11 Apophatic Liturgy: Re-presenting the Absent in Rite

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

(Genesis 28: 12)

Elementary forms of liturgical life convey a sense of unction in the function. Where it exists, the actors play in a way that suggests the heavenly born on earthly leave of absence. There is a balming quality in their act. The liturgical actors seem well filled with grace in their parts. Unctuousness conveys dissimilar, more worldly sentiments. It is a quality of the fawning classes seeking to entice the unwary into sticky relationships. Their oiliness feigns interest to entrap the unwary in a gush of flattery that should warn the wise. Both qualities, so near yet so far apart in meanings, suggest a need for subtle discrimination. Each has a seductive quality that can lead or mislead. Whereas unction conveys qualities beyond calculation, unctuousness embodies its use.

In a liturgical performance, unction suggests a sense of being acted on with a grace that descends from on high. An aura becomes attached to the actions of the pious that lubricates what is being unfolded. To look closely at an actor so endowed generates the risk of being enticed into gazing at heavenly highways, invisible, but clearly marked. Unctuousness has a pejorative overtone that matches its deceiving, ingratiating art. Both qualities signify trust or distrust. A fine judgement is required to preserve the integrity of self before the allures of each.

Sociology might find a happier hunting ground in stalking and entrapping unctuous practitioners. There is plenty of theoretical ammunition to fire at their smooth veneers. Uction is a rather more puzzling quality for a sociologist to handle, who is unused to heavenly dealings. It eludes analytical grasp and takes sociology away from its more proper and orthodox concerns. Yet this sense of analytical failure has its own purpose. Karl Jaspers has suggested that a boundary awareness is developed as the limits of knowledge are approached.
Ambiguities emerge that cannot be understood through the generation of further information. They demand choices between options that can lead from the philosophical to the theological. Failure to resolve these ambiguities can give rise to madness or to escapism into an everyday cynicism. But, as Jaspers has indicated, they can also lead to an authentic conversion, a form of awakening that leads to 'transcendence arising upon its ruins'.\(^1\) The need to choose in the face of options liturgical transactions present is inescapable, for the denial of choice can lead to the occupation of a reductionist position by default.

This point bears on some aspects of the philosophy of Maurice Blondel. He was concerned with pursuing the implications of actions into a supernatural realm. His point that the denial of meaning in action, a form of nihilism is itself a positive statement, led him to affirm the need to choose between a negative and a positive solution that involves a wager. By opening to the supernatural out of sheer necessity of choice the actor accepts a relationship to what is otherwise inaccessible.\(^2\) This need to act, to engage with God, has been expressed in terms of play by the Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar in Theodramatik. His notion of participation in the ultimate sacred drama facilitates a link between theology and sociology which he has explored through the writings of Simmel and Goffman. An important sociological school is placed in the context of theological debate and is used to develop an aesthetics of the holy.

The strength of hermeneutics lies in its capacity to go deeper into what is recessed in meanings, to converse about what is tacit in a human life and in a culture that manifests a 'relentless tension between illumination and concealment'.\(^3\) This tension can be expressed in an antinomial form and is exemplified in liturgical productions where revelation operates in a dialectic manner with the hidden. Hermeneutics claims to operate in a way that opens out understanding so that a fullness of meaning can be achieved. It sheds light on elements that impair or hinder understanding, even in theological and liturgical matters.

Gadamer has argued that since the Reformation there is no longer unambiguous evidence of a unity of worship and religious behaviour. We are faced with the precarious and intricate question as to how far we can fulfil and sustain the whole work of cult, prayer and benediction, since the sincerity of faith is at stake.\(^4\)

He notes that this disassociation has happened since the inception of Christianity. But awareness of this disjunction generates new problems