

# The Language of Ritual

## Roger Grainger

*Consecrate them by the truth; thy word is truth*

(John, 17: 17)

In this article I shall be making some attempt to look at Christian ritual from the particular angle of its nature as a medium for the communication of theological ideas. Ritual, and particularly sacramental ritual, is itself a specific kind of human discourse, one particularly suited to the description of religious experiences and the codification of religious thought. Ritual is a language. The structural principle according to which all language operates is the identical principle underlying any kind of human understanding: the neurological function of ideas depends on the ability to discriminate between percepts. Just as the formation of ideas depends on the ability to discriminate 'this' from 'that' – whatever 'this' and 'that' may actually be – so the communication of ideas both to oneself and to other people has discrimination and differentiation as its main purpose, for the action of distinguishing is also the action of relating, and once we are able to hold the objects of perception in tension we can organise our experience into articulated statements about the world: we can relate our own experience to that of other people.

A language, then, is a way of distinguishing between experiences in order to relate them to one another. By relating one thing to another, we are able to alter the meaning we ascribe to similarity and division, so that we now see connections when we were once only aware of oppositions, and logic where there used to be nonsense. The logical connections which appear as a result of our operation of organising discrete perceptions into extended propositions, the process of articulation which constitutes language formation, have their origin in an acceptance of division and differentiation which lies at the root of all language. Language organises consonance by means of an acceptance, at the primary neurological level of the existence of dissonance. The original contrast between 'this' and 'that' – the contrast which allows 'this' to be 'this' as distinct from 'that' – which is fundamental to all thinking and consequently all language, is accommodated in an account of reality which now includes both sameness and difference, and is able to describe every kind of human experience in a way which brings it into relationship with human experience as a whole.

Naom Chomsky's analysis of linguistic codes draws heavily on the fundamental difference which exists between the primal organisation of meaning in spoken and written language and the relationship between the order in which individual words as they actually appear in particular sentences. Every sentence, he maintains, has both a 'deep structure' and a surface structure; it is by grasping the first that we are able to interpret the meaning of the second. This deep structure of language, which is the fundamental principle of its semantic organisation, is the source of its flexibility and comprehensiveness, for the surface meaning of any sentence is an adaptation of a basic semantic proposition contrived to meet the demands of a particular situation. Indeed, Chomsky goes further than this, for he claims that the ability to recognise the deep structure of language is an inherited skill corresponding to our primal ability to recognise meaningful distinctions and to use them to articulate a picture of reality which is consistent within itself. Once the deep structure or organising principle of any language has been grasped, the various syntactical permutations may be worked out quite easily: which is why languages are readily learned by children whose knowledge of life is as yet so severely restricted.<sup>1</sup>

Once the underlying structure is grasped – and it is a structure which corresponds to the natural human facility of making distinctions between phenomena – the surface transformations become intelligible. The same idea lies behind the structural analysis of mythological codes proposed by Levi-Strauss. In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Levi-Strauss examines two hundred South American myths, some of which appear on the surface to exist in direct contradiction to others in the series. Indeed, the same cast of characters who may be human beings or animals, appear in mythological scenarios in widely disparate relationships with one another. Taken as a whole, however, the conflicts and contradictions which characterise the view of the world presented by the myths fall into place once they have been referred to the 'deep structure' of the mythological code – for each surface transformation is a variation upon a single underlying semantic principle. This structural keystone of the entire linguistic edifice is never explicitly presented, for its mystical significance requires oblique statement in order to preserve its numinous quality as the fundamental source of all meaning, yet it is able to organise the meaning of the entire series. The semantic core of the mythological system is in fact the basic contrast which is perceived between *nature* and *culture*: the hostile environment which stands over against man to control his actions and limit his freedom, and the human world to which he reacts as a participating subject, the environment in which he ex-

periences himself as a contributor, and with which he enjoys a positive relationship. Levi-Strauss describes this original opposition as the armature which articulates the meaning of each myth in the entire system. The fact that at its most fundamental level each myth relates a pair of opposite ideas, holding them together in a statement which includes both, is able to make sense of all the disparate elements which occur at the surface level of each scenario. Each myth exists in its own unique form as constituting a special case of the general proposition signified by the mythological armature, which is itself a structural element and not a proposition at all. In terms of the structure of human thought, the idea of divinity emerges from and reflects upon the perception of a fundamental relationship between different kinds of possibility whose juxtaposition creates epistemological difficulties that may not be resolved in any other way.

This 'picture of human contingency', illuminated by its mythological setting within the framework of an absolute formal perfection, is able to speak more clearly and directly than any verbal proposition could ever do. The imaginative reality of the myth bypasses mere statement and involves us in an experience of our relationship with the world. What is true of the myth is even more dramatically and strikingly true of ritual, the embodiment of mythical truth in relationships which are acted out rather than talked about or imagined. Ritual is an acting out of religious awareness which itself constitutes that awareness, for, as we have seen, the rite participates in the message that it communicates. To borrow MacLuhan's famous phrase, here more than anywhere else "the medium is the message". Spoken and written language make use of conventional signs in order to convey an idea about the primal experience or relationship-through-difference; but theological ritual employs a living symbolism which itself embodies the actual perception of such relationship without recourse to mediating linguistic formulae which must be consciously assimilated – actively learned – before the experience can be communicated and so shared. In other words we are confronted, not with the signs of a presence, but with the presence itself; the presence of communion with the primal truth of our own being. This is the ground which the rite prepares for our encounter with divinity. The human truth of this transforming meeting is the openness for encounter which only ritual can give us. This is because in corporate ritual, the meaning of our perception of God is not obscured by argument. The rite is a language specifically designed in order to communicate a particular kind of message. Its semantic core, which is its deep structure as a language, the armature upon which its meaning depends, is vividly presented by *its actual shape*. This

needs no interpretation, for it is a language where truth is personally experienced by the men and women who take part in the living symbolism of its extended journey into fullness of being. In every linguistic code, meaning emerges from the resolution of a basic semantic opposition. In the rite of passage, this resolution is actually *lived through* in the characteristic ritual progression from the original 'natural' man or woman to the condition of a transformed humanity, passing through the crisis of the rite's central movement, the agonising moment of change in which we all participate.

Indeed, the rite's impact as an acted symbol, which transcends every limitation of time and space and refers to the global experience of human beings within their eternal identity, is the true source of its practicability; for this is what gives it its amazing flexibility of reference. The rite is able to talk to men and women about their own lives in a language which they cannot misunderstand, however hard they may try to misinterpret it! The ritual symbol is the 'deep structure' which permits linguistic flexibility, as it brings a specific content of ideas and images into a fruitful relationship with one another around the invariant semantic core of the three-fold ritual progression, the unambiguous proclamation of change which is both image and experience. In this way, different rites speak to varying situations within the lives of individuals and communities, bringing a living message of hope to bear on significant crises of human growth and personal relationship. In his description of mythical systems in South America, Levi-Strauss makes the fundamental point that —

The truth of myth does not lie in any special context. It consists in logical relations which are devoid of content, or, more precisely, whose invariant properties exhaust their operative value, since comparable relations can be established among the elements of a large number of different contents.<sup>2</sup>

It is this *topological consistency* that makes both myth and rite versions of an ideal language for the expression of timeless truth — an understanding of the meaning of life which is recognised by those who receive it to be self-authenticating. Whatever the precise message of a particular myth may be, the underlying view of reality that it expresses never changes, for this is implicit in the formal structure of the communication. Thus, each Christian sacrament revolves around the central, invariant, image of the Cross, as the symbol of every kind of authentic existential change.

It is in the nature of language to be self-contained and to possess the ability to communicate meaning according to its own syntax and vocabulary. Like other languages, religious codes are self-

explanatory. Faced with new kinds of reality they discover ways of describing it in their own terms. Just as mathematicians cannot adequately transmit information about mathematical relationships without resorting to their own language of number, so theologians are unable to describe religious reality without pointing out that what they are talking about is quite precisely not what is actually under discussion. (Psychoanalysts have the same problem when they try to describe the actuality of processes which are specifically defined as being 'unconscious'!) Fortunately, however, theology is not the only available language at the disposal of religion. The language of ritual is its own kind of truth. It is not a commentary upon, or even a metaphor for anything else which might be considered as logically preceding or metaphysically transcending it. (This is particularly important when we are considering the relationship between religious languages, codes of meaning which rely upon the forms of ritual and myth, and the thought worlds of psychology and sociology. Religious ritual cannot really be used to correct social discontinuities or breakdowns in the structure of personal relationships in any way which is directly instrumental. The most it can do is counterbalance social lesions and organisational weaknesses by its specific reference to, and realisation of, a spiritual reality running parallel to – and underlying – the social one. Its relationship with social structure is one of dialogue rather than homology; and the same is true of psychological theory and practice. Social structure articulates societies, and psychological theory formulates ideas about the mental life of individuals. The structural meaning of ritual is intrinsic to itself, and has no essential exterior reference either to sociology or psychology.)

Ritual is the native tongue of religious awareness. When it speaks, it speaks of itself. It witnesses to its own reality and truthfulness – which is to say that it speaks to us of God, for it is in the rite that we become aware of God as he acts in the world of men and women: God as he *is for us*.

Ritual speaks through its actions, not its words. It is no kind of explanation, but a direct presentation of religious reality. Words cannot help but explain something or other, and the explanation is rarely good enough. As far as the relationship of God and man is concerned, it is never good enough! George Steiner has reminded us of the unreliability of words when it comes to describing the ultimate truth of being: "Words distort; eloquent words distort absolutely". The rite does not depend on words but on the transforming actions of lived life. It is these actions, the human experiences of change and growth that are recognised and validated by our encounter with God in the Christian sacraments. Their identity as rites of passage renders the sacraments the perfect embodi-

ment of the message implicit in the Gospel narrative; in the nature of the Gospel as a narrative, a description of the life, death and resurrection of the 'word made flesh'. The gospels describe a God who shared the experiences of a particular generation of men and women, lived in a particular place, at a particular time, was subject to a very specific set of social, political, religious and economic circumstances. At the same time, Jesus the man passed through every vitally significant stage which characterises the process of human growth and development. As with every other human being, it was precisely this journeying through life that constituted his essential nature as a person. Without this he could not have been human – for humanness is manifested in time and in change, in the dynamic processes of existence. This being so, the ideal theophany for the people of God, the true sacrament of the Body of Christ, can be no other than the establishment and perfecting of men and women as creatures who are continually changing, as they must always be growing and learning. This fact in itself establishes the nature of the sacraments as rites of passage in which the time-bound nature of human life is recognised and established in the very process which transforms it. This fundamental message of the sacramental rite of passage needs no words, is implicit in the actual form of the ritual itself. It is the shape of the rite – the shape it *possesses* and that it *allows* – that speaks.<sup>3</sup>

1 Chomsky, N. *Language and Mind*, Harcourt Brace, 1968.

2 Levi-Strauss, C. *The Raw and the Cooked*, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p 240.

3 Grainger, R. *The Language of the Rite*, DLT, 1974.

## The Prophetic and the Mystical: Heiler Revisited

### Rowan Williams

Friedrich Heiler's Classic essay on prayer – *Das Gebet* – first appeared in 1919: several times reprinted and revised, with an abbreviated translation into English published in 1931, this vastly influential work helped to popularize and to fix in the theological mind a sharp distinction between two antithetical styles of spirituality, the 'mystical' and the 'prophetic'. The distinction owed something to William James, something to a group of Lutheran scholars interested in the history and phenomenology of religion, of whom the most significant is probably the great Nathan Söderblom (whose general influence upon Heiler is very considerable).