

Ritual and Agnosticism

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In my work as a hospital chaplain I listen to many people whose daily life has been drastically interrupted by some kind of unexpected event—not always an illness—so that they have been obliged to stand back and try to take stock of all the things that have happened to them over the years. These people often say things which reveal the important part played by ritual in their lives, things like ‘I was married at St. So-and-So’s’, or ‘I remember being confirmed at St. Somewhere-else’s’. They may never have been to these churches again—most probably they have not in fact, or at least only rarely—but they remember what took place on these occasions, what it meant to them and how they felt about it. Now, when they look back, these things at least make sense. Sometimes, perhaps they are the only things that do make sense. All the meaning and purpose of a life has become attached to a particular occasion associated with a church service that they probably have not thought about for years. You could say that for them at this juncture in their lives the possibility of meaning only really exists at all because of that morning at St. So-and-So’s. You could also say that nowadays with some of our strong-minded theologically rigorous clergy they probably wouldn’t even have had that!

Christian ritual has suffered attack from several directions, notably theology, psychopathology and anthropology. Protestant theologians in particular have regarded ritual as an idolatrous attempt on the part of men and women to reach God by means of human techniques and on human initiative. The attack is unjustified, however, for symbolic ritual candidly admits the real facts about mankind’s way of understanding about God—that he can only really be approached by men and women who are willing to come clean about the limitations of their own intellectual understanding and would rather act out such a relationship than analyse it. A tendency in Reformation thinking would seem to suggest the opposite, however: that thought is somehow able to leap the gap between mankind and God in a way that is denied to our physical nature, as though thinking were less earthly than moving about and doing things, and men and women have a ‘spiritual’—that is, an intellectual—identity which God prefers to their bodies because it is more in tune with his divine nature. It is, of course, totally against the Judaeo-Christian understanding to confuse the intellect and the soul in such a way, and most Catholic Christians do not do it, or at least they try not to. But the attitude of mind that requires Christian initiation to be limited to those who are already fortunate enough to possess the right

kind of *cultural* qualifications, who come from Christian homes and belong to "Church", families approaches dangerously close to this kind of thing. The 'right' kind of social group and the 'proper' way of thinking about the world are very closely associated! Apart from which, there is good reason to believe that the kind of intellectual understanding about God which is required as the rite's entrance fee actually *proceeds from* the rite itself; modern biblical scholarship lays increasing stress on the idea that Christian teaching is to a great extent the philosophical-rationale of sacramental experience.

Secondly ritual has been criticised from a psychological point of view. Psychopathologists of the psychoanalytic school usually regard all ritual behaviour as neurotic, while behaviourism dismisses it as 'unadaptive' and consequently meaningless. For the psychopathologist, however, all rituals are essentially private. Corporate rites, says Freud, are merely a way of by-passing individual neuroses by institutionalizing their symptoms. (Let's all be neurotic together!) However, as with a good deal of analytic thinking, this explanation is a kind of eisegesis, an attempt to make all the available evidence fit the original theory rather than deal with the facts empirically. Freud does not say how neurosis, which is essentially private or even secret, can conveniently be generalised in order to fulfil the demands of society. (It would surely be convenient if it could be, for neuroses are socially unacceptable, whereas religion is not!) Psychoanalysis regards religion as essentially private, an extension of the self and its unconscious conflicts. It is particularly useful for individuals who for one reason or another, perhaps because they have no adequate human father, are suffering from 'unresolved, Oedipal conflict'; in other words, they have not been successful in identifying with the avenging unconscious Father figure in order to placate his wrath, and must find a way of 'sublimating' their terrors by channelling libidinal energy away from themselves towards a religious personage to whom they can willingly surrender and who will transform psychological impulses which they find so very threatening into a comforting obedience to himself. For Freud, religious belief is the answer for sexual anxiety, for Rank it is founded in man's unconscious fear of dying; only for Jung is genuinely *social*.

Just as the ritual attacked by the Old Testament prophets was a dishonest manipulation of the cultus, a way of distracting God's attention from the fact that his own people were engaged in disobeying his instructions regarding their behaviour towards their fellow men and women, who were to be loved and respected in exactly the same way that he himself should be loved and respected, so the ritual criticised by psychologists is the same kind of anti-social distortion of the true nature of human rituals. The neurotic element in private ritual is just that: its *privacy*. The practice of corporate ritual is a function of being human and a proclamation about the social, relational, personal, nature of our

humanness.

The prophetic objection to ritual has frequently been misunderstood by Christians who, in the light of the imagery used by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, should really have known better than to see Jesus's ministry in terms of an extended polemic against religious observance. (See on this, my own book, *The Language of the Rite*, DLT 1974) Their attitude has drawn a good deal of support from a confusion about religion encouraged by nineteenth century anthropology, which persisted in regarding ritual as a kind of primitive science, an instrument for changing the nature of human reality by discovering ways of forcing God's hand. But this is to confuse religion with magic, which depends on the use of techniques that are essentially secret and must remain the property of the priest or the shaman. It certainly does not make sense as a description of Christian sacramental experience, where what was once totally inaccessible, except to the few, is made perfectly available to all. The glory and the joy of Christian worship lies precisely here, in its proclamation of God's universal love, and its call to a responsiveness which is free, wholehearted and spontaneous. Because something is special does not mean that it should be kept private! The Christian gospel leaves us in no doubt at all about this glorious fact, and Christian rites of passage are even more explicit. But again, there are those who take the common bread and the wine "shed for many" and hedge it round with all sorts of social restrictions, and ecclesiastical caveats. There are always those who invite us to draw near not by faith but by special social and intellectual circumstance....

The corporate ritual experience of "the many who share" has been subjected to criticism from within and without the Church itself, and on theological, psychological and philosophical grounds. But the main attack on Christian rites of passage has come from within the Church. It has proceeded in fact from a particular kind of ecclesiastical selfishness, from fear on the Church's part of exposing its treasures to all and sundry. It is as though the spiritual impact of the rite is so powerful that it will permit no human being, or group of human beings, to apportion or direct it according to what seems to them to be appropriate; as though the message of the rite is so very clear and direct that it needs no commentary. This is a washing, this is a taking, breaking and sharing, this is a losing and this is a binding. Where is the need for words? Where is the need for theological expertise? A dangerous thought, and not one likely to commend itself to professionals!

And so the ritual experience is a perilously destructive one, for barriers erected by the Church itself as well as by those who ask for initiation at the Church's hands. The mystery is too open to be exposed to view. The Church clings to the injunction about casting pearls before swine, forgetting Jesus's uncomfortable tendency to ask personal questions rather than make universal pronouncements. We know what the

pearls are; but who are the swine?

The rite destroys the barriers we erect, because it is always and essentially a gateway. It is the gateway to a new kind of personhood, as it unites mankind with Christ in order to give it a new personal name, that of the Second Adam. As Paul makes clear in his last Epistles, namelessness is a kind of death: the death of the human soul. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians, Charles Masson speaks of an alienating tendency within human organisations which is both impersonal and depersonalizing. She calls it ‘l’action impersonnelle du siècle’. In fact it is a condition which proceeds from a spiritual vacuum. Men and women are impelled by the need to give themselves in relationship to a source of meaning. In the absence of a personal God, a God who has become personal to them, they worship themselves: or, more accurately, they worship the idea of themselves, the abstract notion of their own corporate life—the demonic entity referred to in the New Testament as ‘he who has no name’. It is not that society itself is demonic. How can it be if the very roots of our religious awareness lie in our experience of other people, our social consciousness? On the contrary, it is because human society, searching for an identity, needing a name, must be able to choose the right one. There is, in fact, only one name for the New Creation. God has freely given us the name we need, the name we must have in order to survive our second death: the name of his son Jesus. This is the good news. The Church’s task is to proclaim it *and make sure it is available*. Everything else is secondary.

For churchgoers and members of congregations, the sacraments provide necessary rites of passage from one stage of life to another. In a society in which everybody went to Church there would be no problem at all in giving symbolic form to important events in an individual’s journey from cradle to grave and beyond, because all would be familiar with a single set of symbols, so that everybody could speak the same religious language. However, we do not live in such a society any longer—if, indeed, we ever did. We can only guess that in such a situation the main pastoral problems confronting the parish priest would be the personal commitment of individual Christians, the nature and extent of their assent to the doctrinal pronouncements of the Church and their willingness to conduct their lives in accordance with the rules of personal and social behaviour that the Church lays down for its members. Although it would be untrue to say that such matters no longer cause Christians, either clerical or lay, any concern, the fact remains that, during the last hundred years or so, important social changes have shifted the main focus of ecclesiastical concern away from the relationship between individual Christians and the Church they belong to into the area of confrontation arising between whole Christian congregations and the secular communities who contain them. The Church has been forced to rediscover its original identity as a missionary organisation, preaching its

unique philosophy of life and death within an ideologically alien environment.

The desire for establishing certain things that happen to individuals as events which have extraordinary importance for those individuals, and the network of social relationships to which they belong, by invoking some kind of ultimate spiritual or metaphysical authority for them—some kind of *religious* sanction able to endue them with final meaning and set them apart from the ordinary contingent occurrences of daily living—is characteristic of people in general, and not just church people. In the present missionary situation of the Church, this need for ritual experience, rising to a peak at particular times in the lives of men and women of all kinds, affords the Church an opportunity for preaching the gospel, for setting forward ‘the purposes of the kingdom’, which is unique and unsurpassed. The fact is that baptisms, weddings and funerals are essential rites of passage for everybody, not just for Christians; and although the Christian Church does not actually hold the monopoly on all occasions of this kind, it is certainly in a dominant position within the market! Here, more than anywhere else, is the great missionary opportunity for Christians; for this is the time and place where the conditions are just right for preaching to the very greatest advantage, because the language used is the pre-theological one of mankind’s fundamental religious awareness. At this point the world comes to the Church and demands a particular kind of service, one which it senses that it cannot get anywhere else, and one which (from time to time, at least) it feels it must have.

This truth is a painful one for Christians, it appears. Other people want the benefits of the Church without the obligations it requires in the shape of religious belief and conformity to a particular code of social behaviour. They do not require the Church’s services only for psychological reasons—reasons concerning a sense of shape and meaning in their lives, nor only for sociological ones—because being baptised, married or buried in church signifies a kind of social acceptability and belongingness, because it is the ‘done thing’. They want them for reasons that are genuinely religious, reasons concerning their awareness of God.

In other words (and this is what causes so much distress to clergymen) these people demand what, at its most basic and fundamental level, the Church exists to bestow upon mankind. Unfortunately, however, they are not over-keen on the Church itself. For various kinds of reasons, sometimes narrowly personal but often widely sociological, the institution tends to put them off. The personal reasons may be idiosyncratic and fortuitous, but the sociological ones tend to make a lot of sense, and have powerful philosophical and even political implications. The philosophical ‘atmosphere’ of the twentieth century is assuredly more secularist and agnostic than religious and ecclesiastical, so that a man or a woman who goes to church frequently appears to his

or her fellow citizens as unintelligent or even in some cases intellectually sub-normal. There are of course other 'religions' demanding both spiritual and intellectual allegiance which one can subscribe to without forfeiting one's social credibility, but they either deny God altogether or tend not to take him very seriously. The most obvious example of a secularist religion is of course Marxism: but the tendency of the Christian Church to ally itself with established social authority makes it appear quite as 'political' as its atheistic rivals, although its politics are often, though by no means always, those of the right rather than the left. For good or ill, a Church which is overtly 'political' in a class or party sense puts off as many people as it attracts, and those who are attracted to it do not always join it for the right reasons—that is, for reasons which are authentically religious.

The tragic history of separatist movements within the Church itself suggests yet another reason for its lack of appeal, namely its own inability to live up to the ideals it professes, ideals of devotion to God and obedience to his revelation in Jesus Christ. For members of the Church, the saddest thing of all is when people say that their objection is not to the Christian faith itself, but to what it has *become*: what the Church has made of Christianity...

Christians know that those who say these things have good reasons for their objections. The Church is certainly not what it should be. There is no doubt about that. At the same time, however, they feel very strongly that people who think and talk like this have not got it right. The Church is very much more than all this. People who dismiss it out of hand, as so many do nowadays, do not really know very much about it, although they may think that they do. To know the Church properly, Christians say, you must know it from the inside. To understand it, you must first of all experience it. You must share its unique experience of God. Criticise by all means. But if you want your criticism to be valid and constructive, if you want it to be founded in the truth of the situation as it exists, then you must be willing to become involved within the Church in its own unique life. As the Psalmist says: "Taste and see how good the Lord is; Let us exalt His name together." Only then will the heart of the matter be reached.

The way to this kind of involvement is by means of the rite itself. Each experience of corporate Christian ritual is a 'journey into the interior of the Faith', and may itself actually induce faith by its ability to integrate feeling and thought, shaping the emotion that belongs to human relationship in accordance with the vision of an over-arching meaning, one founded in our original and final relationship with God himself.