

The Contempt of Ritual I¹

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by Mary Douglas

The Church today is engaged in a great crisis of self-examination. It is looking at its claims, its traditional role, its theology. It is revising its rituals. This reforming effort is intended to bring Christian worship fully into the twentieth century. But, alas, the zeal for coming up to date proceeds without recourse to one of the most relevant critical techniques which this century has produced, I mean sociological comparison. Hence some naïveté in the religious reformer about his own role. He seems not to suspect how much his views are the product of his secular environment. Nor does he consider whether the faithful are free to follow his proposals, though they also must be constrained by their own social environment. More important, he does not seem to foresee any difficulty in abolishing some forms of worship and retaining others. Whereas, if the sociological dimension has as much power as I think it has, King Canute had more chance of saying which pebbles should remain dry.

Let me take the very acute observations on ritual reform made by Louis Bouyer in his book *Rite and Man, The Sense of the Sacral and Christian Liturgy* (1963). He sees that ritual can easily degenerate into magic (pp. 57-58), a series of techniques to control reality. And he sees that in reaction to magicality, there is a tendency, as he says,

for the word to become over-objectivized. It will affirm the absolute transcendence of the spirit over the naive reality of a man in search of freedom. . . . To become purely divine, the word endeavours to escape completely this sensible world which is the world of man. But it can then well happen that man does nothing more than make for himself a supreme idol, that of the intelligence succeeding to the idols of stone and flesh (pp. 57-58).

Strong words; and he goes on to trace such a move from magic to over-weening rationality in 'certain types of Protestantism', and insists that 'all modern Catholics can be regarded as being unwitting Protestants in this regard'. Indeed, the anti-magic and anti-ritualism of today is the conscious heir of the Reformation and traces its lineage to the prophets of the Old Testament as did Luther himself. The social context of these anti-ritualist movements and of their periodical defeat is my subject today.

There is a perverse ritualist, called the Bog Irishman, whom my clerical friends try to reform. Bog Irishism is a highly magical,

¹This article is based on a paper originally given as the St Thomas's Day lecture at Blackfriars, Oxford.

irrational, non-verbal culture. The Bog Irish are found in London parishes. Friday abstinence is the core rule of their religion: it is a taboo whose breach will bring automatic misfortune. It is the only sin they think worth mentioning in confession and they evidently believe that it will count against them more heavily on the day of judgment than breach of any of the ten commandments. To bring them nearer to the true doctrines Friday abstinence has been abolished and an active movement of new catechetics attempts to wean their offspring from magicality and bring them to a superior form of worship. When I ask why the new forms are held superior, I am answered by a Teilhardist evolutionism which assumes that a rational, verbally explicit, personal commitment to God is self-evidently better than its alleged contrary, formal, ritualistic conformity. Questioning this, I am told that ritual conformity is not a valid form of personal commitment, and is not compatible with the full development of the personality; also that the replacement of ritual conformity with rational commitment will give greater meaning to the lives of Christians.

As an anthropologist descended from the Bog Irish, I would like to challenge all of this. In my defence of ritualism I will argue that the choice between ritual and non-ritual forms of worship is socially determined; that our pastors, in their acceptance of Teilhardism, are moving with the secular tide. They are not making an intellectually free, undetermined assessment of the relative value of these forms of worship. They should recognize that the currently preferred form, personal, private, intellectual commitment is not an option available to all. Therefore, it follows that much exhortation will be in vain. Finally, I will maintain that religious meaning is richer and personal commitment deeper in a ritualistic system. Instead of rushing along with the humanists and hastening the collapse of symbolic forms, it would be better to grieve at their loss. To shore up ritualism may be a vain exercise. But I will argue that ritualism is a necessary condition for a sacramental religion. It will be well to consider, therefore, whether we are prepared for a doctrinal shift concerning the sacraments.

Before I launch into a comparison of primitive religions, I would like to recall the delicacy of the line that a sacramental religion rests upon. Sacraments, as I understand, are signs specially instituted to be channels of grace. The whole material world is sacramental in the same sense, that material signs and channels of grace are everywhere always available; but the sacraments are specially instituted. The Christian who approaches a sacrament must fulfil stipulated ritual conditions. If these, for one reason or another, cannot be met, he can have recourse to the more general sources of grace. Instead of actually going through the instituted form of confession and absolution, he can make an inward 'act of contrition'; instead of Eucharistic communion he can make an 'act of spiritual communion'. The

devotion to the sacraments, then, depends on a frame of mind which values external forms and is ready to credit them with special efficacy. It is such a general attitude which commits the ritualist to sacramental forms of worship. And vice versa, a lack of interest in external symbols would not be compatible with a cult of instituted sacraments. Much of the discussion of the liturgy rests on the idea that old symbols have lost their meaning and that therefore the problem is to find new symbols or revivify the meaning of old ones. This could be a waste of effort if, as I argue, people at different historic periods are more or less sensitive to signs as such. The perception of symbols in general, as well as their interpretation, is socially determined.

There is a popular idea that all primitive religions are magical and taboo-ridden. Robertson-Smith voiced this impression that there has been, through the centuries, a progressive decline of magic accompanying the growth of civilization. He was not altogether wrong and it will be a melancholy conclusion of my paper that our current contempt of ritual is a late phase in that decline. But the great secular movement he described has been frequently interrupted. Furthermore, among primitive cultures far removed from industrial progress we find non-ritualists.

Ritualism is founded in a concern that efficacious symbols should be correctly manipulated and that the right words be pronounced in the right order. Strict Christian doctrine limits the efficacy of the sacraments to the internal working of grace in the soul. Through this agency external events may be changed at second remove, since decisions taken by persons in a state of grace will presumably differ from those of other persons. Sacramental efficacy works internally. But magical efficacy expects symbolic acts to work direct upon the external world. So a candle lit to St Anthony for finding a lost object is magical as also a St Christopher medal used to prevent accidents or the expectation that meat eaten on a Friday would bring one out in spots. Both sacramental and magical behaviour are expressions of ritualism. What we learn about the conditions in which magic thrives or declines in primitive cultures should be applicable to sacramentalism among ourselves.

I am now going to accept the elision between ritualism and magic which the despisers of ritual so often make. Extreme ritualism I take to be shown in concern for symbolic boundaries and in the belief that specified symbolic acts can be efficacious to change events. Take first the case of a tribe whose traditional religion was magical, and where a sizeable minority switched to a Protestant-like reform of ritual and conscience. 'The traditional Navaho', writes David Aberle,

fears errors in his rituals and particularly error in the fixed prayers which chanter and patient must repeat in the course of a ceremony. Error may not only render the ceremony ineffectual but

may cause illness to the patient years later. . . . Navaho supernatural power is likely to harm man when man breaches various tabus, but these tabus have almost nothing to do with the moral order. If a man were to commit murder, he might have ghost trouble—but so might he if he worked in a hospital or happened to burn wood from a hogan where someone had died. His ghost trouble stems from ritual contamination, not from God's curse or the ghost's vengeance. Theft, adultery, deceit, assault, and rape have no supernatural sanctions. . . . True, ceremonies are impaired if the singer becomes angry or if there is quarrelling at the ceremony. In this sense there are supernatural sanctions against misbehaviour—but only while the ceremony continues. On the other hand, the Navaho must fear the consequences of many accidental breaches of tabus--(p. 196).¹

From this position of extreme ritualism a large minority of Navaho have adopted a religion centred on the ritual eating of peyote. The religion of the peyotists differs utterly from the traditional one, in their ritual, their ideas of sin and of God. The peyotists value spontaneity in their prayers and insist there is no fixed pattern in them. As Aberle puts it: 'The traditional Navaho tries to bind power by formulae while the peyotist tries to sway God by his fervour'.

The peyotists' God is interested in morality. Confession of sin is necessary to gain God's blessing and aid.

Full details of this religious change are given in David Aberle's remarkable book. Here I need only indicate the change in social conditions which accompanied the change of religious worship. Navaho life was based on shepherding in very arid, difficult conditions, mainly in Arizona and New Mexico. A man with many sheep used to gather round him other families who managed portions of his herd for him and in return were given part of the yield. These units must have been extremely cohesive, the basis for economic aid in crises and for revenge and moral control.

The largest organized unit of Navaho kinship was a group of local matrilineal kinsmen who actually co-operated and assisted one another on a day to day and year to year basis. . . . A man might lose his accumulated wealth through a bad winter or a dry summer. Hence an ethic of sharing was general, with primary dependency on matrilineal kin but secondary dependence on many other kinsmen as well, including affines. The wealthy were supposed to be generous, the poor unremitting in their pressures for generosity. Mutuality among kinsmen was reinforced by . . . the process of regulating disputes: here self-help and compensation were the rule. A headman could only arbitrate, and kinsmen were needed for support in case of feud, pressure for compensation, or need to pay compensation (p. 44).

How tight this community life was and what strong controls to

¹*The Peyote Religion Among the Navaho*, Aldine, Chicago, 1966.

conform were exerted by the sanctions of reciprocity in hardship may be seen from the attitude to moral rules. European enquirers were apparently surprised to find that Navaho ethical standards were supported not by love of virtue, but by fear of reprisals, fear of withdrawal of support, and fear of shame. Aberle's book is a documented study of the gradual breakdown of the basis of community moral control. American law and order substituted for vengeance groups.

Clan cohesion was impaired as the possibility of mutual aid was reduced. Fear of loss of support in the community also became a lesser threat. And fear of loss of face or shame depends on the degree of involvement in the face-to-face community. Not only was intra-community interdependence lessened and enforcement of morality impaired, but extra-community dependence on wage work, and familial economic autonomy, was increased. . . . (pp. 200-201).

This one example suggests that when the social group grips its members in tight communal bonds, the religion is ritualist, when this grip is relaxed, ritualism declines. And with this shift of forms, a shift in doctrines appears. The social experience of the traditional Navaho man conditioned him to automatic response to his community's demands. Abstract right or wrong, internal motives, these were much less important to him than knowing to which vengeance group he belonged and to whom he was bound in a web of reciprocities. But the new Navaho, impoverished by enforced de-stocking, insecurely involved in the American wage and cash economy, had to learn to discriminate between the obligatory claims of his family and optional claims of charity. Private judgment controlled his behaviour, not blind loyalty. He could not count on his kinsmen, nor should they on him. He was alone. Eating peyote gave him a sense of greatly enhanced personal worth and a sense of direct communion with the supernatural. Notice that his God has become like himself, no more coerced by powerful symbols of reciprocity and allegiance. He judges intentions and capacities. He does not apply fixed rules automatically but pierces behind the symbolic façade to judge the inner heart of man. God has turned against ritual. Here is a fascinating model of the Protestant reformation, well worth exploring further. But since this anti-ritualism is clearly a response to modern conditions, it does not fit my need for primitive models.

For these I turn to three studies made from Oxford. Professor Evans-Pritchard's work on the Nuer,¹ Godfrey Lienhardt's on the Dinka² and Colin Turnbull's on the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest.³ From these I derive the thesis that the most important determinant of religious behaviour is the experience of closed social groups. The man who has that experience associates boundaries with power and danger. The better defined and the more significant the social

¹*Nuer Religion*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956.

²*Divinity and Experience*, R. G. Lienhardt. O.U.P., 1961.

³*Wayward Servants*, C. M. Turnbull. Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1965.

boundaries, the more the bias I would expect in favour of ritualism. If the social groups are weakly structured and their membership weak and fluctuating, then I would expect ritualism to be weak. Along this line of variation, doctrinal differences would appear, as well as differences in forms of worship. With weak social boundaries and weak ritualism, I would expect doctrinal emphases on internal, emotional states. Sin would be more a matter of affect than of transgression; sacraments and magic would give way to direct, unmediated communion, even to the sacralization of states of trance and bodily dissociation.

Half the thesis, of course, is Durkheim's. Striking confirmation for it lies in the religions of these three peoples. The pygmies represent the extreme case. So little ritual do they perform that their first ethnographers assumed that they had, to all intents and purposes, no religion, no culture even, of their own. All that they had was borrowed from the Bantu. Turnbull's work is inspired by the need to assert that their very lack of ritual is an aspect of an independent culture of their own. He draws a picture of pygmies, irreverently mocking solemn Bantu rites, into which they have been drawn, uncomprehending the magic for hunting and fertility which their Bantu neighbours offer them, overcome with giggling during Bantu attempts to divine for sorcerers, quite unconcerned about incurring pollution of death. The whole paraphernalia of Bantu religion is alien to them. Seen from the Bantu point of view they are ignorant, and irreligious. But they do not have any alternative set of paraphernalia, equally elaborate and imposing, but different. Their religion is one of internal feeling, not of external sign. The moods of the forest manifest the moods of god and the forest can be put into a good mood by the same means as the pygmies, by song and dance. Their religion is not concerned with their correct orientation within elaborate cosmic categories nor with acts of transgression, nor rules of purity: it is concerned with joy (p. 289). It is a religion of faith, not works, to use an ancient slogan.

As to their social groupings—so fluid and so fluctuating is the band that a given territory witnesses 'a continual flux of individuals' (p. 109). Bantu farmers consider that certain pygmies are attached to their villages by hereditary right and would very much like to know their whereabouts. But, Turnbull says:

So with every lineage, as with every individual, there is an infinity of territories to which he may move it if pleases him, and the system, such as it is, encourages such movement to the point that no (Bantu) villager can ever be sure of what Mbuti lineages are hunting in 'his' territory (p. 109).

A camp of net hunters moves its site roughly every month. During that time newcomers are arriving and original members moving out, so that the composition is not the same throughout the months. Seven men are needed for the hunting season, and a camp of over

20 huts is counted as a large one. In the honey season such camps fragment into much smaller units.

In such a society a man can hardly need to be preoccupied with the formalities of social intercourse. If a quarrel arises, he can easily move away. Loyalties are for the short term. Techniques of conciliation need not be elaborate or publicly instituted. I am not merely saying that the people's behaviour to their god corresponds to their behaviour to each other, though the truism could well be underlined. I am saying that religious forms as well as social forms are generated by experiences in the same dimension. Pygmies move freely in an uncharted, unsystematized, unbounded social world. I maintain that it would be impossible for them to develop a sacramental religion, as it would be impossible for the neighbouring Bantu farmers living in their confined villages in forest clearings, to give up magic.

Nuer and Dinka are sometimes treated as a unit in contrast with other cultures. Indeed, it is Godfrey Lienhardt's penetrating comparison of what he called Nuer-Dinka with Anuak cosmologies that started this line of thinking for me (1962).¹ Neither tribe is as Low-Church as the pygmies. Their ethnographers have both had trouble, when asserting the non-ritualist quality of their worship, in convincing their colleagues that a tendency to idealize has not distorted their reporting. This is the fate of every ethnographer who tries to describe an unritualist, primitive religion. I have never known what to reply to anthropologists who have suggested that his own religious affiliation may have coloured Professor Evans-Pritchard's account of Nuer religion. I have heard them question Nuer disregard of fetishism, alleged to be a foreign new importation (p. 99). As for the Nuer God, his close intimacy with his worshippers, his refusal to be coerced by sacrifice, his aptness for being described in Christian theological forms (chapter 1), how far he seemed from the traditional gods of primitive religions. I have also wondered whether Robin Horton was perhaps justified in chiding Godfrey Lienhardt for playing down the magical content of Dinka ritual behaviour.

. . . . There is an occasional failure to call a spade a spade. For instance, though it seems clear from the material offered that the Dinka think certain actions symbolizing desired ends really do help in themselves to achieve these ends, the author seems at times to want to rationalize this magical element away.²

Godfrey Lienhardt, I recall, was at pains to draw a very subtle delicate line between the expressive and efficacious functions of Dinka ritual. In my view, he offers a brilliant insight into the way in which symbolic action controls experience. But is he guilty at the same time of underplaying the magical element?

My answer now is that *magical rites are not the same the world over*

¹The Situation of Death: an aspect of Anuak Philosophy', *Anthropological Quarterly*, XXXV, 2nd April, pp. 74-85.

²*Africa*, XXXII, 1st January, p. 78.