

# THE NEED FOR RITUAL

By KEVIN DONOVAN

*Everywhere, hierocracy has sought to monopolize the administration of religious values. They have also sought to bring and to temper the bestowal of religious goods in the form of 'sacramental' or 'corporate grace', which could be ritually bestowed only by the priesthood and could not be attained by the individual. The individual's quest for salvation or the quest of free communities by means of contemplation, orgies or asceticism, has been highly suspect and has had to be regulated ritually and above all, controlled hierocratically. From the standpoint of the interest of the priesthood in power, this is only natural. . .*

**M**ODERN SOCIOLOGISTS of religion echo Weber. Thus Bryan Wilson, of All Soul's College, Oxford, interpreting ecumenism as a largely clerical reaction to the galloping secularization of the age, predicts that 'The Church will increasingly become the organisation of the professionals, and they will be increasingly professionals emphasizing technical expertise and monopoly of sacramental function'.<sup>1</sup> So much for the blowing of the holy Spirit. The liturgical and ritualist movement is no more than a belated attempt to bolster sacred status; it is medieval priestcraft mumbling a final benediction to solace modern man's half belief. For although the number of committed christians declines, there is still a 'sustained demand for religiously authentic rites of passage'. Figures suggest that 'the Church still plays its part in the lives of many, more as service facility than as an evangelistic agency, more as the provider of reassuring ritual than as the disseminator of vital knowledge or the exemplar of modern wisdom'. Wilson is writing specifically about England and the United States, predominantly protestant. But few would care to deny that his last remarks apply equally well to traditionally catholic countries, where baptism, first communion, marriage and burial are often the only rites normally received, and social respectability and superstition have the edge over belief.

Since Durkheim, the social function of religious ritual has been

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<sup>1</sup> *Religion in Secular Society* (London, 1966), p 201. The whole of chapter 10 is relevant.

correctly emphasized. So too has its use as an emotional control in crisis situations, whether of great joy, apprehension or sorrow: birth, marriage and death, unique days in the life of the individual, yet equally important for the society to which he belongs. While refraining from passing any value judgment on christianity, Wilson can describe its ritual as 'the point where the quintessentials of religion can be preserved'. Ritual has been the vehicle for communal and emotional satisfaction, 'the agency by which men are brought into contact with divine, inspirational and, often, aesthetic experience in a controlled and regulated way'.

To this uncommitted testimonial must be added the findings of comparative religion. Too well known to need rehearsing here, the 'myth and ritual' approach has shown that important parallels can be found between the religions of the ancient near east, the cultures studied by contemporary anthropologists and the so-called higher religions, including christianity. So much so, that there is a temptation, not always resisted, to stress undoubted similarities and even borrowings at the expense of the more distinctive features of individual systems. The assumption that all the features of babylonian sacred kingship were reproduced in Israel, or that primitive christianity stemmed from the greek mystery religions were cases where the method outran the evidence. Such mistakes apart, it has been a precious gain to realise how universal is the connection between myth and ritual, between the symbolic account of religious belief in terms of a sacred history, and the symbolic action which, by miming phases of that history, enables participants to enter into it themselves; in catholic parlance, between the liturgy of the word and of the sacrament. More recently, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the high-priest of structuralism, has challenged the assumption that there is an orderly correspondence, a homology between the two. He concludes that we should 'conceive of the relationship between myth and ritual as dialectical, accessible only if both have first been reduced to their structural elements'.<sup>2</sup> What he seems to be saying is that ritual, like myth, is a form of language, of communication. Far from being the consequence of emotions, it arouses them. Its cause, however, must be sought ultimately in the intellect. Like totemism, with which he compares it, ritual activity would ultimately be a statement about the world, and about the individual's place in it in relation to other people and things in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C.: *Structural Anthropology* (eng. trans. New York, 1964), p. 233.

Do we, the believers, the ritualists, recognize ourselves in these differing analyses? How do they tally with what we experience? Bureaucratic control, for instance. Well on into the present century, the congregation of rites could forbid the use of the gothic chasuble. And today? Members of the latin mass society are insistent that unwanted reforms in our venerable ritual have been foisted by religious bureaucrats upon a resentful people. More avant-garde liturgists are equally dissatisfied with vatican and episcopal control, which, it is maintained, renders genuine experimentation impossible – at least above ground.

We may concede the occasional excess and even stupidity of officialdom. The short answer to both complaints must be the same. It is also the only possible counter to reductionist tendencies, whether from the pundits of anthropology, comparative religion or the social sciences. Christianity is a revealed religion. Christ instituted it. By instituting it, he made it institutional. To accept him is to accept his covenant and enter the people of God as a member. We know that faith is a free and individual response; but once made, it commits us not to a person merely, but to the society of believers, to the ritual expressions of that society and the formulations of its belief. This involves no fundamentalist acceptance of scripture, dogma or liturgy. We cannot rewrite the scriptures, but our understanding of them can improve. Doctrine develops, or rather the formulation of doctrine. As with exegesis and dogma, so with sacrament and ritual. Even Trent acknowledged that the Church, the body of believers, could alter the sacraments provided that their substance remained intact. Alterations there have been – that is a matter of demonstrable fact – and there will continue to be, as the Church recognizes that her message is universal, and not to be tied for ever to expressions in terms of greco-roman philosophy or mediterranean cultural patterns. Yet to admit this much is to admit that there will be tensions between fidelity to the past and relevance for the present. If there is to be change and adaptation, whether in formulary or in rite, it is the body of believers, and not the individual believer in isolation, who must decide what can be changed while respecting the uniqueness of Christ's intervention. In the last resort, the meaning of christian ritual is given; it is tied to and expresses the fundamental christian beliefs. In other words, while the ritual side of christianity can be considered in isolation and fairly compared to other specimens of ritual, it is the belief, expressed in scripture and prayer, which specifies a ritual as a christian sacra-

ment. The 'matter' is a natural rite, with its natural meaning; the 'form' makes clear the deeper christian implications of the natural situation (reconciliation, the union of marriage) signified by the natural rite, elevating it to the dignity of sacrament.

This connection between ritual and belief is all-important. It is the only possible justification for short-sighted conservatism, which represents at its best a consuming determination that it will be Christ and none other who is presented to us in the Church's teaching and liturgy. Those who show the concern can be over-zealous, mistaken in their methods. There were the chinese rites, even if there has been no Galileo of the liturgy. Few people have been burned for breaking rubrics, although this is perhaps because fire was by then out of fashion. However, this is not the place to condemn or excuse the attitudes of yesterday. Indefectibility affords no guarantee against bureaucracy where this does not compromise belief. What matters is the connection between belief and its ritual expression. Should one notice a wide and unexplained divergence between one's own ritual practice and that of the Church as a whole, it would seem high time to look more closely at the relation between one's belief and that of the rest of the Church. Remembering, of course, that it is easier to show that a catholic has fallen behind his fellows than it is to prove that he has not correctly anticipated the next move.

Can one share christian belief and not take part in the ritual? For the reasons suggested above, this is implausible. Christianity is revealed, instituted and social. But can one share the ritual without the belief? A much more urgent question. A priori, it seems likely, since the ritual has natural roots. And, in fact, it would appear that millions actually do so: 'Would appear', because faith, *pace* the sociologist, ultimately eludes statistical classification. No reliable 'pistometer' has yet been devised for measuring the response of those who go or fail to go to mass. There can be numerous reasons for attendance besides that of a serious commitment to Christ. And vice versa. But what of nominal catholics, those with whom, as far as one can tell, personal belief and commitment have failed to keep pace with the emphasis placed by the community on ritual participation? The emphasis makes sense because communal ritual is designed to express, deepen and reinforce belief; it is, however, no substitute for the commitment it presumes.

The liturgical renewal aims to benefit all catholics, even fringe catholics, but especially those aware of a hiatus between ritual and

belief. If there is belief inadequately expressed in current ritual, then some change is called for in the ritual. This is possible, because ritual, like the formulation of belief, is culturally conditioned. It is this sort of change which the liturgical movement has largely been concerned with. But not exclusively. The ritual may be satisfactory and the belief dormant; so that liturgy needs to flow over into pastoral action and even catechesis. Belief must be awakened, in so far as man can initiate faith in another by preaching Christ's message.

The revised rite of infant baptism is an excellent example of this, with its careful catechesis of the parents, and provision for delaying baptism until they are sufficiently prepared. Delaying, not denying. The desire of non-practising parents, or the similar request of an engaged couple for a church wedding, may appear to be motivated by merely social reasons of prestige. But even where they are taking advantage of the Church's undoubted flair for impressive and comforting ceremonial, this may reflect faith. 'Lord, I believe, strengthen my unbelief'.

Ritual, for these people, will indeed be 'the agency by which men are brought into contact with the divine': and this in a far more authentic sense. Events like birth, marriage and death are critical situations. Individuals faced with them are by this very fact more open to God's action. Everyday defences are down, the occasion is special and calls for special treatment. But the special treatment, the sacramental ritual, does more than underline the import. It signifies the way God deals with men, and brings them more closely into the pattern of his saving history – a history which is not something remote and irrelevant, but intimately connected, concerned with a man's own personal life history. In so doing, the ritual incorporates a new member, or grants him fresh status, in a society – that of the people of God, the body of Christ. It is a society which is unitive, inclusive, not divisive and exclusive. We must return to the distinctive contribution of christianity in this regard. Our present point, that christianity, being social, is ritualized, provides the foundation for its universality and its diversity. But taken by itself, it need not exclude a narrow and clannish interpretation of christianity.

You cannot be a christian on your own. You do not worship the Father by yourself, for you do so as a member of his covenant people. This communal worship of the Father through the Son and in the Spirit is primary. Because community and society involve,

require, are expressed by ritual, the communal nature of christian worship requires ritual. However, the individual personal prayer of the individual christian remains a need. It would be a gross mistake to think that any rediscovery of the importance of worship in common called this into question. But when the christian prays, whether formally, in the quiet of his own room, or in a diffuse 'prayer without ceasing', or even caught up in some third heaven, it is as a member of Christ that he prays. Our Father. His personal prayer should both flow from and deepen his share in common worship. Public ritual and private prayer depend together much as do ritual and belief.

At a verifiable level, then, christian ritual follows much the same patterns, meets the same human and social needs as do other rituals, sacred and profane. Certain holistic societies are characterized by an interpenetration of the religious and social functions of ritual that was so evident in medieval christendom or ancient Israel. There are modern societies which also claim to provide a complete frame of reference and interpretation of man's life, public and private, but which are officially atheist. These have evolved rituals of their own for the crucial moments in a person's life when the individual acquires a fresh status in society: ceremonies of socialist name-giving, enrolment in pioneers or red guard, the palace of weddings. Life and the embodiment of life, the socialist state, are celebrated in pageants and processions which annually recall the unique events of the revolution and its *Heilsgeschichte*. Each generation is thus enabled to share in the single on-going process. The heroes of man's progress, from infallible chairman to returning astronaut, are suitably fêted, canonized, embalmed.

In a pluralistic society, no single ideology, no one religion, be it sacred or secularist, holds the field. Diversity of belief is matched by a diversity of rituals, as multiple as the different groups to which the same person can at once belong. Some are light-hearted, others are in deadly earnest. Harmless or sinister, rituals vividly portray man's hope for the future and his present sinfulness. Some die for the flag, others burn their draft-cards. The long hair of hippies or the short crop of skinheads, 'bovver' boots or bare feet: like some sacramental seal, the ritual marks you off from other groups of race, gang or generation. Black power on the olympic podium; what could be more telling? But where is gentle Jesus in all this? A man like us in all things, sin alone excepted. This question is prompted by another one, which Roger Poole, an enthusiastic exponent of

Lévi-Strauss, puts to us at the end of a penetrating introduction to that author's *Totemism*.

The final and ultimate question remains; why do men go to such lengths to classify out the universe? What leads them to organize their codes in this excessively subtle way? The answer which seems to emerge from *La Pensée Sauvage* is that totemic classifications seem to be there to divide men up from each other, these classifications are like what we call 'nationalism' . . . . Man does not want to imply recognition of a 'common nature' with other men. Totemic symbols are borrowed from nature by men 'to create differences amongst themselves'.

If this is so, then it is a sad reflection with which to end a study of a mentality we hoped was primitive. Because this mentality is, in the last analysis, only our own.<sup>3</sup>

If this is human nature, can its rituals ever surmount division? With all the counter-evidence of crusades, persecutions, wars of religion and christian intolerance, how dare we persist in our claim that rituals of christianity are ultimately meant to mark the unity, not stress the disunity of mankind? Only because of our faith that our ritual brings us to the truth that God is love.

Ritual, we have seen, is a perfectly natural social activity, found in, but not confined to, religious contexts. Ritual also pertains to the social expression of the people of God. As a necessary consequence of the incarnation, christian ritual will resemble other human ritual. It too will console and cushion, will add panache and poetry to the great moments of life. Whether one prefers to stress the continuity or the discontinuity between grace and nature, the distinctive feature of the christian use of ritual is that it consecrates, brings formally within the ambit of the triune God, all the aspirations, achievements, and failures even, of human life. It does explicitly, through Christ, what the rituals of other faiths do inchoately and implicitly. It is for this reason that the Council can, on more than one occasion, commend non-christian ritual and even urge its adoption in our sacraments. The sacred ceremonies of non-christian religions are part of the restless searching of the human heart.<sup>4</sup> For the grace and good in these rites and cultural traditions

<sup>3</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C.: *Totemism* (eng. trans., London 1964), p 63.

<sup>4</sup> *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-christian religions), 2.

are a sort of secret presence of God.<sup>5</sup> The constitution on the liturgy singles out initiation rites<sup>6</sup> and music,<sup>7</sup> besides giving a more general appraisal.<sup>8</sup>

Once baptized, ritual is neither natural nor supernatural. It is both. It should express the joy of parents and a family that a child is born, but also the joy of the christian community at welcoming a new-born member. It hymns the love of man for woman in the family, as it does the abiding love of Christ for his Church. That love led him to the cross and beyond, and he left us an abiding memorial of love which anticipates the wonder of heaven, when man will again be at one with his God, and enjoy lasting peace and fellowship with his brothers. This is the hope which the ritual meal of the eucharist makes present. This is the christians' answer to the sombre reflections of the clinical observer. All too often that hope seems frustrated, the truth obscured, by the ceremony which should proclaim it. Why are we in practice so often disappointed by our ritual?

Part of the answer must lie in the human tendency to formalize, even to fossilize ritual. Seeking to protect, we succeed only in petrifying. This ultimately makes ritual an end in itself instead of a language for the community, a means whereby individuals can open themselves to God's vital activity. But there is an objection which will doubtless be made by many readers – priests and religious and all whose life centres round the daily eucharist. Is it really possible to experience anew every day the full message and meaning of the eucharist: this fellowship in Christ, this joyous acknowledgment of being redeemed together? Can you expect to feel all of this quite so frequently? On special occasions, the experience will be almost tangible. But these are the golden moments, rare and to be prized. It is not thus everyday – to try to make it so would be artificial, dangerous even, a playing on the emotions. The world series comes but once a year, the world cup but once in four.

The liturgical year answers the difficulty, but only in part. The year is paced. An ordered succession of feasts phases the total mystery of Christ in a way which corresponds to the natural rhythm of the year. Easter and christmas can be emphasized. Even sunday, the weekly easter, can receive a special attention. But daily mass . . . the rhythm of life just does not allow us to make every day a red

<sup>5</sup> *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-40.



letter day. Routine, fatigue, monotony, even boredom intervene. And this despite good-will and repeated resolutions. Is it enough to say that we have to come to terms with human weakness? The special occasion can be made special; but for most of the time we should accept with gratitude the helping hand of a well-established ritual form. A familiar pattern and a pre-arranged sequence are needed if we are to cope with daily eucharist and office. Even sustained improvisation must have its framework: Isaac Watts saw that three centuries ago. Otherwise, the strain of having to be original, fresh, creative every day of our lives, and often before breakfast too, becomes intolerable. Overstrung, the bow snaps. This admission may seem to destroy the case we have been building up: that ritual and ceremony naturally mark the special occasions. From being the poetry of life, they have turned into rather dull prose. And in any case, the force of the objection was surely this; that if the ritual of the eucharist is supposed to be bringing us the very heart of the christian message, and we are meant to react, respond to this supreme moment in our lives, then, like an over-exposed film, we have ceased to register.

The difficulty arises from a rather unique feature of christian ritual, and particularly of its frequency. Ask yourself what is the most important single christian ceremony; by which I do not mean the most impressive, the entry most likely to win a competition for a TV spectacular: a papal coronation, or perhaps the dedication of a church. It should be obvious – to a christian – that the most important is not these but the eucharist. Yet this is an every day affair. On sundays, you can even catch it on the hour, like a commuter train. Admittedly, only the larger parishes can vie with Pope Leo III, a nine-mass-per-day man, if one may believe Honorius of Autun. The notion of a God whose mercy needed, or at least welcomed such repeated stimulation now seems grotesque; and this practice marked an extreme, seldom approached before the ninth century, and never since. But it does make the point. We christians are prodigal to a degree where our major ritual is concerned. Does this unparalleled inflation lead to devaluation?

I am not concerned here to argue the delicate thesis that we overdo daily eucharistic celebration, much as we in the past overdid our weekly celebration of penance; both can end by becoming non-celebrations. If we accept as sound the christian instinct which gradually led to the daily celebration of the eucharist, and also limited it to once a day, how should we interpret what is still,

compared to other religions, an extraordinarily high frequency for what is acknowledged to be the most important of religious acts? It is not enough to answer that the style of celebration can and must be varied to suit the group, the community, the parish, the pilgrimage, school or whatever: students' mass and mass for the mentally handicapped. That is only common sense; and in any case, most of these situations will be rather exceptional.

The answer must be that, in our ritual, we risk reducing the special, the sacred, to the level of the commonplace and the ordinary precisely because of our belief that salvation in Christ is both unique and commonplace – the bread of life is indeed our daily bread. The events of Christ's life are unique; they merit the privileged celebration of holy week. But because his life has transformed the world, and this transformation is worked out in the whole of our lives, which are social, in the most banal as well as the most exciting events of life, the memorial of that life can itself take on a very humble and unexciting ritual. As ordinary as the most simple meal in a cafeteria. As elaborate as the Hilton. It is not an accident, or a mistake, that the central act of christian ritual exhibits this wide spectrum of ceremonial, from the stark to the rococco; why it calls forth, on different occasions, every possible emotional response – even to boredom. For it is both special and ordinary, like christianity itself. This is what we ought to expect in a religion which proclaims the incarnation. God enters human life, and every aspect of it mediates God; God becomes man, and man is no longer divided against himself. Our varying ritual speaks to us of this, if we would only let it.