

## Christian Ritual and Magic<sup>\*</sup>

Today, many of us are familiar with the notion that the Bible contains myth as well as fact, story as well as history, poetry as well as narrative. Most of us would also agree that our understanding of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures has been enhanced rather than diminished by those scholars who apply critical-historical methods (source criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, etc.) to the texts of the Bible. Although fundamentalists in general either take (i.e., profess to take) everything in the Bible literally or else place various restrictions on the right or ability of these methods to question a biblical narrative, a scriptural truth or a doctrinal claim, main-line Christians and Jews tend to agree that the scientific examination of Biblical texts helps them to distinguish between what is central or essential to biblical revelation and what is peripheral or culturally conditioned in the Bible.

Some of us in our group might agree with the argument that since God is the sole author of truth, there can be no real contradiction between religious and scientific truth, and that therefore, whenever there is an apparent contradiction between a text's literal sense and well-founded scientific judgments about the realities referred to in the text, the literal sense should cede to rational interpretation. Those interested in religious truths (i.e., basic affirmations about God, human beings, and the relationships between them) are encouraged to look elsewhere (to other texts, to the structure of the narrative, to a preponderance of images, etc.) to find the meanings and affirmations that they believe are found in the Bible.

Distinguishing between the literal sense of a text and the truths revealed in the Bible is a mental exercise that can also be applied to doctrines. On the one hand, there are those for whom the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Resurrection, for example, are literally true: the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became human in Jesus of Nazareth, who physically died and was actually resurrected as the transformed, Risen Lord in glory. At the other extreme, there are those for whom religious doctrines, like biblical texts, are symbolic statements of more universal and less particular truths: that all human beings are actually or potentially divine, that the path to life and fulfillment is often through death and self-surrender, and so on. I suspect that in our group, although there are few biblical fundamentalists, many of us find ourselves more comfortable with rather literal interpretations of traditional Christian doctrines.

The same, I think, is often true in our interpretation of Christian rituals, although I would be happy to discover that I need to become better informed in this area. My sense is that the majority of Christians believe that there are at least some Christian rituals that are "literally true." Those of us who are members of so-called liturgical churches tend to be more deeply committed to the literal truth of a number of rituals: that baptism is necessary for salvation and in some way effects salvation; that confirmation imparts the Holy Spirit in some manner; that in the Eucharist, a real change occurs in the elements of bread and

---

<sup>\*</sup> Originally presented at an inter-church seminar held at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, on June 13, 1995. © 1995 by Joseph Martos.

wine, or at least in the ritual in which they are blessed and shared; that a Christian wedding ceremony makes people really married in the eyes of God (there is, in other words, a real difference between marriage and cohabitation); that ordination somehow changes a person from being an ordinary member of the church to being truly different, if not necessarily better; and so on. Those of us who are members of so-called non-liturgical churches may privately smile at the archaic literalism of those in the more ancient traditions, but I suspect that in many cases there are non-liturgical rituals that play analogous roles in the more recent traditions—accepting Jesus as one's Lord and Savior, for example.

Christians who do perceive real changes to occur through ritual (liturgical or otherwise) have often distinguished between their own rituals and the rituals of other (i.e., non-Christian) religions by claiming that pagan rituals are instances of magic, whereas their own rituals are instances of mystery, of divine ordinance, or of some other acceptable rationale. (I suspect that the same claims are sometimes made against Catholic and other churches' liturgical rituals, but for the sake of ecumenical politeness we won't go into that here.) My experience as a Catholic who has progressed through different stages of faith (à la James Fowler), my encounter with people of a variety of religious faiths, my study of comparative religions, and my reflection on all of this suggest, however, that there is a fundamental likeness among all religious rituals, and indeed, among all rituals, religious and nonreligious alike. To say up front what I hope shortly to persuade you of, all ritual is inherently magical, and from this perspective there is no difference between Christian and non-Christian (including secular) ritual.

When we hear the suggestion that Christian rituals are magical, I believe many of us shudder with the same instinctive repulsion with which biblical fundamentalists recoil from the suggestion that the scriptures contain myths. Yet most if not all of us who accept the presence of myth in the Bible can remember a time in our life (perhaps also in the life of our church or denomination) when we too took the scriptural stories literally, and when we moved mentally from a fundamentalistic attitude to a more critical attitude. I dare say that those of us who have made this mental journey believe that we are better off than we were before, that our understanding is more nuanced and more balanced than it was previously, and that we have gained much insight without losing much that is important. Is it too much to suggest that, were we to accept the presence of magic in Christian ritual, we would experience an analogous set of benefits?

Just as many Christians were able to be persuaded of the presence of myth in the Bible only after discovering a non-pejorative concept of myth (that is, myth not as false story but as symbolic narrative), so also, if we are to be persuaded of the presence of magic in Christian rituals, we need to find a non-pejorative concept of magic. At the present, the word "magic" conjures up thoughts of sleight-of-hand tricks and feelings of deception, if not suspicions of sorcery. When used in a religious context, the word does not have any positive connotations. Preachers and theologians occasionally make their point about baptism, marriage and other religious ceremonies by emphasizing that these rituals are not magic.

Is there, then, a positive or at least a neutral meaning of magic that could be borrowed and applied to Christian ritual, in order to understand it better. I believe there is. Jean Piaget in his theory of developmental psychology speaks of magic as a way of perceiving events which human beings develop fairly early in life, perhaps around the age of four or five. Once developed, it never disappears, even though other more sophisticated forms of perception and analysis develop after and, as it were, on top of it. Magical perception is something that we are always able to do, even as adults.

Magic in this sense is the perception of cause and effect without understanding the causal relationship between the two. Piaget gives the example of a child who cries when he sees his mother putting on a hat and begs her to take it off. In Piaget's analysis, the child has in the past seen the mother put a hat on before going out, and has perceived that wearing a hat "causes" his mother's disappearance. The plea to take off the hat is therefore an attempt to forestall or escape from the unwanted "effect." Although the child's perception in this case is erroneous, the perception of cause and effect without much intermediary understanding is a necessary and valuable development of the human thought process. We do it all the time, and, as a matter of fact, it saves a good deal of mental effort.

Turn on a light switch, and how does the light come on? We do not really understand, nor do we care to; all we need to understand is that flicking the switch causes the effect we want it to have. Our perception of most technological innovations is, I submit, fundamentally magical: it is perception of cause and effect without inherent understanding. This is why, when our automobile or computer fails to be affected by our causative motions, we must take it to a person who is reputed to be able to make it work. Our lack of understanding is one reason why we must trust the expert's (magician's?) explanation of what went wrong. It is also why we must pay so much for the repair. We do not have to remain in the realm of high technology to find good, everyday examples of magical perception, however. How many of us understand how a match lights, or why plants need water, or how words convey meaning? Rather, we perceive cause and effect, and we just do what is needed to produce the desired effect.

Many human ceremonies, especially rites of passage, have this same magical quality. When the candidate recites the oath of office with one hand raised and the other on a Bible, he is transformed from a private citizen to a public official. When the graduate receives her diploma, she is transformed from being a student to being a certified expert. The effect is automatic, and few people (if any) understand the complex mechanism of social consensus and symbolic action by which these and other transformations are effected. They happen, as it were, by magic, although in the case of secular rituals we do not call it magic. Rather, we appeal to law or to some other such arcane rubric. Actually, though, law itself is a fabric woven out of magic: if one says the right words in the right way, it will have the right effect.

Religious rites of passage are similarly magical. If the candidate is properly dunked, he becomes a member of the church. If the ordinand is properly installed, she becomes a validly ordained minister. If the couple are properly married, they become truly bound to one another until death does them part.

I do not claim to understand everything about the magical element in religious ritual, but I am convinced that it is there. The psychology of perception has something to do with it, as I indicated earlier. The sociology of consensus also has something to do with it—what is sometimes called the social construction of reality. I also believe that if we (and those who speak on our behalf in discussions among churches) were able to recognize and admit the magical element in our respective rituals, the cause of ecumenical understanding and acceptance would be greatly furthered.

In the mean time, we are held back from unity by differences over the "effectiveness" of certain forms of baptism, the "validity" of certain ordination rituals, the "reality" of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and so on. Arguments of this sort are often cast in the form of disagreements over what is objectively so, over what is truly the case. Were we able to agree that ritual change is effected by magic, and that magic is a matter of human perception, then perhaps we could own our particular Christian rites as the meaningful creations of our separate but worthwhile religious traditions rather than as the only proper way to do things.