

1-1-1989

## Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals

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### Recommended Citation

Bell, C. M. (1989). Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals. *Worship* 63:31-41.

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ciple that Tillich subjects the whole Christian tradition to a radical critique in the name of the Ultimate who uses but, nonetheless, transcends all forms of sacramental/symbolic manifestation. By correlating this principle with the concrete "Catholic substance" Tillich attempts to achieve what may be called an "Evangelical Catholic" synthesis which is both sacramentally concrete and absolutely universal at the same time. The ecumenical implications of this approach, especially in terms of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue on the sacraments, have not been, but should be obvious.

Catherine Bell

## Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals

Liturgical reform has not been well received by some cultural anthropologists and sociologists of religion. Most, of course, have ignored this quiet revolution and its ramifications, but a few have reacted strongly. In this very journal, for example, the justly renowned anthropologist Victor Turner lamented the loss of the dignified pre-Conciliar Mass and the emergence of "relevant" liturgical experimentation.<sup>1</sup> Turner's reaction is not an isolated case among scholars, although it may be the most direct.<sup>2</sup> Such opin-

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner, "Ritual, Tribal and Catholic," *Worship* 50 (November 1976) 504-26.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Douglas presents a more historically nuanced critique of recent liturgical changes in general in *Natural Symbols* (New York: Random House/Vintage 1973) 19ff. David Martin has also published several critiques of changes in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, speaking both as a sociologist of religion and as a deacon in the Church of England. See David Martin and Peter Mullen, eds., *No Alternative: The Prayer Book Controversy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1981) and D. Martin, *The Breaking of the Image* (New York: St Martin's Press 1979). The ambiguities of Martin's position have been criticized in Jonathan D. Harrop, "The Limits of Sociology in the Work of David Martin," *Religion* 17 (April 1987) 173-92.

ions clearly suggest the dangers of forsaking scholarly distance or appealing to a professional "expertise" to decide what is proper ritual and what is not. It is doubtful, for example, that Turner would have so harshly judged ritual reforms carefully deliberated and implemented by the Ndembu. Yet with regard to Catholic ritual, he even backed his critique with the credentials of "science."<sup>3</sup> The root of such reactions, however, is not simply a loss of objectivity or a display of scientific aggrandizement. Rather, self-consciously changing ritual presents scholars with a major conundrum, a contradiction of sorts that is rooted in the history of approaches to the study of ritual.

Since the turn of the century, the study of ritual has been closely tied to issues of social change. Two general approaches have predominated. The first, rooted in W. Robertson Smith's study of Semitic sacrifice,<sup>4</sup> has been developed with great sophistication by Turner and Mary Douglas among others. This approach has focused on the role of ritual in the maintenance of social groups. It therefore tends to analyze ritual as the expressive deployment of the symbolic structures that undergird a group's common world view. In this way ritual is seen to act as a mechanism of continuity to resist forces that could fray the fabric of the community.

A second approach has focused on how groups change through ritual. Within this perspective, ritual is seen as integral to the way in which the ideals and traditions of the social group are adapted to changing circumstances. This approach is probably rooted in Durkheim's analysis of cult, but articulated most recently and persuasively in the work of Clifford Geertz.<sup>5</sup> According to this perspective, ritual is seen to facilitate meaningful social change by fusing a community's "general conceptions of the order of existence" with the actual circumstances of its daily life.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "I do not wish to sound uncharitable towards sincere and devout individuals, but science must have a say, and the comparative study of cultures has already some valid findings to its credit." Turner, 525.

<sup>4</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (New York: Meridian 1956). Originally published in 1889.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Structures of the Religious Life*, tr. J. W. Swain (New York: Free Press 1965). Originally published in 1912.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books 1973) 44-45, 48, 89, 113, 127, etc.

The first approach casts ritual as a mechanism of continuity, a way of countering change. The second approach regards ritual as affording change via adaptation or integration. Examples abound to support both approaches, but as theoretical formulations of the basic dynamics of ritual can both approaches be correct? Of course, the apparent contradiction between these approaches is largely a matter of emphasis. Yet their stark polarization highlights the fact that our most influential theories of ritual use it to solve other questions, particularly those raised by bifurcations of culture and society, and stasis and change.<sup>7</sup> One result of this orientation is the relatively little attention paid to how rituals themselves change or to why a community's sense of appropriate ritual changes. When these questions are discussed, the results are often rather strained.

Indeed, Turner was led to characterize the post-Vatican II Catholic Mass as a "hackwork of contemporaneous improvisation" in contrast to "authentic ritual," which he defined as the "outcome of . . . generations of shared and directly transmitted social life."<sup>8</sup> Certainly Turner's tendency to see authentic ritual as "liberated from historical determinations" left him little methodological room for analyzing how and why Catholic liturgy has changed today.<sup>9</sup> Yet much the same can also be said of Clifford Geertz's famous analysis of another equally "modern" ritual scenario, the Javanese funeral ritual that "failed to function properly."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, with an initial definition of ritual as integrating cultural values and social ethos so as to bring about personal detachment and communal harmony, Geertz is forced to imply that this funeral, which failed to do just that, barely qualifies as ritual — despite the fact that things were done and words were said by which a child was buried and formalities of mourning were observed. In both cases, Turner and Geertz bypass analysis of that which constituted effective ritual for the people involved in favor of illustrating what ritual should be.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Bell, "Discourse and Dichotomies: The Structure of Ritual Theory," *Religion* 17 (1985) 95-118.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Turner, "Ritual, Tribal and Catholic," *Worship* 50 (November 1976) 507, 523-24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 146.

Turner and Geertz portray modern modifications of older ritual traditions as chaotic and unsatisfactory at least in part, I would suggest, because such modifications violate reigning scholarly assumptions about ritual and its social role, according to which ritual functions either to transcend historical change or as a medium for the smooth, ongoing and unconscious accommodation of change. It is possible, however, that ritual is not intrinsically concerned with resisting or embracing change. Although ritual may be mobilized for either purpose, a focus on ritual and change will be of little use when it comes to analyzing how and why rituals themselves change. A more useful approach would incorporate the many insights of Turner's and Geertz's work, while not similarly restricting ritual's social role. Such an approach would attempt to identify dynamics intrinsic to ritual that, on the one hand, enable it to serve unchanging tradition *or* cultural adaptation, while on the other also make apparent the logic by which rituals are altered. Recent scholarship provides many resources for just such a social-analytical approach to ritual dynamics. While a complete development of this theory is beyond the scope of this paper, its basic principles can be sketched out briefly.

First of all, observers of the social performance of ritual often point out that rites are not composed of unique acts that occur only in the context of rite. Rather, ritual is a *way* of acting. As a way of acting, however, ritual is intrinsically concerned with distinguishing itself from other ways of acting. Thus, it is probably more appropriate to use the term "ritualization" to refer to a way of doing certain activities that differentiates those activities from other, more conventional ones. The ritualized activities gain a special status by this type of contrast. For example, distinctions between eating a regular meal and participating in the Christian eucharistic meal are drawn in numerous ways in nearly every aspect of the ritualized meal. Some of the most obvious social strategies for distinguishing a special eucharistic meal involve gathering a larger community to participate in it, establishing a distinctive periodicity for repetition of the rite, highlighting the insufficiency of the food for physical nourishment, and so on. However, theoretically, ritualization of the meal could employ a different set of strategies to differentiate it from conventional eating — holding the meal only once in a lifetime or with too much food for normal nourishment, and so on. Which strategies are used would depend

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on which could most effectively render the meal distinct from and symbolically dominant to its conventional counterparts. Given this analysis, ritualization could involve the exact repetition of a centuries-old tradition or deliberately radical innovation and improvisation.

It is in the orchestration of such strategic schemes that ritualization distinguishes certain things from others, attests to values inherent in such distinctions, and affords participants an experience of these distinctions as grounded in the nature of reality. Yet the strategies of ritualization themselves are little more than the production of a series of weighted oppositions in which one side of the opposition quietly dominates the other side — as “spiritual” nourishment, for example, dominates “physical” nourishment. Through their orchestration in the course of the rite, whole sets of these oppositions will also come to dominate other sets.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the traditional Catholic Mass discussed by Turner, the scheme of a “centered” community versus a dispersed one is generated as people congregate together at a specific place and time. When assembled, this scheme is overlaid with a higher versus lower opposition in which a raised altar and host, lifting and lowering voices and eyes, standing and kneeling, and so on, all generate a contrast between a higher reality and a lower one. This scheme is overlaid in turn by an inner versus outer opposition when that higher reality is internalized through the food shared by participants. Ultimately, inner/outer will nuance the oppositions of higher/lower and centered/dispersed to generate an experience of spiritual authority as an internalized reality.

The basic dynamics of ritual, therefore, can be seen to involve two processes. First, ritualization is itself a matter of drawing strategic contrasts between the acts being performed and those being contrasted or mimed. Second, the schemes established by ritualization are impressed upon participants as deriving from a reality beyond the activities of the group. Participants embody these schemes of perception and interpretation and deploy them in their social world. Such embodied schemes enable ritual participants to perceive and interpret their world in ways that facilitate the domination and validation of the values attested in the rite. Ritualization is, therefore, a type of creative socialization. It is most

<sup>11</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, tr. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977) 114–30, for a discussion of ritual strategies.

effective and most heavily used in communities that differentiate themselves from other groups on the basis of distinctions ascribed to the very nature of reality. Hence, some ritualization will attend the activities of a board of trustees, more ritualization will attend the activities of a national community, even more the activities of a sectarian community claiming a unique revelation.

This approach to ritual activities suggests that an ethos of timeless continuity based on the exact repetition of unchanging tradition is only one strategy of ritualization — one that creates a particular contrast between eternity and truth on the one hand and the daily, provisional and false on the other. Likewise, ritual activities that orchestrate an integration of tradition and historically new circumstances may equip the ritualized actor with other schemes, ones more effective perhaps for an individual negotiation of religion in pluralist communities. Finally, this approach also suggests that when the strategic schemes of the ritual can no longer effectively interpret and dominate the social milieu, then these schemes will shift.

There is no better way to illustrate these conclusions than by turning again to the Roman Catholic Mass. It is an excellent "test" for a comprehensive analysis of ritual and social change, since it has demonstrated both exemplary stability and sudden and radical innovation. In addition, our relative familiarity with the historical contexts of Christian liturgy makes it possible to analyze a succession of ways in which the forms of this rite interacted with their socio-historical contexts. It is no less pertinent as well that the field of ritual studies has been at something of a loss in addressing recent developments — opting, in the main, to judge the liturgical revolution of the last twenty years as an aberration of sorts, a symptom perhaps of religion's feeble and undignified disarray in the face of the forces of secularity. However, even a cursory analysis of the schemes of these new ritual formulations within the context of the history of the Christian Mass reveals something more vital.

Indeed, various historical formulations of the Mass reveal quite different relations to the historical moment or its transcendence. For example, the eucharistic rites of the first few centuries of the Christian era appear to have involved a conscious sense of historicity that does not fit neatly with either Turner's or Geertz's approaches. These rites celebrated an event that occurred in time,

occasioned the historical establishment of a community of the faithful, and anticipated a further historical agenda for the world. According to Dix, the emphasis within these rites was on the *doing* of certain actions, those thought to have been done before by Christ.<sup>12</sup> There was no equal importance to what was said, nor was the invocation of devout feelings thought necessary. This ritual meal was, above all, an *anamnesis*, a reappropriated enactment of the passion of Christ that simultaneously gave thanks for the events themselves, handed the story on to others, and grounded the particular community in the lived example of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the strictly standardized Tridentine liturgy formulated in the 1570 Roman Missal systematically invoked that transcendence of time which Turner saw as a feature of all authentic ritual. In that Mass, the historicity of Christ and his community of the faithful gave way to the eternity of the church and the miracle of "transubstantiation."<sup>14</sup> The emphasis was not so much on what was done as on what was *said* — the words that made this miracle occur. The dramatic words of consecration and adoration became the new crescendo, while the communal consumption of the consecrated food fell into a longer concluding sequence. Theologically as well, history became allegory, while the laity became passive witnesses to the drama unfolding in the often incomprehensible cadences of the priest's Latin.<sup>15</sup>

A few scholars have attempted to illustrate how the form and activities of this Mass both reflected and affected its social milieu. John Bossy, for example, finds the expression of a particular social doctrine in the medieval Mass by its representation of major social groups and their access to sources of power. Through the orchestration of components of sacrifice and sacrament, entreaties for the living and the dead, and distinctions between "friends" and "enemies," the medieval Mass impressed upon participants a variety of schemes and values, such as strategies for avenging oneself on enemies, channeling social violence, legitimating social hierar-

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury 1983; first edition 1945) 12–15.

<sup>13</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (New York: New American Library 1961) 17.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, 42–43.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, 46–49.



chies, and acknowledging a transcendently unified community. Bossy goes on to contrast this Mass with those of the Reformers, whose theological objections were inseparable from new social demands.<sup>16</sup> Keith Thomas has also demonstrated the social role of the medieval liturgy, noting its need to compete with surprisingly resilient rival systems of belief and practice. In the total organization of its ritual corpus, he finds, late medieval Christianity claimed both the transcendent identity of church and society and the impregnable hold of the official church on the here and now of local affairs.<sup>17</sup>

The ritual schemes embodied by participants in these two types of liturgies certainly differed as dramatically as the social circumstances of the church in these two periods in history. The same is true of the Mass after the liturgical reforms of this century.

Some observers at Vatican II were surprised that the opening sessions addressed matters of liturgical reform. It is now widely recognized, however, that the guidelines issued by the Council for "a general restoration of the liturgy" did more to change the face of the church and individual experience within it than any other resolutions.<sup>18</sup> Even while the Council portrayed the liturgy as "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed," it was actually dismantling a towering mountain of centuries of unified worship.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the central liturgical issue facing the Council — universal unity of practice versus the need for cultural adaptation to local communities — fundamentally challenged the theology and tradition of the Roman liturgy.<sup>20</sup> What have emerged from local applications of the conciliar guidelines appear to be very distinctive strategies of ritualization.

<sup>16</sup> John Bossy, "Essai de sociographie de la messe, 1200-1700," *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 36 (Jan.-Feb. 1981) 16-25.

<sup>17</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's 1971) 151-53. Also see Natalie Zemon Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures," in Steven Ozment, ed., *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research* (St Louis: Center for Reformation Research 1982) 321-43.

<sup>18</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 3.

<sup>20</sup> A. Bugnini and C. Braga, eds., *The Commentary on the Constitution and on the Instruction of the Sacred Liturgy*, tr. V. P. Mallon (New York: Benziger Brothers 1965) 13, 100. Also see Godfrey L. Diekmann, "Is There a Distinct American Contribution to the Liturgical Renewal?," *Worship* 45 (November 1971) 578-87.

Most dramatically, the communal aspects of the liturgy were again strongly emphasized in the prominence given to lay understanding and participation, but also in the recognition of a place for local cultural traditions within the liturgy. This was not a return to the ethos of the early church, however. The Council had reasoned that there were parts of the rite instituted by Christ himself that could not be changed; yet those considered to have been instituted by the church might be.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Council recognized both unchanging and changing aspects of the liturgy in a way that would recognize the historical and particular only in relation to the eternal and the universal. Indeed, the interplay of these two aspects of the rite depicts a *proper* relation between the universal, unchanging church and the particular community. The postconciliar Mass frequently presents itself as a "celebration" of the particular community that is constituted in the ritual. As such, the Mass is an act of self-recognition by which the assembled group experiences itself as "the church." The accompanying ethos may be the quiet orchestration of symbols of the group's identity or the over-enthusiastic outpouring of idiomatic self-assertion that offended Turrell.

The "medium" of this expression of communal ritual emphasizes neither what is "done" nor what is "said" — despite a high degree of performance and very explicit dialogue. Rather, the emphasis is on "expression." In the postconciliar Mass Catholics "express" themselves.<sup>22</sup> The ritual schemes implicitly foster participants' expression of themselves both as a community and as "the church" by assuming that the basis for any and all community resides within each person. That is, the basis for liturgical community is not ascribed to anything in the social, historical or cultural environment, nor to simple obedience to traditional church authority and custom. Rather, a basis for community within each person is evoked, expressed and experienced in this form of ritualization.

The language of this type of liturgical community was particularly apparent in the self-presentation of American Catholics to

<sup>21</sup> Bugnini and Braga, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Many have noted the prominence of "self-expression" in various aspects of modern life in general. In particular, see the discussions of "expressive individualism" in Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row 1985) 32-35 and 333-34.

Pope John Paul II during his 1987 visit. Lay spokespersons in particular made it clear that their identities as Catholics were based on the recognition that Rome rules not from without but from within — by virtue of the inner respect and humility that each Catholic willingly finds in him or herself, and which they need to have recognized.<sup>23</sup> Yet at times the Pope appeared to be on the other side of the gap that has opened between Roman ecclesiastical structure and the results of a new liturgical logic. No longer does Catholic identity reside in specific acts and verbalizations, in obedience to ecclesiastical authority, or in affiliation with a universal church. Rather, Catholic identity now lies in dynamics of self-expression instituted and nourished in a liturgical medium by which a group of individuals is empowered to experience themselves as a particular manifestation of the church. Indeed, this liturgically forged and promoted identity may well be the basis for the further emergence of lay challenges to the local leadership of bishops that was laid out in the Constitution on the Liturgy.

Turner continued his critique of liturgical change in Catholicism by decrying “the tendentious manipulation of particular interest groups,” the abandonment of “the spiritual for the material,” and the use of “jaunty verbal formulations” to “express” the “relevancy” of the sacred in its latest secular wrappings. All this, he maintained, was “clean counter to all anthropological experience.”<sup>24</sup> Hardly! Rather, we can observe strategies in these liturgies that imbue participants with the sense that as persons in community they can orchestrate this rite and their relation to God. The immediate participants may not share common traditions, political consensus, or social values, but through this new means of ritualizing the traditional eucharistic meal they can embody schemes that render such assumptions unnecessary in establishing a modern and effective religious community.

The Mass as it emerges in these three formulations is significantly different in each case because of the great shifts in the political, social and institutional status of the church and its members. In each case the particular ritual schemes of the Mass

<sup>23</sup> See the remarks of Donna Hanson, chairwoman of the U.S. Bishop's National Advisory Council, in her address to the Pope on September 18 in San Francisco, printed in “Meeting U.S. Laity,” *Origins* 17 (15 October 1987) 320–21.

<sup>24</sup> Turner, 24–26.

functioned in their specific socio-historical milieu to make strategic distinctions that defined both community and personal identity in effective ways. At times the repetition of an unchanging rite was such a strategy. In other times, the freedom to innovate and adapt will be an appropriate and effective way of ritualizing. While the foregoing examples have been too brief to do full justice to the social dynamics of these three examples of the Mass, they suggest that such dynamics were both socially direct and complex. They also suggest that with regard to accommodating or transcending historical change, the Mass has not functioned in any one way. Thus, the intrinsic purpose of ritual is too narrowly conceived if it is tied simply to the issue of social change — a problem that may loom unnaturally large to sociologists of religion due to the historical peculiarities of how the study of religion has differentiated itself from the practice of religion. Ritualization can function either to accommodate history or deny it. Moreover, in those circumstances in which the “proper” rite cannot be performed or an improvised ritual fails to evoke the expected ethos — as in the muddled Javanese funeral witnessed by Geertz — the participants still possess and re-embody strategies with which to express an adequate or potentially powerful articulation of the values by which the community orders and reorders the events and emotions of their lives.

Liturgical renewal illuminates the poverty of traditional ritual theory. The phenomenon of the liturgical movement as well as the scholarship that it has generated challenges nonsectarian scholars of ritual to be both better historians of the traditions within their own cultures and better sociologists of the impact of “relevant” ritual on modern life.



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