

The Sacred and The Whole

by Vincent Buckley

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Brian Wicker's new book is important not only because of the analysis which he gives of our historical present and of the potencies within it but also because of the sources on which he calls to establish his analysis and the terms in which he calls on them. They are terms particularly congenial to the literary imagination, for one reason because they suggest a renewed life for poetry. Briefly, Mr Wicker argues that it would be a mistake to see our historical moment as one in which a conception of the sacred is fighting unequally against the secular actuality, or in which secularism must be accepted by Christians as a providential subversion of myths no longer acceptable to reason. On the contrary, he says, the most rational account of our condition, both existential and essential, is one in which a conception of the sacred will be not only preserved, not only renewed either, but remade. His account of this may bring unease both to those who think there is only one way to talk about the sacred and to those who think it retrograde to talk about the sacred at all.

In speaking in such terms he is of course speaking from within a cultural dilemma whose nature he recognizes; our society in so far as it is opting for 'secularism' is opting to sit on one horn of the dilemma; for its refusal of the sacred is not only a refusal of a 'meaning' in and for life but an inability to participate fully in the world of meaningful presences and activities. I agree with him heartily; but the dilemma remains even for those who think as we do. The question now becomes how to assign a redemptive meaning to the whole human venture in history while giving a meaning to the word 'sacred' but without entertaining a separate category of 'the sacred', with its inevitable suggestion that certain things, people, actions, modes of experiences are to be definitively and as though arbitrarily separated out from the whole; for to make this separation, to prescribe a *fixed* category of the sacred, is to cast some doubt on the redemptive meaning of the whole, and hence on the reality and scope of the Incarnation. As we all know, one contemporary charge against Christianity is that, by ritualizing its own apartness, it both evades and trivializes real life.

The answer to the problem is to see the sacred not as a separated category but as an illuminating one, to see it not as arrogating meaning to itself but as bestowing it on the whole. This involves the further sense that the sacred is not a *possession*, to be jealously guarded and hoarded, but a means of understanding, participation,

and service. It is, in a word, representative; and I would suggest that it is so in a way analogous to that in which works of literature are representative. On the whole, Mr Wicker urges a case which looks like this; but one cannot be entirely sure whether or not he sees it in just those terms, and the focus of his attention is in one decisive respect different from my own. When he turns to literature, he is interested chiefly in the novel (he gives, for example, excellent accounts of Dickens and George Eliot); and he says with obvious justice that the cultural problem or misunderstanding which he is seeking to overcome has arisen during the period when the novel has been the dominant literary form. It may be of course that it is coming to its point of crisis in a period in which the film is succeeding the novel as the dominant literary form, if that is not too paradoxical a way of putting it.

In any case, however, my own interest is chiefly in poetry, and poetry is an art form which, even over the past hundred years, has shown a somewhat different preoccupation with the sacred. It is noticeable that a sense of and concern for the sacred, and for poetry itself as a sacred or sacralizing act, stubbornly persists among poets, even though they will not always use such a terminology. Even if in the nineteenth-century we exclude poets like Tennyson and Browning, who were in some sense religious believers, we still find as it were a debate being conducted between poets as diverse as Hopkins and Whitman; the debate is about 'form', certainly, but in that very fact, given the poets concerned, it is a debate about the presence and nature of the sacred, for it is a debate about man's vitality and the vitalities which he meets in or elicits from his world. In this century, even if we exclude poets like Rilke, we have as it were a multiple dialectic between poets like Yeats and Eliot, Pound and Crane, Lowell and Roethke, Thomas and Edwin Muir, not all of them by any means religious 'believers' in the conventional sense, but all seeking to define areas of experience as sacred in order to allow them to open out towards forces which, though half-comprehended, invite, however unevenly, to a sort of worship.

In other words, poets are more *overtly* concerned than novelists with the question of the sacred; and, since so much of their traditional social territory has already been taken over by the novel, they tend to conceive the question of the sacred in terms of an individual man's relations with his particular loves, including his dead, with his own emotional movements, ranging from nostalgia to hope, and with non-human nature, which signifies so powerfully to the poetic imagination the duality of growth and death, giving intimations of immortality in mortality and of mortality in the tenuous apprehensions of the eternal. I share these preoccupations, and consequently share the temptation to offer as objective analysis what is merely the projection of a subjective life riddled with particularities which issue in poetry *faute de mieux*. For a person with such interests,

there will seem few problems in using Mircea Eliade's terms, examples, and prescriptions, as Mr Wicker does. Yet it needs saying at the outset that there is a strong case for thinking that Eliade's analysis, while it is enlightening and challenging, cannot be prescriptive for modern man, since it returns us to a primitive imagination in which, though we may respond to it, we cannot share. So I shall have to question one or two details of Mr Wicker's analysis in a way which at one moment may seem to push him towards Eliade and the issue of primitivism, and at another moment push him too far away from it. It may or may not help Mr Wicker to know that, all the time I am doing this, I am thinking in a distracted way about trees.

That part of Mr Wicker's thinking in which I am interested for the purposes of this essay may be indicated by tracing a certain line through his book, even though such a method distorts the infinitely more satisfying logic which he uses himself. Thus he says: 'There is a void in the heart of Western culture which has got to be filled' (p. xiv) and, after analysing various aspects of it and criticising various responses to it, he goes on to announce what thinkers he will call to his aid:

In order to understand why it is that the work of three non-believers—Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Marx—should be of crucial importance to the contemporary Christian, it is necessary to see that what they have in common is an interpretation of man's commerce with the world which is much older than that of the secular philosophy itself. It goes back, indeed, in its essence to the primitive world-view of primordial religious man. It can be seen as the modern development of a mode of understanding which is that of 'participation'. Primitive man does not confront an alien world, but participates in a familiar one. (pp. xxix-xxx.)

The last sentence is at least debatable, since not only Eliade but other experts in comparative religion insist that the very familiarity of the sacralizing patterns adopted by primitive men often had the dual effect of aspiring to ward off chaos and threatening the society with the chaos which it was the role of the pattern to avert; in other words, primitive man was, so to speak, at the mercy of his own possible non-performance of the prescribed ritual. But that is a detail, and no doubt a disputed one. I quote the passage for a different purpose; for Mr Wicker is wanting to establish that 'primitive man lives in a religious world, and his social experience and religious experience are different ways of referring to the one, single way of life' (p. xxx), and that his chosen thinkers may help modern man to do the same. Consequently, he goes on, certain philosophical trends in our century which have so far been taken as establishing a secular outlook actually have the opposite effect, and

'allow for the possibility of a renewal of the sacred in a new form' (p. 1).

When he comes, in a chapter hearteningly called 'The End of Secularism', to deal with Merleau-Ponty, he takes up this theme in a more philosophical way:

In the understanding of how we actually meet others we can, perhaps, begin to see the meaning of the sacred, not as a corner of the world which is privileged to be free from profane intrusion, but as the basis of the whole inter-subjective situation which is the reality of our community together. (p. 37.)

And such a basis may be conceived, in terms which Eliade would surely approve, as involving the power of the ordinary, of the seemingly profane, to point beyond itself and so to become sacred, for that is what sacred *means*:

But this 'power' is now not some specialized force, located in a special realm, that of the sacred; it is a power for action in our ordinary transactions, and reveals itself in every moment of existence. It is the universal power of the ordinary to point to what lies beyond itself. (p. 46.)

Obviously there are difficulties involved in this way of putting the matter; for that 'universal power of the ordinary' may not be universally available to men, and if it were the result might even be a sort of madness. But I feel that Mr Wicker is right to put this emphasis at this stage of his argument, however little comfort it may give to professional taboo-seekers. If he did not, his argument would quickly become closed up in some programmatic *détente*, or would end by swallowing its own tail. That it does not do so is a tribute to his patient sense of relevance. He *must* keep the categories open if he is to get to any helpful contentions about the representative or sacramental nature of sacred objects. He does so by speaking about language. 'Language transcends mere species-life because it enables us to think and act in a *representative* way', he says; a dog cannot represent the species in the sense of consciously taking on himself the interests of the species. But a man can, by language:

But what makes us capable of community, is language. I cannot, bodily, be in the same place, or have the same sensation as you. But in appropriating the language which we share I come to possess, wholly, something which you too possess wholly. This is why it is possible for a human being to represent, in his language, the whole community. For as a language-bearing creature I can bear within myself that which also lives in my fellows, and so manifest to the world something which is not just characteristic of them, *but actually makes them present in my action*. (p. 75; my emphasis.)

Now we have arrived at the point which I consider the crucial one,

and in terms of which any debate about the sacred must be conducted: not its feasibility, but its representativeness. And it is here, if anywhere in the selective logic I am following, that I would want to take issue with Mr Wicker. But there are a couple more steps to be taken before I may.

The taking issue becomes possible when, having laid his foundation for a discussion of the sacred, he comes to analyse the concept itself and its present relevance. This chapter, 'Rediscovering the Sacred', is of great importance throughout. In fact, it is something of a trial knowing what to select for comment. One point certainly comes when, on page 171, he outlines objections to his treatment of the sacred. It might be held, he says, that he is

trying to defend a concept of the sacred which is exactly opposite to its original meaning. For, in taking it that the 'sacred' way of thought is essentially an interpretative structure based upon a reality already established independently of it, we are denying its very basis, and *raison d'être*.

The reason is plain; Mr Wicker is maintaining that 'the sacred' is not a special category of experience, or a special set of objects, actions and things denominated as such and set apart from the whole, but a way of conceiving and participating in the whole. It is a *mode*, that is, of action in and understanding of the world. This is what it was for primitive man, for whom to live in society was to live religiously; and this is what it may be for contemporary man, helped by the thinkers whom Mr Wicker has so fruitfully used.

In a sense one wants to assent at once; *this*, surely, is what every poet and every painter tries to testify to, even if his testimony takes the form of a self-disgust for his inability to do so. But the qualification is significant; for it is also precisely this which everyone finds so difficult, as the works of modern artists show so clearly, and which most men find not only impossible but inconceivable. We fall back therefore on the question whether it is necessary, if a man is to participate sacredly in the whole, to find some principle and mode of representation which will involve him in specifying some things as sacred; and if it is necessary, whether it is also necessary that other things be seen as 'profane'; and if they *are*, what implications that fact carries for a poet's sense of the totality of his vocation or for a Christian's sense of the totality of the redemption.

As I have already suggested, I think the answer is to be approached in terms of the sacred as *representative*, in much the way that Mr Wicker finds a man's bearing of language representative. In other words, I find religion and art the truest analogues for each other; though in doing so I agree that their action and efficacy in the world are frighteningly mysterious. Poetry, for example, may be a representation by revelation of certain powers in that language which itself is seen by Mr Wicker as representative. Mr Wicker himself, a

couple of pages further on, gives an account of 'sacred activities' which would answer to this contention, and certainly accord with the analysis of, for example, Eliade:

Sacred activities are designed to cause a break in the homogeneity of everyday space and time—that is, to help men to understand that in a sacred place, or during a sacred rite, everyday time and space are transcended. Man is transported by myth or rite into another dimension of experience. Now, this sacred dimension, so far from constituting an escape from everyday reality, is understood as a revelation of the ultimate reality which alone gives sense and meaning to the everyday world. The profane is not more, but less, 'real' than the sacred. (p. 79.)

Actually, at this point I think Mr Wicker has become too simply Eliadian, if only for a moment. The word 'break' seems both appropriate and dangerous; for one would want to stress continuity and discontinuity in one, at the risk of making the paradox intolerable. At any rate, so it seems to me, the transporting into another dimension of experience may have the effect of giving *all* experience the resonance of transcendence. For the Christian, the possibility of this would surely seem to be guaranteed by the very fact of the Incarnation, and by the way in which the transfiguration on the mount, leading to the resurrection, leads also to the resurrection of the apostles at Pentecost. In modern poetry, a striking example of the same possibility is seen in the remarkably subtle process of Eliot's *Four Quartets*; for what in 'Burnt Norton' is seen as a few moments of 'transporting', of sacred apprehension leading to a profound questioning of the 'profane' to which the poet returns, becomes by 'Little Gidding' a still more profound sense of all history and all present experience as a sacred pattern, from which any question of 'profane' perspectives is excluded. It is also significant that there is something human and humane in the latter poem which is missing from the former, or is present there in a truncated or intermittent form.

Despite the splendid logic of his book, then, Mr Wicker does seem to me to oscillate in certain of his local formulations between a sense of everything as sacred and a sense of sacred things as being unacceptably separate. We are all bound to do this, of course, if we think about the matter seriously at all; that is the way the world is. But if the difficulty is to be overcome, at least conceptually (and existentially I do not think it can be fully overcome until the beatific vision), it will be by way of a concept of representation.

Mr Wicker comes to this concept; and when he does, he comes, significantly enough, relying on Eliade. So he says,

It has already been noted that the sacred involves a notion of the discontinuity of space and time. By contrast with the modern, scientific, 'desacralized' view, religious man thinks of the world as being capable, in itself, of revealing a dimension of space and time

which is not that of everyday. The sacred space of the consecrated ground, or house, or Temple, and the sacred time of the festival and of the mythical narration—both represent this capacity of the world to manifest the sacred. (p. 192.)

I find no difficulty in agreeing with this, yet I am afraid that the stress it leaves may be misleading; and, indeed, I am mildly surprised that, of all the categories of the sacred Eliade speaks of, Mr Wicker should have chosen the sacred space and time. It is true that the Catholic liturgy has traditionally relied very strongly on both these concepts; the existence of churches and of the liturgical year make this plain. Yet I wonder if they are the most important things: there are also sacred persons, objects, actions, and sayings, and the collocation of all these constitutes a liturgical life much more surely than the sacred place and time, dear as these are to me personally. After all, if we *are* to think in terms of sacred places and times, the cemetery and the bridal bed are as much examples of the first as the church, and the times of gestation and of dying are as much examples of the second as the space of a Mass. Like Mr Wicker, I too find fascinating Eliade's talk about the construction of a sacred space in the sense of a construction of a world of meaning which re-enacts mythically the creation of the world.¹ It is something of an historical curiosity, nevertheless. For the primitive mentality appealed to by taking these acts as a paradigm seems to be one which engages not only in repeated rituals but in rituals of repetition: which is not, perhaps, quite what we need. Certainly we need acts which recall to us the primal act of God, but that is another matter; for we have the Incarnation, and hence the Mass, to be our exemplar of a sacralizing event and a sacred act; and these do not depend on anything like the sacralizing deed which Eliade *at this point* speaks of.

To me, Eliade is more compelling when he speaks of things, actions, persons, as *hierophanies*, manifestations of the presence and power, hence the relevance of God; and I think most poets would find it so. It is evident that the choices open to primitive man were much sparser than those open to the religious man today. It is as well to recall this fact, for the notion of choice has several important consequences. On it depend the very notion of a communal moral existence, the very notion of representation (a language, after all, is developed by communal selection of certain sounds to predominate over others, while a baby babbles the whole range), the very notion of men as playing roles in relation to one another and so establishing a pattern of communal significance, and, hence, the very existence of all the examples of the sacred which we know today. Meaningful action is chosen action. The whole of the Old and the New Testament could scarcely emphasize choice more: the choices of a people, of a city, of individual savers and saved. Indeed, God the Father is presented as Chooser, and Christ as both Chooser and Chosen.

¹See Eliade: *The Sacred and the Profane*: p. 11, *passim*.

In the perspective provided by these examples, we modern men have so many choices open to us that the act of choice itself may even become a re-humanizing and sacralizing act, renewing our powers as free creatures. To the extent that it does, the sacralizing act does not merely represent a reality already in existence, it brings into existence, afresh, a reality in man's own powers without which none of the choices practically available to him has much meaning. Consequently, although there is a community of experience between primitive and modern men, there can hardly be an equivalence. Primitive man's designation of a space as sacred is an act whose dissimilarity from a modern man's designation may be as important as its similarity. And for practical reasons in the contemporary climate of Catholicism, it may be unwise to insist too much on the sacredness of place and time, lest that very insistence prevent us from breaking out of a conventional framework of expectations or, at the other extreme, throw us over-prepared into the chaos of the unconventional.

Having moved slightly away from Mr Wicker in one direction, I must now lurch away from him in another; but in the process I must recall our basic agreement, as when he says, again echoing Eliade:

For everything—objects, words, tasks, relationships—is capable of becoming a 'hierophany'. This is not to say that everything is felt to have a sacred quality immanent in itself, but—on the contrary—that there is a dimension within which everything can be considered as sacred because it goes beyond itself. (p. 195.)

And at this point he reaches the issue where disagreement is going to become evident. Engaging in a loving dialectic with Eliade, as I would do with them both, he uses Eliade's own statement that *any* place can be made sacred to reproach him for insisting that a Christian church is a sacred place. Christianity, says Mr Wicker, rather reversing the opinion I quoted earlier, has no need of *special* sacred place, since 'Christ himself is the new temple, which is not made with human hands. The presence of God is now not actualized by the consecration of a physical space, but simply by the consecration of the community.' (p. 197.) He goes on, with his usual scrupulous qualifications, so that one is in doubt whether to agree or disagree. I cannot quote more, and anyone who would follow my remarks must read page 195 *passim* of Mr Wicker. Basically I agree with him. 'Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'; and the communal love of Christians is the exemplary manifestation of Christ's presence to the world, as the whole New Testament testifies. But I also think that an emphasis on ritual as manifestation has its own importance. That is (and I hope it is not laughable to put it this way), since the communal love is never perfect, and all too seldom visible, certain deeds, persons, and things may *normally* have to be chosen to reveal it and,

in revealing, to recreate it; and if *those*, perhaps *normally* places too. After all, the people of God, shabby as it is in performance, is glorious in aspiration, and the God of thrones and powers has to be both witnessed and answered to.

It is fashionable to suggest that, the less 'religious' modern man becomes, the less we Christians ought to indulge in rituals, since they only emphasize our separateness, and hence our 'irrelevance'. If rituals were all we had, that would be obvious. But since they are not, I think it worth suggesting that the case may be the opposite. 'Christ's presence is to his people, not to physical things', says Mr Wicker. On the contrary, Christ's presence is to both; or, to put it another way, it is by their use of things that Christ's people may manifest his presence to them. In saying this, I do not want to beg any questions; I do not want to prescribe in advance any *things* which alone shall be the matter of the sacraments. But I do think that our very presence in the world forces on us a sacramental, sacrificial role, and so enjoins on us the necessity for using 'things' to manifest his presence not only in us but in and to the whole of mankind. The choice of such 'things' is in part a matter for theologians and liturgists; but the supervisory insistence on representativeness is a matter for the rest of us. When Mr Wicker says that Christ's presence is to his people, not to physical things, it may be replied that Christ's people symbolize his presence to them by giving a sacred-symbolic value to physical things, and may even do it in such a way that they show to non-Christians his presence to *them*.

It would be easy for a liturgical revivalist to take up this remark as a suggestion to 'place more emphasis on the forms of the liturgy', as I have heard it said. Such an emphasis would, in my view, be misplaced; the issue is rather one of extending the eucharistic action (actually I have come to detest the term *liturgy*) as a resonance into many other actions; there are more sacraments than one, and the sacramental significance of Catholicism is not exhausted by the count of seven. But, however the eucharistic action is led outward, there must always be at work a principle of representation: life as a continuum has no room for the sacred, and cannot be a sacred whole. The problem is how to designate things as sacred in such a way that the designation brings us to see all things as sacred. Too large a vision may end in practical defeat. Thus, Mr Wicker, who is as realistic a Christian as I know of, says:

Thus, for Christianity, the sacred space is not that of the consecrated building, but rather the space which is created by the presence of the members of the community to each other. (p. 198.)

This is an admirable statement; yet it is worth asking, not of Mr Wicker but of some contemporary Catholics, what they think would happen to the 'presence of the community to each other' if every church were converted into a stable or museum. That presence, after

all, must be actualized in meeting, in communities of worship existing within and reflecting the whole community, in a way analogous to that in which the Catholic community reflects the human race. Christianity is the reverse of gnostic; as Mr Wicker abundantly shows, *mental* unities are not enough; our redemption, and our resurrection, have to do with our *bodiliness*. There are times, and there is every reason why they should be regular times, when we gather together precisely as Christians, in order to celebrate what Christ has accomplished, not only for us but also in the world. When we do, we are surely designating place, time, person, deed, object, as sacred and sacredly representative. It is not perhaps a question of how men may know that *we* are the Father's, but of how they may know that *they* are the Father's; for, after all, God help us, *we claim to be*.

These remarks lead me to two final contentions which, put briefly, are these: On the one hand, it is necessary to follow further than Mr Wicker does Eliade's suggestion that we may get into the habit of 'recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere', and so remove the suggestion that it is *only* in communal presence, in liturgical *meetings*, that the sacred may be found; on the other hand, it is necessary to move *away* from Eliade possibly more decisively than Mr Wicker does, and to take as our paradigm for the sacred not the objects and observances which he attributes to primitive man but something fuller and more resonant from the Christian tradition itself, specifically the Last Supper.

On the first of these points, it is important and instructive to note that the members of the New Catholic Left speak very much as men of the cities, and as though the manifestations of non-human natural life had only a marginal interest for them. This is historically understandable, but it is likely to distort any effort at a renewal and extension of the sacred; already more than once in the pages of *Slant* have appeared signs of a certain scorn for the numinous potency of natural objects. 'As for nature, our misfits will do that for us'; or so somebody may be persuaded to say. But natural life, both in its processes and in its achieved forms, may itself be an image of the resurrected universe. A mankind entirely cut away from this sense of it is a mankind alienated indeed, because in having few analogues for creation it can have little sense of the re-creation in which we are corporately engaged. Eliade's remark about recognizing hierophanies everywhere is surely addressed to the individual scholar—and the individual religious man. Even Mr Wicker writes from within a context in which he sees the concept of the sacred threatened by the very fact that men are driving the unpredictable from the universe:

We are faced today by the unique historical possibility of a totally humanized and controlled world. The old distinction between the sacred and the profane in terms of the unknown and

mysterious and unpredictable, on the one hand, and the known and the controllable on the other, is fast disappearing. The world may soon present to us a wholly humanized environment, in which there is no corner left untouched by man. (p. 240.)

In a general sort of way, this is of course true in that it indicates an historical tendency; but, strictly speaking, it is untrue, because it is impossible to conceive of the tendency's reaching the sort of completion Mr Wicker seems to be envisaging. To take the tendency as achieved fact is to engage in Promethean fantasy. We have not (we cannot have) fully humanized and controlled the universe. We *have*, it is true, reduced 'the unknown and mysterious and unpredictable' both in scope and power; but we have not eliminated it. Leaving aside the mysteries disclosed by astro-physics, anyone who spends an afternoon walking in city street or on country roads and keeps his eyes open is faced with a million newnesses, reminders or revelations, any one of which may be for him an hierophany. It is true that he may be faced with them in the context of a *general* expectation of life which is much more fully 'controlled' than even before; but that is a different matter. The gradual delimiting of the arbitrary in experience does not of itself banish the fact-as-numinous, it merely makes men less accessible to it (if I may put the logic of the matter in this paradoxical way). In any case, man is still subject to an arbitrariness as terrible in scope as it is horrible in nature, a dislocation of being represented by drought, famine, earthquake, war, accident, disease, and neurosis. Perhaps we have categorized our 'accidents', but only by looking backwards, as men always did; and we have neither prevented nor fully understood them. Of course we may *hope* to do so, but it does seem to be a melancholy fact that one great threat to mankind succeeds another.

Given all this, it is just as well that we have access to the renewal in hope which personal hierophanies provide. And it is the personal nature of those apprehensions which chiefly concerned me in the preceding paragraphs. This brings me to the second of my contentions. If I think it misleading of Mr Wicker to place so little emphasis on individual apprehension and response, and to place so unremitting an emphasis on human *meetings* as the focus for the sacred, I also think it misleading to place so exclusive an emphasis on, so to speak, the *human-ness* of those meetings. I do not want to be misunderstood here. I agree with all that Mr Wicker says on the effects of the Incarnation, and I think, as I guess he does, that Eliade's examples, while enormously valuable for us in showing the varieties of sacred apprehension, can hardly be normative for us; they cannot, that is, provide us with our paradigm. We have our own exemplar, the Mass, and its exemplar, the Last Supper. But when we do turn to, for example, the Last Supper to find a paradigm for our participation in the world-as-sacred, we should, I think, refuse to

see its significance as exhausted by its character of a meeting or a meal. Personally, I am uneasy about talk of the Mass as 'the family meal of the Christian' for much the same reasons as move me to regard the Last Supper as having a significance beyond that of presenting a communal set of relationships. It has those relationships, certainly, but it is also a communal action. The action is initiated at every point by Christ, and at every point the apostles are drawn to participate in it at his invitation. The result is something utterly mysterious and, in a way, the reverse of reassuring: very different, at any rate, from what we normally think of as involved in a meeting of friends or a communal meal.

It begins with the mysterious directions for finding the supper-room, the place which is thereby designated as sacred. It involves more than one ritual, in St John's gospel for example a washing of the feet, which is resisted by Peter. It involves also a charge of treachery, dire warnings and challenges (the fending off of corrupting influences). In all four versions it includes mysterious sayings, and in St John's version an eschatological discourse. And in all these respects, when Christ offers himself to his companions, as a servant in the washing of feet and as a sign in the offering of the bread and wine as his body and blood, he does so while repeatedly commending them to one another and to the Father, who is invoked to receive them. His speech is dark, mysterious, exalted, full of doctrine and paradox. And the meal which began so mysteriously and was so strangely conducted ends, strictly speaking, with the going-out to Mount Olivet which is, in terms of the dramatic economy of the narrative, presented as almost a prolongation of the meal itself.

In all this, what is *sacred* is not merely human companionship illuminated by Christ's presence and initiatives but also a series of actions, of informative sacramental rituals, by which Christ declares to the Apostles not only his presence to them or their presence to one another, but the Father's presence to them all, both through him and through the Spirit whom he promises to send them. It is an indication, perhaps, that when we speak of the 'humanizing' of the world, and of the renewal of the sacred by appreciating Christ's presence in that humanizing, we should not allow our terms to remain quite so 'humane' as the language of 'the family meal of the Christian' might suggest. What Christ *does* at the Last Supper, and what is done now in the Mass, has something in common with the rituals of sacred designation spoken of by Eliade, though it immeasurably transcends them.

I hope these remarks will make it clear how much I have been moved by Mr Wicker's book, and how provisional our disagreements are. Indeed, so formidable are his logical procedures that I cannot be sure whether we disagree at all. At any rate, we are at one in thinking that a radical Catholicism has to do with the sacred, and that it has little in common with that panic progressivism which seems anxious

to find some grounds for being glad at the 'secularizing' of the world, and to immortalize itself in the vision of God disappearing into the Church, the Church disappearing into the world, and the world disappearing into the future.

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