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The Liberative Power of Rituals

Religion is a basic element in human existence. In many ancient societies, no one thinks of religion as something to join or belong to, but as a part of one's way of being human. One becomes religious the moment he or she is born. It is not a system of truths of intellectual reflections regarding the relationship between man and God. It is, instead, a characteristic of man's life that he almost automatically assumes as he becomes human. In this sense religion may be better understood as a relationship of man to some one or as an environment in which man lives. As man's life evolves and develops religion also plays its role in the various stages of the evolution and development of man. Thus it comes into action at the moment of birth, at the time when man or woman arrives at the age of puberty, at the time of marriage, death, etc. What is the specific role of the religious act at these moments of man's life? It would seem that it is meant to assert and establish the integrity of primal human belonging. We may say that it was a way of giving a metaphysical dimension to events or happenings in their lives. It also gave these events a certain depth and significance.

In the process of growth and development man also faces obstacles. The affirmation of his existence and the effort to give greater meaning to his life is, at the same time hampered by his own inability to assert himself and to grapple with situations around him that seem to take away meaning from his life. Hence one of the roles of religion has been to liberate man from all these obstacles and evils.

This is evident from a close examination of the religious practices of mankind in the course of history.¹ There seem to have been two types of evil that prevented man from arriving at the fulness of his growth: one is moral evil, that is, sin, caused by his evil inclinations. This was remedied by moral prescriptions and ascetical practices. The

1. L. Bouyer, *Rite and Mass*, London, 1963, p. 63.

other is physical evil, caused by external forces. Man tried to liberate himself from these through rituals by which he got the power to withstand their forces. At times the moral and physical evils were combined or were considered to be related. In such cases both the moral laws and ritual practices were employed for obtaining liberation. Nay, they were even identified. Moral evil was considered to be removed by ritual acts and ritual acts were regarded as having moral values.² In all these we find that the religious practices had their origin in the need of man to be totally free, for it is in this total freedom that he became truly himself. Freedom, to some extent, made man enter into the sphere of the limitless, that is, the Divine realm or Divine life.

He, through his freedom, entered into communion with God and thus arrived at the fulness of his being. We may call this salvation. In this presentation we are going to examine how the rituals were believed to possess the power of enabling him to arrive at this total liberation. We shall make, in the first place, a brief survey of the basic role that the rituals have played in the most important religious traditions of the world. Then we shall critically analyse the results they have actually achieved. Finally, we shall assess the value of rituals today as liberative actions for the man of today.

I. The Role of The Rituals In The Religious Tradition of Mankind

A. The Mystery Cult

The religion of the Graeco-Roman world of the time of the New Testament was permeated with the so-called mystery cult. This was an act of worship meant to effect the liberation of man from the limitations of this life and make him enter into perfect communion with the divine: 'The mystery is a sacred ritual action in which a saving deed is made present through the rite; the congregation, by performing the rite, take part in the saving act, and thereby win salvation.'³ Let us analyse this definition:

i) In the first place, there seems to have been a saving event in the past, an intervention of God in the life of man. Again, O.Casel describes it as follows: "The Kyrios of a mystery is a God who has

2. Cf. the *Prescriptions of Leviticus*.

3. O. Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (London; 1963), p. 54.

entered into human misery and struggle, has made his appearance on earth (epiphany) and fought here, suffered, even defeated; the whole sorrow of mankind in pain is brought together in a mourning for the God who must die. But then in some way comes a return to life through which the God's companions, indeed the whole of nature revives and lives on.⁴ This idea is expressed in mythical descriptions.

ii) Secondly, the ritual action makes this saving event come to life again and therefore the epiphany goes on. Worship is the means by which this saving and healing action is continued in the world. The ritual action becomes a sharing in God's acts; its aim is union with Godhead, share in his life.

Primitive man is confronted with nature as an obstacle and as a challenge to his freedom. It was, to some extent, the forces of nature that were curtailing his freedom towards full growth and happiness. He wanted to identify the forces that lie behind this power of nature. This force he called God. If he could enter into communion with this force he would be able to overcome the obstacle posed by nature. The rituals, especially of sacrifice, were meant to effect this communion with the power that lay hidden in nature. Thus agrarian societies began to worship hero-figures, masters and mistresses of the sun and the moon, the earth and the seasons; hunting communities chose to talk in ritual terms of beasts and birds and fishes.⁵ The various rites which were performed in worship were to effect this communion with the divine power which controlled nature thus enabling man to overcome the obstacles to his freedom in which consisted his salvation.

In the mystery religions this liberating ritual had a mythical basis. The original state of the world in an agrarian society was conceived as one of perfect fruitfulness effected by Demeter, the Goddess of the earth. Kore, her daughter is identified with the vegetation. Pluto, the God of the underworld takes Kore away in order to marry her. But when Demeter, her mother, avenges the deed by causing all life on earth to cease, Hermes takes the stolen girl back on Pluto's won horse. But Kore had taken food with her husband and eaten pomegranate seed which he gave her; she belonged to him forever and therefore she had to return to him for a third of every year. From this time onwards

4. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

5. M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (Harper: 1958).

she spends a third of every year on earth; and it is she who makes the corn grow and gives the earth its fruitfulness. Hence sowing and reaping have only appeared since Kore went down into the underworld.⁶ The ritual re-enactment of this event was expected to confer the power to return to life in all its fruitfulness on the participants. The ritual served thus as a means of liberation for man from all that seemed to deprive him of a happy and contented life by effecting the yearly return of the fruitfulness of the earth at spring time. The epiphany goes on through the agricultural phenomenon. Man enters into union with God and effects his liberation through the ritual enactment of the event as he participates in the benefits of the divine saving action manifested in the flourishing cultivation. He gets the power to dominate the forces of nature that seem to deprive him of the means of living and growing.

B. The Indian Concept of Sacrifice

It is not the scope of this article to give an exhaustive understanding of the concept of sacrifice in the Indian context. What we want to do is only to understand the meaning of sacrifice as a ritual and its implication for the man who performs it. Hence our main concern will be its ritualistic aspect.

The first truth about sacrifice as a ritual consists in the fact that at beginning of every being there is a sacrifice that has produced it. This means that the core energy of sacrifice is nothing but the creative force, the power of becoming which in the cosmological sense is described as *rita*.⁷ In this sense the ritual of sacrifice is the externalization of the invisible *rita* that is inherent in all reality which we may call divine power. Understood in this sense the sacrificial ritual becomes the re-enactment of the creative activity. The first *mandala* of *Rigveda* seems to express the whole reality of creation in terms of a sacrificial act:

The altar is the furthest limit of the earth, this sacrifice of ours is the world's centre the, Soma is the Stallion's prolific seed. Our prayer is the highest heaven where abides the Word.⁸

6. O. Casel, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

7. *Rita* is the cosmic and sacred order; it is the universal law, the ultimate dynamic and harmonic structure of reality. (R. Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, Pondicherry, 1983, p. 887). The visibilization of this dynamism may be considered sacrifice.

8. *Rig Veda* 1, 164, 35.

But soon this creative is mixed up with the forces that are opposed to it. This is described in Satapatha Brahmana as the struggle for immortality by *devas* (Gods) and *asuras* (demons). The rivalry between the Gods and the demons, the so-called *daivasura* struggle is the subject of one of the richest myths extant concerning the conflict constantly being waged between the two forces harboured in man.⁹ Sacrifice, performed according to correct rules, was the sole means by which the victory could be achieved and immortality arrived at. "It was by the perfect accomplishment of the sacrifice that the Gods proceeded to the heavenly realm, and it was by reason of their defective performance of the same that the *asuras* were conquered."¹⁰ This is obvious because the right performance of the sacrifice could restore the eternal *ṛta* of reality of which the creation is an external manifestation, as we have seen above. By performing the sacrifice man enters once again into the original movement of becoming. He is saved from his powerlessness at the mercy of blind forces.

Thus we see that all the sacrificial rituals are liberative acts in as much as they lead man to the original *ṛta* of becoming. "To perform the sacrifice is not to participate in a good act or to do good to the Gods, the mankind or to oneself; it is to live, to make one's own survival and that of the whole universe."¹¹ While the Graeco-Roman ritual leads man to the saving act of God represented mythically, the Hindu ritual leads man to the saving act of God represented in the cosmic act of creation. The symbols used in the rituals (e.g. *agni*, *soma* juice etc.) indicate the return of man to the original stage of creation.

C. *The Old Testament Concept of Sacrifice*

In the Old Testament the sacrificial act is considered a memorial. For the Jews it was the memorial of their liberation from Egypt. Participating in the ritual was re-enactment of that original event of liberation in each one's life.¹² In fact the Jews kept alive the messianic hope, which is the perfect stage of liberation through the commemorative ritual of the original liberation. The specificity of the O.T. liberation consists in the fact that the original event which is re-enacted is a historical event, while in the other two cases we have mythical and cosmic symbolisms.

9. R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, 382.

10. *Taittiriya Samhita* 1, 6, 10, 2.

11. R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, 353.

12. Ex. 13-3-16.

D. *The New Testament Concept of Ritual*

Here the memorial concept is continued with a difference. The original event of liberation is a personal act of love and self-gift. Christ replaces the O.T. Paschal ritual with a fraternal agape, or a friendship meal which he fully expresses on the Cross by His death and resurrection. Paul describes the Christian ritual later on as a memorial of this liberating act of Christ. He expressly says this with regard to Baptism (*Rom* 6:6-11) and the Eucharist (*1Cor* 11:23-27). In the case of the New Testament the liberative force is manifested in freeing man from his selfishness and making him capable of loving others to the extent of giving one's life for others out of love. In this way man becomes totally free, capable of universal love. It is precisely at this moment that he is fully saved because he enters into full communion with the God of love and the God who loves.

2. The Actual State Of Rituals In The Organized Religions

The liberating power of the rituals was soon lost as the ritual became the so-called means for obtaining favours. The rituals instead of liberating man enslaved him in the same way as the effort to be free at times leads man to his enslavement, to his likes and dislikes.

- A. In the Graeco-Roman world, the practice of the mystery cult with its accompanying mysteriousness soon degenerated into unintelligible acts leading to many abuses. The religious experience accompanying such celebrations at times was transformed into erotic experiences. Instead of leading man to true liberty, they at times led him to belong to cliques and secret groups, thus depriving him of that true freedom.
- B. This has happened also in India. In the celebration of sacrifices which were supposed to take man to the original source of his becoming, the presiding minister, or the priest acquired a certain divine character and this led him to exploit ritual act for his own selfish motives.
- C. In the Old Testament we see clearly how, the very rituals that were supposed to lead man to liberty enslaved him to them to the extent that they became an obstacle to the practice of the very covenant which was the summit of the liberating act of God.
- D. In Christianity, too, the ritual lost its liberating power, when it was celebrated for certain specific favours, when it became the

act of the priest, when it was considered a means of achieving heaven without giving due importance to the commitment to build communities of love.

In reality, it is paradoxical that the very ritual that was to be a means of effecting true freedom (and thus building up a wider community of men), has become an alienating force among men. Often it is at the level of rituals that we find the greatest difficulty in communicating with the other religions. Christ came to destroy the rituals precisely for this reason. He wanted to build a temple where man could meet man on a level of that unifying and liberating force which is love. It is significant that the Last Supper of Jesus Christ which is the basis on which the Christian ritual actions are resting was not in all probability a traditional ritual paschal meal, but an agape, a fraternal meal.¹³

3. The Value of Ritual Today as a Liberating Force

It is not possible to eliminate rituals from the life of man for many reasons: first, because they are a link for his communion with the rest of humanity in space and time; secondly, the very structure of man calls for rituals—his constitution as spirit and matter or as embodied spirit demands that he uses rituals in his efforts to relate himself to men and things.

It is necessary for man to arrive at this universal relationship because it is only then that he becomes truly man. It is then that he is truly free. Hence he needs rituals. But these rituals should be such that make him truly grow in his freedom for it is only then that they become genuinely saving. The conditions for creating such liberating rituals are:

- a) They must effect an authentic conversion within himself. In other words, the ritual must first and foremost free the one who performs them from his selfishness which is the root cause of his slavery. Hence they must be accompanied by words or rather they must be expressions of the words that change his attitudes.

13. Louis Bouyer, *Eucaristia*, Torino 1968, pp. 103-105. According to this author the Last Supper of Jesus has no ritual continuity with the Jewish paschal meal. The Last Supper is a memorial of the liberating sacrificial death of Christ, commemorated in a fraternal meal which Jesus celebrated on the eve of his death. Hence it is the ritual celebration of the liberation act of the New Testament.

- b) They must be signs, that is, they must be the outcome of deep interiority. Then they will result in expressions of one's self-gift to others (Heb 10: 5-10).
- c) They must be oriented to build up human communities. The greatest glory of God is the living man;¹⁴ the living man is the one who can fully relate himself to others. Our rituals should aim at building up those communities of relationship.
- d) We must liberate our rituals from their immediate interests. This is where the rituals degenerate into superstitions and thus lose their liberating power. We proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes. That is the objective, the transformation of this world into the new earth and new heaven.

Conclusion

The rituals have a tremendous power because they can serve as a bridge that unites man to man and man to God. This is possible on condition that we do not domesticate them for our own personal interests. When we do that, they become magical acts and superstitious practices, with the consequence that they enslave man instead of liberating him. They leave him in his sin even though through them he may be representing the saving action.

14. St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.* IV, 20, 5-7.