

Christian Ritual in Theosophical Perspective

By Robert Ellwood

Christianity, like all traditional religion, is permeated by ritual. This is the case whether one thinks of a Quaker meeting--where participants sit in silence until the Spirit moves someone to speak, and the gathering lasts for exactly one hour, after which all shake hands and rise--or a typical Protestant service--centering on hymns, scripture reading, prayer, and sermon--or worship of the Catholic sort--whether Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, or that small denomination related to Theosophy, the Liberal Catholic Church, with its colorful vestments, bells, incense, and genuflections.

In the last analysis, ritual may be thought of as any words or action done in a religious setting that have special meaning pertaining to the setting. From the Catholic sign of the cross to Pentecostal speaking in tongues, the ritual words and actions denote divine power and presence to those within the tradition, while those same religious acts appear meaningless if not absurd to those on the outside. The purpose here is to look at the words and gestures, inflections of voice and silences, of the Christian religion in its tremendous diversity from the point of view of key Theosophical ideas. First, however, we need to remind ourselves of a few background Theosophical concepts.

The Ancient Wisdom, hidden in the heart of the world's religions, speaks with many voices. For religion itself is not one thing. One form of expression is the myths and stories that make up the narratives of a religion's significant times past. Another is the initiations, rightly made much of by Theosophical writers, that can bring individuals into those changes of consciousness by which the same religion's truths can be understood on a deep level. A third is its rituals and ceremonial. These three forms are ultimately unified, for ritual can enact myth and, in so doing, initiate participants into a profounder comprehension of its eternal meaning. Ritual can make that which it enacts into timeless reality, repeated generation after generation, continuously born anew in human consciousness.

The historian of religion S. G. F. Brandon has called religion a "ritual perpetuation of the past." While I would not say that is the only function of religion, it is certainly an important part of its essence. A religion always comes to us as something out of the past, a tradition and language which may or may not totally jibe with present mundane realities, but which may seem all the more significant--or irrelevant--because it is like a powerful alternative to the values and worldviews of the present-day marketplace, academy, or community. Right or wrong, it gives life a dimension of depth by offering a second opinion, as it were, one grounded outside the one-dimensionality of the present but with roots in Shakespeare's "dark backward and abysm of time."

That is the way religion has virtually always been. From the prophets and saints of old to contemporary pulpit and altar, religion has set against the allegedly decadent world around it the ideal of an ancient truth now half-forgotten. In this, it has a key notion in

common with the Theosophical idea of the Ancient Wisdom. The difference is that Theosophy sees the lost touchstone of moral and intellectual truth more or less equally distributed in the esotericism of all religions, while of those religions, each naturally favors itself as the premier bearer of the light. Specific religions, being grounded in the particular historical moments of their origin, center their tokens of remembering on that time, though often with nods to other significant events in history. So it is that the Muslim rite of pilgrimage to Mecca perpetuates through many gestures the Prophet's last visit to that holy city, and the rite most sacred in most Christian denominations, the Holy Communion, ritually perpetuates, and brings back to us, the last days of Jesus' life.

Ritual works because the past, whether in religion or the significant moments in our own individual pasts about which we feel most deeply, cannot be brought back whole and entire, but the power and poignancy of sacred moments now gone may be evoked by a simple symbol or token: a single photograph of a beloved face, a single souvenir of an unforgettable event. In the same way, for believers, what might be called "condensed symbols" of sacred times and events deep in the past can call them up into the present: a few words of scripture, the tiny bits of bread and wine used in Holy Communion. A great religious service, whether (as in Christianity) a high mass or a powerful revival meeting, may be termed an "orchestration of symbols," for it combines such tokens in many media--music, visual, even touch, taste, and smell--to create for the duration of the service a kind of religious sub-universe in which symbols in all directions support the religious worldview and make it live for those susceptible to its power.

From the point of view of orthodox interpretations of the Christian religion, however, more than just manipulation of symbols occurs in the most sacred rites and occasions of the faith. The symbols of the Eucharist, as the bread and wine are consecrated to become the Body and Blood of Christ, and the rhetoric of fervent preaching, recalling the saving words and deeds of the same Christ, are also actual means of grace. They are concrete vessels of matter and word by which the overcoming power of God reaches into the world to touch individuals and do for them what they cannot do for themselves--lose the burden of their sins and become new persons purified by divine power. While God's power cannot be limited to any particular instrument, from the orthodox perspective, word and sacrament are uniquely ordained by Christ to be the chief mediums of divine grace working at ground level, as it were, in this murky world.

The outlook of the Ancient Wisdom or Theosophy would not put it quite that way. It considers that the Wisdom has means of expressing itself in all religions, and it also takes karma into account as it contemplates and honors the possible transformation of individual human lives for the better. But it can, I believe, take a position that affirms the immense power that worship and ritual can have in the work of teaching and transforming the world and all the beings in it.

That position begins with the idea of thought forms, so vividly described in the celebrated book of that title by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater. This work tells us that intense feeling and cogitation form energy patterns on the inner planes inside and around us. The etheric, astral, and mental bodies--which are as much parts of us as the physical and also

represent corresponding universal planes of being--change color, form, and degree of opening to outside benign or malignant influences according to the nature of the energy within. It follows that if thought-forms themselves can be in any way shaped by corporate actions like worship, then the nature and purpose of that worship is not something to be taken lightly. It matters a great deal if an individual or a gathering let loose in the world thought forms that are expansive and open to good influxes, or twisted so as to be narrow and ugly and open only to the worst.

This was the attitude taken toward Christian belief and worship and their associated thought forms by a group of remarkable Theosophical and Christian writers in the first half of the twentieth century, above all Besant, Leadbeater, and Geoffrey Hodson. No doubt the greatest and most influential text to come from them is Leadbeater's book *The Science of the Sacraments*. The idea was to preserve the basic forms of traditional Christianity, but to put new wine into its old wineskins, the new wine being the new (and also immemorially old) essence of the Ancient Wisdom as transmitted by the modern Theosophical movement.

With the new doctrines came a new way of understanding the meaning of traditional Christian worship based on the concept of thought forms and all that stems from it. To these writers, traditional Christianity meant Christianity in its Catholic or Anglican form, but I believe that many of the principles they developed could be applied to its Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and even Pentecostal versions; much interesting and important work remains to be done in this area.

These writers saw that the basic doctrines of historic Christianity are quite compatible with the fundamental principles of the Ancient Wisdom, so long as they are seen as mythological or story expressions of that which is always true, and they were willing to see those truths as manifested with particular clarity in the person and life of Jesus. This approach is often called esoteric Christianity. They emphasized that the three persons of the Christian Trinity--the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--represented the three eternal outpourings of creation in Theosophical lore: the Spirit brooding over the face of the waters in the Genesis creation myth is the first outpouring, which gives life to the unformed chaos of inert matter; the Son, who is also according to the Gospel of St. John the Logos or creative word of God, is the second outpouring, which gives pattern or form to the universe that the Spirit has quickened with life; and the Father represents the impartation of the innermost hidden spiritual principle, which finally endows all created beings with the light of supreme knowledge.

The incarnation of the Logos in Jesus the Christ is a token of the Theosophical involution and evolution of spirit within the world of matter. The crucifixion and death of Jesus on the "cross of matter" indicates the terrible limitations of matter alone. And his resurrection displays the possibility of the transformation of matter into a glorious expression of Spirit and foretells the ultimate return of the body of spirit and matter back to the Halls of Light, which are its eternal home.

Coming to Christian worship, the esoteric Christians held that the traditional forms of worship, above all those of the Eucharist, expressed the gist of ideas about the Trinity and the Incarnation in symbolic form. But they went much beyond the notion of symbolic expression to maintain also that the Christian rite, especially when well enacted and well supported by constructive thoughts on the part of all worshipers, creates thought-forms that are vessels and channels of the divine powers evoked by those exalted ideas.

The Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Communion, so much debated by theologians over the centuries, they said to be certainly true. But it is not done by magic, or by some special power that God arbitrarily assigns to one church only. Nor is the Presence of Christ in the bread and wine only a symbol of the inward faith of individual believers, as many Protestants would contend. Rather, in the esoteric Christian view, the Real Presence is made possible by the collective work of the worshipers, whose thought forms build channels by which what was in Christ is communicated to us today.

It must be acknowledged that Christianity has not always had a favorable image among Theosophists. In her writings, Helena Blavatsky not seldom castigated that faith for the narrow-mindedness and limited outlook of most of its leading lights, from the church fathers to eminent theologians of her own day. Quite justifiably, she was appalled by the brutality of religious persecution done in the name of Christianity and by the tactics of the zealous but ill-informed Christian missionaries she encountered in India and elsewhere. Frequently, she found occasion to contrast the meager intellectual resources of that faith, as she knew it, with the wisdom of Hinduism and Buddhism, which was fuller because closer to the deep wells of the Ancient Wisdom.

These sorties against Christianity had a necessary place in the Theosophical program of Blavatsky's day. It was important that Christianity, then riding high as the nominal religion of Earth's masters in the heyday of European imperialism, be made to realize it was not immune to criticism and like all other religions was, in its human form, fallible and subject to the vicissitudes of history. Christian individuals of good will had to be led to see the immense value of the Eastern faiths. They had to be brought to realize the ways in which other religions complemented their own, and in some respects probed more deeply into the mysteries of reality than did nineteenth-century versions of Christianity.

At the same time, Blavatsky always spoke well of Jesus himself, considering him at the least a great initiate, although--like most others--a misunderstood one. She also had a high regard for the ancient Gnostic version of Christianity, albeit widely regarded in her day as heretical. All this suggests there might be a way in which Christianity could be reconstructed to be compatible with the deepest insights of Theosophy, and moreover become for some people a vehicle for the transmission of those insights and the powers latent in them.

The contention of the esoteric Christian school of Theosophy has been that, once the necessary work of shearing Christianity of unwarranted pretensions and dogmatism had been done by Blavatsky and her school, a new version of the faith of Jesus--Gnostic, esoteric, close to the wisdom of Jesus, rich in myth and ritual and the right understanding

thereof--could arise. I believe that is so, and that such a Christianity will appear in all its beauty before the inner eyes of those for whom it is the right spiritual path and who are prepared to see the inner side of things.

References

Besant, Annie, and C. W. Leadbeater. *Thought-Forms*. Abridged ed. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1969. Original ed. pub. 1901.

Leadbeater, Charles Webster. *The Science of the Sacraments*. Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1988. First ed. 1920.

Copyright © 2000 By Robert Ellwood. All Rights Reserved.