilation of what was transubstantiated. He equally denied that an accident could be separated from its substance because that too violated the immutable order that God had decreed where there was an eternal sequence from intelligible being in God to potential and actual being among creatures. To accept their separability would make nonsense of the universe, just as to accept the destructibility of a substance would engender the destructibility of the entire universe whose being was allied to the intelligible being in God. Quantity was not therefore an absolute accident which could be the subject of the bread's and the wine's appearances, because there were no separable accidents. In contrast to Ockham Wyclif's rejection of quantity's independence was subsumed under a refusal to accept any mode of being other than substance and hence the inseparability of all accidents, although it is not clear whether he denied the existence of all absolute accidents.

Not surprisingly such divergent presuppositions led to very different accounts of the eucharist. Ockham's main purpose⁴ was to show the compatibility of transubstantiation as an article of faith with the ontological truth accessible to natural reason that only substance and quality are real, and the theological truth that whatever is absolute God, as creator and conserver of the world, can create or conserve independently of any other absolute to which it is ordinarily joined in nature. The reason was the further universally accepted theological truth that God can do whatever does not entail a contradiction; and where two things are distinct in their nature, as substance and accident, matter and form, cause and effect all are, God can separate one from the other. Conversely he can join what is ordinarily separate, making one thing subsist totally in another (as the soul does in the body or an angel in its location) or one substance in two bodies, or two or more bodies simultaneously in the same place.⁵ Since, however, that can only occur through God's direct intervention, the separation of the bread's substance from its appearances in the eucharist can only be accounted for by God's omnipotence. From the outset, therefore, the eucharist must be regarded as the result of a miracle which surpasses the natural course of events. The ultimate appeal must be beyond nature to God; but it can enlist the help of nature in making it intelligible.

Through their convergence Ockham sought to explain what for him was the central problem, of how with the supersession of the bread's substance by Christ's physical presence there is on the one hand substance — Christ's body — without quantity, and, on the other, qualities — colour, shape, size — without substance in the continuance of the bread's appearances which remain accessible to the senses. In view of Wyclif's contrary interpretation it is perhaps worth remarking that Ockham's position was founded upon unqualified acceptance of all the main tenets concerning the eucharist: namely, that with the conversion of the bread on the altar into Christ's body nothing of the bread remained except its accidental qualities or appearances which now co-existed with Christ's body. He thus affirmed that the body of Christ is really present in the host under the appearances of the bread and wine, that it is hidden from the bodily eye — although absolutely, like Duns Scotus, he saw no reason why it should not have been seen corporeally⁶ — and that Christ is present in the whole host simultaneously in every part of it.⁷ None of these points is for him, unlike Wyclif, at issue. His principal concern, especially in his two special treatises on the eucharist, *On the Sacrament of the Altar* and *On Christ's Body*, was to explain how since quantity is not an absolute

accident it can be separated from Christ's body really present in the host and from accidents of the bread and wine which no longer have substance.

For Ockham, transubstantiation meant the cessation of one substance and its succession by another, only the accidents of the first substance remaining to coexist with the second substance.⁸ With Duns Scotus he saw their connexion as extrinsic, as one of displacement, and not intrinsic, as Aquinas did, in the conversion of one substance — the bread — into another — Christ's body. On Ockham's view only the bread changes — from being to non-being; Christ's body as the other term merely changes its location — from heaven to the host where the bread previously was. Transubstantiation, therefore, involved a double change, in the loss of the bread's substance and the acquisition of Christ's body.⁹ Each is independent of the other; hence the bread need not have been transubstantiated for Christ's body to change its position from heaven to the sacrament. He still remains in heaven; but he also acquires a new place.¹⁰ Moreover, it is a change of place and not to his own substance; and affects, as we shall consider in a moment, only his new mode of inherence, which differs in the eucharist from that which he has in heaven.¹¹ So far as the bread is concerned, it entirely loses its substance. In his earlier writings on the subject, in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Ockham spoke of the bread's annihilation, for which he was censured by the chancellor of Oxford University, John Lutterell;¹² later, probably as a result of this criticism, he said instead that the bread and wine ceased to exist.¹³ The import remained the same: namely that the bread and wine no longer remained anything in themselves but became something else.

So far there is little here not found in previous accounts, especially by Duns Scotus. It was over the explanation of how Christ inheres in the host and accidents are separated from substance that Ockham — and Wyclif — diverge from their predecessors. They do so, as we have said, by denying that quantity, as a term connoting substance extended in space, can ever be separated from substance. But whereas for Wyclif that meaning was invariable, as the relation between substance and accident was invariable, for Ockham quantity referred only to corporeal substance. Spiritual beings, like angels and the human soul, were without extension; they occupied space, in the terminology of the time, definitively, where all their parts were totally present in the same place and throughout that place, as opposed to each having its own place — circumscriptively — which was the mode of corporeal

beings. Only the latter involved quantity. Where substance was definitive there was none.¹⁴ Accordingly to Ockham quantity was not an essential attribute of substance, but, as he expressed it, only accidentally predicable of substance, when it meant a substance having spatially distinct parts.¹⁵

On the basis of that distinction — ignored by Wyclif — Ockham was then able to explain how Christ could inhere in the host as substance without quantity: namely as any spiritual being, definitively, with all his parts occupying the same space and in every part of that space without extension. No greater credulity was required than in the case of the soul or angels. Each was a matter of faith; but none required any special explanation, beyond the recognition in the case of the eucharist that it occurred by a miracle in that Christ continued to exist physically in the heaven — which he occupied circumscriptively as a substance also having quantity — and yet was enabled to be present — non-quantitatively — in every individual host.¹⁶

As for the other problem, of what maintained the accidents or the appearances of bread and wine after their substance had been displaced by Christ's being, Ockham equally dispensed with the notion that they were maintained by quantity. On the contrary quality is, after substance, the only other absolute accident; it therefore had its own identity independently of quantity. It is true that the qualities of the erstwhile bread and wine — their shape, length, breadth, depth — do have quantity; but since they are those of bread and wine, and not Christ's body, they are now only accidents which are maintained, not by quantity (which cannot exist by itself), but by God's omnipotence. No contradiction is involved just because, as we have seen, whatever is ontologically absolute, can, if God so wills, be separated from whatever else is absolute. That applies to all substance and quality, and so to the substance and appearances of the bread and wine.¹⁷

The symmetry of these conclusions derives from their concurrence with natural phenomena, the citing of which forms the major part of Ockham's different discussions. On the one hand, substance does not necessarily have quantity; on the other quality can be separated from substance as any accident can be separated from its subject. The occurrence of each depends upon God's special intervention, but in accordance with the laws that he had decreed for this world. Thus, in the first case, Ockham takes the occurrence of condensation and rarefaction as quantitative changes in the location of a subject's parts: the closer they come together, the denser the substance; the further

apart the more rarefied. Each is thus due to nothing but a change in place of their parts, leading them to occupy more or less space. Since that can happen to any divisible — i.e. corporeal — being, it is not impossible, he argues, for such a being (including man) to become so condensed that it ceases to be extended, as Christ is in the eucharist.¹⁸ No violation of the course of nature is therefore involved in positing Christ's separate inherence in the eucharist.

Correspondingly, in the separation of accidents from substance, Ockham calls upon nature and logic to show that quantity is not an independent, absolute accident, as well as to argue theologically that it is logically permissible for God to separate whatever is absolute — namely substance and quality as subject and accident — and maintain one without the other. Hence, if matter were prior to quantity, related as subject to accident, God could then destroy quantity, as subsequent to matter, and preserve matter without quantity — which would be nonsense.¹⁹ Again, if a piece of wood is sawn in two, no new substance is generated. There are now two parts of the same whole. Hence they cannot have been in the same place in the beginning; and if one of the parts is then destroyed, and not the other, they again cannot have been in the same place.²⁰ Thus it is as the same substance that they have the same, or different, or less, quantity. Again, since a substance is always prior to its accident, it can exist without an accident; if therefore a substance is extended in space with quantity as an absolute accident inhering in it, it could be so extended before the advent of that accident.²¹ These all illustrate the superfluity of treating quantity as an absolute, when all that really exists are substance and quality, which when corporeal, have quantity as one of their attributes, but from which quantity cannot exist apart.

It is fair to say that Ockham's main concern in the eucharist was philosophical, or to be anachronistic, 'scientific', in reconciling it with his interpretation of nature as consisting exclusively of substance and quality. Although censured by Lutterell he had no theological axes to grind or new interpretations to offer of the eucharist as a sacrament. The same cannot be said of Wyclif. Both philosophically and theologically his position was unprecedented. Philosophically his point of departure was, as has been said, first that all substance was indestructible and so transubstantiation, as the cessation of one substance and its replacement by another, unthinkable; and second that accident was inseparable from substance so that the quantity of bread and wine could not remain after their substance had vanished. The first led Wyclif to deny the doctrine of transubstantiation as it

had come to be understood, indeed to deny the very phenomenon itself; the second to attack the twin blasphemies – which he tended to join but were separately held as we have seen in the case of Ockham on the one hand and Aquinas and Scotus on the other – that the accidents of the bread and wine remained and were maintained by quantity as an absolute accident.

Wyclif's arguments, unlike Ockham's, were an almost inextricable jumble of the philosophical, theological, moral, ecclesiological and polemical. Of his numerous writings on the sacrament, *De Apostasia* has the most coherence; even here, however, there are the same digressions, repetitions, and assertions. But those very traits also leave no one in any doubt of his position. It is that since transubstantiation is inconceivable, what occurs in the sacrament of eucharist is not the displacement of the substance of the bread and wine by Christ, but the advent of Christ to the bread and wine. That is to say something new is added, but nothing of the old substance is lost. In Wyclif's own words, 'Just as Christ is of two substances, earthly and divine, so is this sacrament ... And as the word did not by the Incarnation lose its eternal substance, but retained its nature, newly becoming something that it was not before, so in a certain way the bodily bread, remaining the substance of bread, miraculously, becomes the body of Christ, not identically according to his substance or nature, but figuratively. It is not, however, falsely or improperly called Christ's body, but truly and properly, so that the sacrament should not be called two bodies but one, with Christ's the principal body'.²²

Christ's presence is not therefore physical, but figurative or sacramental, and coexists with the substance of the bread and wine which lose none of their identity.

Wyclif's position meant two fundamental shifts away from the hitherto accepted one. The first was over the presence of Christ. Wyclif distinguished between the eucharist in its natural form as bread and wine and in its sacramental import. In the latter sense Christ was really and truly present spiritually in the host, as he was not in a mere sign for him such as a crucifix. But at the same time that did not for Wyclif, as it had for Ockham and his predecessors, mean that Christ was there in his own person. Wyclif gave none of Ockham's consideration to the problem of Christ's mode of existence in the host, because he did not conceive him in the eucharist in a personal manner; nor indeed did Wyclif ever specify what he meant by Christ's spiritual presence beyond affirming that he was really there in virtue of Christ's

own words that the bread was his body. It is this imprecision, and the denial of Christ's actual presence as a person occupying an actual location, in the way envisaged by Ockham, that has led to the widespread charge that Wyclif denied Christ's real presence. I do not think it can be sustained; but it is also true that, despite his constant assertions, it is virtually impossible to know how Wyclif did understand Christ's presence. This failure is compounded by his second great innovation: his insistence that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, so that they are not transubstantiated in the sense that they lose their own substance for another; instead they receive a new spiritual import, making them the signs for Christ's sacramental presence. This doctrine — known as *remanence* — became the hallmark of Wyclif's eucharist heresy in seeming to deny, as in a formal sense it did, what was understood by transubstantiation. Again, that was to misunderstand Wyclif, whose grounds were quite simply his refusal to accept that anything could be destroyed, but not that something new could not come to change it.

Wyclif's arguments for his standpoint revolved round the implications of the existing doctrine. Like Ockham, but from the opposite extreme, he sought to show how the assumptions that substance could be separated from accidents, including quantity, and that something could be destroyed, undermined the whole of God's dispensation. He invoked God's omnipotence equally to uphold his reading of nature. Thus it would be contradictory for God to separate substance from accident, since by definition an accident must inhere in a subject and cannot exist without doing so. In his own words, 'As [God] cannot permit a creature to exist without him, so he cannot permit an accident without a subject'.²³ The separation of accidents from substances would also undermine all knowledge, since it would destroy any certainty and make everything illusory. It would then be impossible to pass beyond our sense impressions to their underlying reality; all knowledge of nature, essence, movement and so on would vanish.²⁴ It would also lead to idolatry, in worshipping accidents, the lowest form of existence, instead of Christ's body.²⁵ There was therefore no need here for the miraculous explanation given by his predecessors, including Ockham, since no special intervention by God was required to explain how accidents existed without their substance. They did not; and one of the features of Wyclif's discussion is his renunciation of the miraculous to explain what is in accordance with God's ordinance, and his opposition to those who invoked God's omnipotence to override it.²⁶

Similarly, in his attack upon transubstantiation Wyclif sought by a variety of arguments to prove that the annihilation or disappearance of the bread would mean the destruction of all matter, whose *esse intelligibile* it shared, and so the destruction of the universe.²⁷ Conversion of the bread did not involve its destruction or transformation into what it was not. In attributing the power of transubstantiation to the priest's words of consecration it also, morally, represented the worst blasphemy of all, that a creature could of itself create and destroy.²⁸ That in turn would implicate God in improvidence and destruction in a world in which every part depends upon every other part, hence leading to the annihilation of his own creation.²⁹

As to quantity as the subject of the appearances, not only would it again mean worshipping an accident but the basest and most unsuitable of accidents. As the inseparable accompaniment of matter, quantity was passive and thus incapable of sustaining the physical activity of the eucharist. Moreover, any change to it would, Wyclif believed, lead to a new eucharist, since he regarded all rarefaction and condensation as involving a change in matter. Quality would in fact be much better suited to the role assigned to quantity; but neither can be without a subject. As for Christ's quantity, it is only in heaven where he exists dimensionally; in the host he is only, as has been said, there spiritually.³⁰ Similarly his body is not simultaneously in every part of the host,³¹ as to Ockham he was; nor, for that matter, is the human soul either. That, too, for Wyclif was against nature, and he opposed the arguments (given currency by Ockham) based upon them almost as consistently as those (also from Ockham) founded upon the separability of accident and substance. Wyclif's opposition suggests that he did not recognise definitive existence as the mode appropriate to spiritual bodies. Christ, he averred, is present in the host figuratively, as a king in his kingdom; his sign is in every part of it, but he is not simultaneously present with it.³² One host was distinguished from another as members of the same species by the individual bread and wine.³³ Neither Christ nor quantity, then, is the subject of what must remain bread and wine.

Finally, there was the opposite blasphemy, of the identification of the bread and wine with Christ's body, which was the special object of his other main treatise on the eucharist, *De Eucharistia*. This involved the sacrilege of associating Christ's body with generable and corruptible matter so that, like it, his body would putrify or become sour with the degeneration of the bread and wine, be broken and eaten, by priest or by animals, and his blood spilt if the wine were upset.³⁴

It also led to perhaps the supreme blasphemy, that the priest, through speaking the words of consecration, could make Christ's body, whereas in fact they are merely the instrument through which God works his miracle.³⁵ Perhaps his abhorrence of these consequences accounts for Wyclif's insistence that Christ was not present personally in the host, thereby dissociating him from any physical connexion with its material elements. Christ, Wyclif asserted, is no more physically the object of eating the bread and drinking the wine than the sun is broken when we break a window.³⁶ What, he asks, could be more awful than Christ being carried by the priest or being touched by his fingers?³⁷ A priest cannot consecrate Christ's body because it is already holy.³⁸ Wyclif's defence of his concept of the eucharist was also an attack on priestly pretensions; each became increasingly ferocious in the last three years of his life as *De Blasphemia*, the third – and most extreme and disordered – of his works devoted to the eucharist, shows. His doctrine of transubstantiation became part of his condemnation of the church hierarchy and the religious orders as Antichrist. Whatever ministered to human agony was excluded or diminished.

To that extent there was a rapport with Ockham's stress upon divine omnipotence. Where they differed was over their radically different ontologies for which God's omnipotence was invoked. For Ockham it illustrated the inherent contingency of the whole of creation so that whatever was real could, through God's intervention, exist independently of anything else, however dependent it was by God's existing dispensation. The miracle of the eucharist merely illustrated that truth, including its converse that quantity was not an independent reality and so was inseparable from material – but not spiritual – substance. Far then from entailing an alternative order of reality, the eucharist for Ockham expressed God's power to uphold absolute beings in their own natures without reference to anything. For Wyclif, on the other hand, the eucharist was explicable only in terms of the inseparability of accident from substance and the indestructibility of all being. He therefore took an entirely opposed view of what was possible. Or rather he was principally concerned in showing that transubstantiation as traditionally understood was impossible. It involved quite another view of the order of nature and the order of knowledge. Whatever the senses testify to – as in the case of the bread and wine which continue to be seen after the host's consecration – must really exist; and they exist on the basis of the continuance of all being both according to its intrinsic essence or nature and in its inseparable attributes. Consequently, for Wyclif transubstantiation could not be a physical but solely a spiritual occurrence: in the addition of the sacramental,

or figurative, presence of Christ to the consecrated bread and wine. On that view there was not even the possibility, posited by Ockham and Duns Scotus, that had God so willed Christ could have been seen corporeally in the host, because Christ was only present spiritually.³⁹ Hence, where Ockham had seen the resonance between nature and divine omnipotence in the logical extension of the individual attributes of all being, Wyclif saw it in the ineluctable maintenance of the *status quo*. The eucharist could therefore have no physical basis, as it had for his predecessors; it could only be explained as the superimposition of the sacramental upon the physical, whose modes remained immutable. That was Wyclif's novelty and became his heresy, in for the first time eschewing any but a spiritual meaning of transubstantiation.

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NOTES

- ¹ For the details see my *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* vol. II, Manchester, 1967, 496-8; and on Ockham my *William of Ockham: the Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse*, Manchester, 1975, XVI and 601.
- ² *William of Ockham*, 196-237.
- ³ *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* II, 500-510.
- ⁴ *William of Ockham*, 596-613.
- ⁵ Commentary on *Sentences* Bk IV q.4, C, G, N, O; *Quodlibet* IV, qq. 26, 27, 28, 29, 37; *De Sacramento Altaris* chs. 12, 13, 14, 25, 28.
- ⁶ Commentary on *Sentences* Bk. IV, q.6, D; *Quodlibet* IV, q.20.
- ⁷ *De Sacramento*, Ch. 1.
- ⁸ Commentary on *Sentences* Bk. IV, q.6, C.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* F, G.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* C, and q.4, O.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* q.4, F, G.
- ¹² *Ibid.* q.6; *William of Ockham* 603.
- ¹³ *De Sacramento*, ch. 5.
- ¹⁴ *Quodlibet* I, q.3, and IV, 21; Commentary on *Sentences* IV, q.4, C, N, O, P; *De Sacramento*, chs. 15, 16, 25.
- ¹⁵ *De Sacramento*, ch. 31.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* ch. 39 and 41; also *Quodlibet* IV, q.26.
- ¹⁷ *De Sacramento* chs. 10, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24; Commentary on *Sentences* IV, q.7, b; *Quodlibet* IV, qq. 26, 33.
- ¹⁸ Commentary on *Sentences* IV, q.4, H-K; *De Sacramento* ch. 34; *Quodlibet* IV q.31.
- ¹⁹ Commentary on *Sentences* *ibid.*, C, D, G; *De Sacramento*, ch. 29.
- ²⁰ *De Sacramento*, ch. 12.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* chs. 14, 15.

- ²² *De Apostasia* (Wyclif Society, London; reprinted 1966) 106; also *De Eucharistia* (Wyclif Society, London; reprinted 1966) 55, 89, 199, 303.
- ²³ *Ibid.* 121; also 47, 65, 79, 99, 104-6; *ibid.* 64, 132, 199, 202, 231.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* 79, 83, 119, 138-40; *ibid.* 57-70.
- ²⁵ *De Apostasia* 95, 119.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 155, 190-1.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 99; *De Eucharistia* 66.
- ²⁸ *De Apostasia* 137.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* 144; *De Eucharistia* 66-8.
- ³⁰ *De Apostasia* 137.
- ³¹ *Ibid.* 100, 102, 114; *De Eucharistia* 232-3, 246.
- ³² *Ibid.* 92, 223; 121, 303. That presumably explains Wyclif's distinction (*De Apostasia* 223; *De Eucharistia* 89) between the host as both a sign and other than a sign for Christ, according to its natural or spiritual meaning.
- ³³ *De Apostasia* 117.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* 186; *De Eucharistia* 22-4.
- ³⁵ *De Eucharistia* 15-17, 89.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.* 11-13; also 308.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* 23.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 28.
- ³⁹ *De Eucharistia*, 109, 206.