

CHAPTER II

RITUAL AND SYMBOL

I

HERE then is Man, the half-animal, half-spiritual creature ; living under the conditions of space and time, yet capable of the conscious worship of a Reality which transcends space and time. He has certain means at his disposal for the expression of this worship, this response to besetting Spirit ; and again and again he tends, at every level of development, to use these means—which indeed are forced on him by his situation, and by his own psychological characteristics. Of these, the chief are (1) Ritual, or liturgic pattern ; (2) Symbol or significant image ; (3) Sacrament, in the general sense of the use of visible things and deeds, not merely to signify, but also to convey invisible realities ; and (4) Sacrifice, or voluntary offering—a practice too far-reaching in its importance, and too profound in its significance for brief definition here.

All these sensible signs of supra-sensible action appear, in a rudimentary form, wherever man begins to respond in adoration to God. Combined in various ways and degrees, they are the chief elements of Cultus, or the agreed embodiment of his worship. As such both their character and their origin are of great importance to us. For in the first place, the object of Cultus being real communion between Man and God, its formal constituents must be of a kind which further, support, and express this communion. It is set “ between the Unseen and the Seen ”. On the one hand it

must be adapted to the psychological nature of the worshipping subject, making the fullest possible contact with his imaginative and sensitive life. But on the other hand, it must embody and express the substance of that Divine revelation which invites man's adoring response. It is conditioned at one and the same time by psychological and metaphysical necessities, and is to be judged by the perfection with which its twofold function is performed; opening a door through which Mystery approaches the creature, and the creature moves out in response.

And in the next place, though our chief concern as religious men and women is not the lowly origin, but the mature development and significance of our practices—still, there are characteristics of that maturity which are better understood by a reference to the infancy of faith. Since we are thoroughly historical creatures, brought forth by God in time and space, and developing under the fostering guidance of the Spirit, we ought not to be afraid to seek in the past the origin and perhaps some of the meaning of many of our methods of worship; still less should we be anxious to discard them, because they testify to that common humanity which we share with primitive men. It is surely mere arrogance to insist that with angels and archangels we laud and magnify the Holy Name, whilst disdaining the shaggy companions who come with us to the altar of faith: having already, indeed, discerned that altar in a darkness which we have left behind, and given costly offerings to the unknown God whom we so coldly serve. The primitive, sensitive to the mysterious quality of life, worshipping by gift and gesture, and devising ritual patterns whereby all the faculties of his nature and all the members of his group can be united in common action towards God, still remains a better model for human worship than the speculative philosopher or the solitary quietist: for he accepts his situation humbly instead of trying to retreat from it. Those who are prevented

by spiritual snobbery from appreciating this fact, will never achieve real understanding of their own religious experience ; or give it the right context within the historical experience of the race.

When we take together the four chief elements of Cultus—that is to say, the deliberate activity in which man expresses his worship—at once we see that Ritual, Symbol, Sacrament, and Sacrifice have certain common characteristics. First, they possess a marked social quality. They all make it possible for men to do things together. Hence their almost world-wide diffusion does not support Dr Whitehead's definition of religion, as "what the individual does with his own solitariness".¹ On the contrary, the most characteristic means of human worship are precisely those which the solitary does not require : namely the agreed symbols, and the established formulas and rites, which make concerted religious action and even concerted religious emotion possible, and so create the worshipping group. Certainly the religious vitality of this group and its proceedings must depend in the last resort on the spiritual sincerity and action of the individuals composing it : personal and social action must co-operate all the time. It is only too easy for the best and most significant cultus to lose spiritual content when it is not a vehicle for the worship of spiritual men. Then it declines from religion to magic, and from a living worship to a ceremonial routine, in which the exact recitation of the accepted formula or the correct performance of the ordained act is held to satisfy the full obligations of religion. But this tendency, so perpetually attacked by the Hebrew prophets, and Christian reformers, is inseparable from a method of expression which is forced upon man by his own social and psychological characteristics.

Next, Ritual, Symbol, Sacrament, and Sacrifice all have

¹ *Religion in the Making*, p. 16.

a twofold quality, which closely parallels our human situation. In their living state they have an outside and an inside ; a visible action and an invisible action, both real, both needed, and so closely interdependent that each loses its true quality if torn apart ; for indeed an idolatry which pins religion to abstract thoughts and notions alone is not much better than an idolatry which pins it to concrete stocks and stones alone. Either of these extremes are impoverishments, which destroy the true quality of a full and living cultus ; wherein spirit and sense must constantly collaborate, as they do in all the significant acts and experiences of men. Man, incited by God, dimly or sharply conscious of the obscure pressure of God, responds to Him best not by a simple movement of the mind ; but by a rich and complex action, in which his whole nature is concerned, and which has at its full development the characters of a work of art. He is framed for an existence which includes not only thought and speech, but gesture and manual action ; and when he turns Godward, his life here will not be fully representative of his nature, nor will his act of worship be complete, unless all these forms of expression find a place in it. His religious action must be social, as well as personal ; rhythmic and ceremonial, as well as interior and free. It must link every sense with that element of his being which transcends and co-ordinates sense, so that the whole of his nature plays its part in his total response to the Unseen. Therefore those artistic creations, those musical sounds and rhythmic movements which so deeply satisfy the human need for expressive action, must all come in ; and the most ancient and primitive levels of our mental life be allowed to co-operate in our acts of adoration, no less than those more recent achievements of the race on which we prefer to dwell.

“ It is,” says Dr Frere, “ a form of blindness, not common sense, that prevents a man from recognizing

that behind ceremonies there lie realities—principles, doctrines, and states or habits of mind. No one can hope to judge fairly of matters of ceremonial who does not see that the reason why they cause such heat of controversy is that they signify so much.”¹

Indeed as ritual worship develops in depth and beauty it is seen more and more that its rhythmic phrases and ceremonies, its expressive movement, dialogues, concerted outbursts of praise, are all carrying something else: the hidden supernatural action of the group or church by which the ritual is being used.

Ritual, Symbol, Sacrament, and Sacrifice are therefore more, not less valid expressions of the Spirit of Worship, because they belong at one and the same time to the world of sense and the world of spirit: for this is the actual situation of the amphibious creature by whom these means have been devised and used. Taking from that sensible world which surrounds us—and of which alone we have direct experience—finite realities, to which they attach religious significance, and which can therefore be used for the conveyance of infinite truths, all these perform the essential office of welding the world of things into human worship. The obvious dangers of materialism and æstheticism, and the constant invitation to a relapse into more primitive religious conceptions and practices, which wait on all external and stylized expressions of worship, must never be allowed to obscure this truth. These dangers, it is true, perpetually assert themselves, and provoke a reaction towards Puritan ideals. The iconoclast, the Cistercian, the Protestant reformer, the Quaker, the Plymouth Brother, stand each in their different ways for that ever renewed revolt from external elaboration towards austerity and “inwardness”—that constant re-discovery of the inadequacy of all images and all means—

¹ W. H. Frere, *The Principles of Religious Ceremonial*, p. 9.

which corrects the excesses of ritual worship and is a necessary constituent of the Mind of the Church. There is a deep religious truth in that awed sense of the "otherness" and utter transcendence of the spiritual, and horrified perception of the hopelessness—even profanity—of all attempts to represent it, which underlies this trend to an imageless and unembodied worship. It finds its supreme expression in the *Via Negativa* of the mystic; where every affirmation, every imaginative embodiment is rejected in favour of that which "can be loved but not thought".

In spite of all this, however, it is not really possible for human creatures to set up a watertight compartment between visible and invisible, outward and inward worship. The distinction which we commonly make is arbitrary, and merely means that which is or is not visible from the human point of view. Indeed, since we can only think, will, and feel in and with a physical body, and it is always in close connection with sense-impressions received through that body that our religious consciousness is stirred and sustained, it follows that we can hardly dispense with some ritual act, some sensible image, some material offering, as an element in the total act of worship, if that act of worship is to turn our humanity in its wholeness towards God. The mysterious feeding of spirit upon Spirit is made more not less real by the ritual meal which drives home the practical truth of our creaturely dependence. The self-oblation in which adoring love culminates, must find some costly act, however inadequate, by which it can be expressed; as human love is truly—however inadequately—expressed in spontaneous gifts and gestures, which would seem absurd enough to those who had no clue to their meaning. Here those who look with either horror or contempt on physical austerities miss the point, and set up an un-Christian contrast between body and soul. Thus it is that for millions of Christians the ritual service and the symbolic gesture—even the amulet

and the food-taboo—are essential constituents of the cultus ; vehicles by means of which genuine worship is expressed. The pilgrimage, the healing spring, and the votive shrine still play their part. Nor should we dismiss all this too breezily as “mere superstition”. It is rather a naïve expression of the deep conviction that God acts, in particular ways, and asks of man a particular response.

Further, cultus has its subjective and reflex importance ; in that it tends to evoke and stabilize the mental and emotional state which it is meant to express. Here at least the James-Lange law has a direct application to facts. As those who deliberately smile are rewarded by an increase of cheerfulness, so those who deliberately kneel are rewarded by an increase in worshipping love. Hence symbolic gestures, verbal formulas, and sacramental acts, in spite of the soul-deadening quality which may so easily invade them once they are accepted as substitutes for the movement of the heart, are—when used and valued rightly—impressive as well as expressive in effect. It is an important function of cultus to educate and support the developing spirit of worship, by presenting to the senses of the worshipper objects intimately connected with his faith, or carrying strong devotional suggestion, and leading him out along these paths towards the invisible Reality. It is true that in its highest reaches worship becomes an act of pure love ; but never for man an act stripped of all contingency. Because of the unity of our being, sensible stimulation of eye and ear, or even of taste, touch, and smell, can give supra-sensible suggestions to us and awaken, nourish, and deepen the worshipping sense ; and the exclusive spirituality which rejects these homely aids merely defeats its own ends. So, too, the faithful repetition of appropriate acts can deepen our understanding of the realities they are intended to convey. Moreover, such repetition creates appropriate paths of discharge ; and sets up those habits of worship

within which the attention can concentrate on the deeper realities of our spiritual situation. Thus Maréchal, in his beautiful description of the old peasant telling her beads by the cottage hearth, says most truly :

The monotony of these repetitions clothes the poor old woman with physical peace and recollection ; and her soul, already directed on high, almost mechanically, by her habitual gesture of drawing out the rosary, immediately opens out with increasing serenity on unlimited perspectives, felt rather than analysed, which converge on God. . . . What does it matter, then, if the humble *orante* does not concern herself with living over again the exact meaning of the formula she is repeating ? . . . often she does better, she allows her soul to rise freely into a true contemplation, well worn and obscure, uncomplicated, unsystematized, alternating with a return of attention to the words she is muttering, but building up in the long run *on the mechanical basis they afford* a higher, purified, personal prayer.¹

Habit and attention must therefore co-operate in the life of worship ; and it is a function of cultus to maintain this vital partnership. Habit alone easily deteriorates into mechanical repetition, the besetting sin of the liturgical mind. Attention alone means, in the end, intolerable strain. Each partner has his weak point. Habit tends to routine and spiritual red-tape ; the vice of the institutionalist. Attention is apt to care for nothing but the experience of the moment, and ignore the need of a stable practice, independent of personal fluctuations ; the vice of the individualist. Habit is a ritualist. Attention is a pietist. But it is the beautiful combination of order and spontaneity, docility and freedom, living humbly—and therefore fully and freely—within the agreed pattern of the cultus and not

¹ J. Maréchal, *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics*, Eng. trans., p. 158.

in defiance of it, which is the mark of a genuine spiritual maturity and indeed the fine flower of a worshipping life. Thus it is that the Litany and Rosary have an enduring value which their critics will never understand. The liturgical use of the psalter has fed the inner life of many a saint : and the Jews' daily repetition of the *Shema*,¹ the Christians' ritual use of the Lord's Prayer, and the Moslems' of the First *Sura*,² are all justified by psychology no less than by religion. They evoke, deepen, and maintain that obscure sense of God which is the raw material of worship ; and because of their inexhaustible meaning, serve the devotional needs of worshippers of every type. This depth of devotional significance is indeed the distinctive characteristic of genuine liturgical material ; so that souls at every level and stage of development can find in it a disclosure of the supernatural, a stimulus to adoration, and a carrying-medium for their prayer. Unlike the spiritual literature intended for personal use, which may be either elementary or advanced, the genuine cultus, in its rites, its symbols, and its sacraments, is required to be both at once. It is, as Dante held that great poetry must be, "polysemous" ; uniting many degrees of meaning from the most obvious to the most mystical, within one single form.³ Only thus indeed can it fulfil its true office, and make concerted religious action possible. Christian history is also in this sense polysemous. True on the factual level, it is also a sacramental presentation of higher truth—the mysterious realities of the supernatural life.

¹ Deut. vi. 4-9 ; xi. 13-21 ; Numbers xv. 37-41.

² Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds ! the Compassionate, the Merciful, the King on the Day of Judgment ! Thee only do we worship, and to Thee do we cry for help. Guide us on the right path ; the path of those to whom Thou has been gracious, not of those with whom Thou art angry, or those who go astray.

³ " Be it known that the sense of this work is not simple, but on the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, of more senses than one." *Epistle to Can. Grande*. Cf. also *Convivio*, II, 7.