

On The Margin of Liturgical Improvisations

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Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Autumn, 1970) © World Wisdom, Inc.
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THE liturgy can be regarded in two very different ways: one may either take the view that the primitive simplicity of the rites has to be preserved from all sorts of cumbersome accretions, or alternatively one may adopt the attitude that liturgical embellishment, if not contributing to the efficacy of the rites, at least enhances their radiance and consequently is a gift from God.

The point of view of simplicity can derive a certain justification from the fact that Rabbinism had added an enormous number of practices and prayers to the religion of Moses and that Christ, the enunciator of inwardness, suppressed all these observances and rejected the long and complicated vocal prayers; for it was his wish that man should make his way to God "in spirit and in truth". The Apostles continued in this way, as did also the Desert Fathers; but gradually Christians lost sight of their worship "in spirit and in truth" and replaced it with vocal prayers and increasingly numerous observances; thus it is that the Liturgy was born. In early times it took a rather simple form and was performed only in cathedrals around the bishop and only on the eve of the great festivals, when it was necessary to occupy the faithful who came to spend long hours in the church, but had grown weak in prayer. It was then taken up by the monks who, out of zeal, performed it daily. The liturgy of St. Benedict was still quite simple; but it grew more complicated and heavier with time through continual additions.

This point of view unquestionably corresponds to a real aspect of things, but to a single aspect only; one would lay oneself open to serious error if one relied on it exclusively. For it is essential to take account in equal degree of the following data: liturgical development stems not only from the negative factor of the spiritual deterioration of an increasingly numerous collectivity, but also from the positive factor of a rigorously indispensable adaptation to new conditions; and this adaptation—or this flowering of a tangible symbolism—is in itself something wholly positive and in no wise opposed to the purest contemplativity. Nevertheless, there are two elements here to be distinguished: the symbolism of forms and acts on the one hand, and verbal amplifications on the other; doubtless both are useful, but formal symbolism by its very nature manifests the presence of the Holy Spirit in a more direct and incontestable fashion, given that what a pure symbol teaches is not subject to the limitations of verbal expression in general, or to pious prolixity in this mode of expression in particular, where it happens to occur.

The first Christians called themselves "saints", and with good reason: in the primitive Church there was an atmosphere of sanctity which doubtless could not prevent certain disorders, but which at all events was dominant among the majority; the sense of the sacred was, so to speak, in the air. This well-nigh collective sanctity disappeared fairly rapidly and—men of the "dark age" being what they are—naturally enough, due chiefly to the rapid increase in the number of the faithful; it then became necessary to make the presence of the sacred more tangible so that on the one hand men whose outlook was growing increasingly profane might not lose sight of the

majesty of the rites, and on the other, so that access to them should not be too abstract, if one may put it so.

Let it be noted here that one finds nothing of this kind in Islam, where the element of mystery does not penetrate in a quasi material fashion into the exoteric realm.¹ On the other hand Mahayana Buddhism shows a liturgical development analogous to that of Christianity; but in neither case is the liturgy entirely reducible to a simple concession to human weakness, since at the same time, and by the very nature of things, it possesses the intrinsic value of a tangible crystallization of the supernatural.

The first of the two points of view we have been comparing, that of original simplicity, is legitimate in the sense that the purely contemplative person, while not necessarily desiring it, is quite well able to do without any liturgical framework at all, and obviously he would prefer to see the sanctity of men rather than that of ritual forms, in so far as such an alternative presents itself.

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There is no question here of ignoring the fact that the elaboration of the liturgy in the Catholic Church has been at certain times rather too facile; a simplification of the liturgy therefore is something that could be considered, especially since there have been precedents from the Middle Ages onwards, and it could be justified by two reasons: the one intrinsic, aimed at expressions of a piety that had become at one and the same time too demanding and too contingent, and also at an over meticulous legalism; the other extrinsic, namely the need to reckon, but in a dignified manner free from abject hastiness, with the rhythm, in itself abnormal, of our time.

The major error of the modernists is to believe that a liturgy can be invented and that the ancient liturgies were inventions, or that elements added in a spirit of piety amount to such; this is to confuse inspiration with invention and the sacred with the profane.² Another no less pernicious error is to believe it possible to jump over one or two thousand years and retrace one's steps to the simplicity—and the sanctity!—of the primitive Church; there is a principle of growth or of structure to be observed here, for a branch cannot again become the root. One must tend towards primitive simplicity by recognizing its incomparability and without imagining that it can be recaptured by external measures and superficial attitudes; one must seek to realize primordial purity on the basis of the providentially elaborated forms, and not on the basis of an impious iconoclasm.

We have recognized that it is not impossible, in a case like that of the Catholic liturgy, to return to greater simplicity by eliminating accretions stemming from later times; not, however, because they are not good enough for "our time" (allegedly so incomparable and so irreversible), but because they reflect a kind of piety which is not fundamental and because they run the risk of stifling or hiding from the sight of men more ancient and more substantial symbolisms. But if accretions, baroque or otherwise, are to be suppressed, let this be done prudently and respectfully, and let a stop be put to the introduction of a pedantic and vulgar sort of intelligibility into the rites, which is an insult to the intelligence of the faithful.

As to the replacement of the liturgical languages—whose quality is objective and not a mere matter of habit—by modern vernacular languages, it must be said that the least that can be expected of believers is the minimum of interest and respect required for learning the current

liturgical formulas and for tolerating those which they do not understand; a religious adherence which lays down vulgarization, extreme facility and platitude as a prime condition is in every respect totally valueless.³ To say that the quality of the liturgical languages is objective means that there exist languages which are sacred in character, and that they possess this character either by nature or by adoption: the first case is that of the languages in which Heaven has spoken and of the scripts—alphabets or ideograms—which Heaven has inspired or confirmed; the second is that of the still noble languages which have been consecrated to the service of God.

All ancient languages are noble or aristocratic from the nature of things: they could not possess any element of triviality,⁴ since this defect is a direct result of individualism and an indirect one of humanism; being individualistic, modern languages are too loquacious, too tinged with sentimentalism and at the same time too narrowly logical⁵ to be suited for sacred usage. Ritual formulas uttered in French or English have something painfully individual about them, whereas formulas in Latin or Greek are invested with a majestic impersonality which permits the soul to find rest and to escape from its own pettiness.⁶ Low Latin, although not the language of Caesar, is nevertheless not a vulgar language like the various idioms derived from it; all things considered, it is a language which, if not transformed by the mould of Christianity, was at least adapted to it and stabilized by it, and perhaps also influenced by the Germanic soul, more imaginative and less cold than the Roman soul. Moreover, the classical Latin of Cicero is not free from arbitrary restrictions as compared with the archaic language, certain values of which persisted in popular speech, so that Low Latin, derived from the fusion of the two languages, is not a merely privative phenomenon.

In the Middle Ages, European intellectuality flourished within the framework of Latin⁷; with the abandonment of Latin, intellectual activity progressively made its imprint on the dialects, in such a way that the modern languages which derive from them are on the one hand more supple and more intellectualist and on the other hand more blunted and profaned than the medieval ways of speaking. Now from the point of view of sacred usage the decisive quality is neither philosophical suppleness nor psychological complexity—very relative factors in any case—but that character of simplicity and sobriety which is proper to all non-modern languages; it takes the whole of twentieth century insensitivity and narcissism to conclude that the present languages of the West, or any one of them, can be substantially and spiritually superior to the more ancient languages, or that a liturgical text amounts practically to the same thing as a dissertation or a novel.

This is not to say that it is only the modern languages of Europe that are unsuited to sacred use: the general degeneration of humanity, which has been accelerating for several centuries, has had the particular effect, outside the West, of bringing about a deterioration in certain tongues existing on the margin of the sacred languages that they accompany; the cause here is not a lapsing into triviality, ideological and literary in its basis as is the case in Western countries, but a naive *de facto* materialism, not philosophical but none the less favoring dullness and flatness, vulgarity even. Doubtless this phenomenon is not universal, but it exists, and it was necessary to note it in the present context; as for spoken languages which have not been subject to this kind of deterioration, they too have lost at least much of their ancient richness, but without necessarily becoming unsuitable for a possible liturgical purpose.

Liturgical elaboration depends, on the one hand, on the genius of a religion and on the other on the ethnic receptacles concerned; it is providential, like the disposition and shape of the branches of a tree; moreover it is inappropriate, to put it mildly, to criticize it in terms of short-

sighted retrospective logic⁸ and to wish to correct it as if it amounted merely to an accidental succession of events. Assuming the Latin Church has a right to exist, the Latin language is an immovable aspect of its nature and of its genius.

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The innovators never tire of parading the abstract and ideological argument of "the times": this taboo-phrase means for them that things which in fact are situated in what today appears to us as a "past" are *ipso facto* "antiquated" and "out-of-date", and, conversely, things situated in what seems to us subjectively as "the present", or, more precisely speaking, those things which they select arbitrarily for identifying with "our time" (as if other contemporary phenomena did not exist or belonged in a different period)—the whole of this arbitrarily delimited actuality is presented as a "categorical imperative" endowed with an "irreversible" motion. In reality, what gives time its significance here are the following factors: firstly, the progressive decadence of the human species in conformity with cyclic law; secondly, the progressive adaptation of religion to the collectivity as such; thirdly, adaptation to the different ethnic groups concerned; fourthly, the qualitative oscillations of the traditional collectivity in the grip of the temporal flux. It is to one of these factors, or to their various combinations, that everything can be referred that brings in "the times" by way of explanation.

As regards the adaptation of a religion in its first youth to a total society, this concerns the transition from the "catacomb" stage to that of a state religion; it is entirely false to assert that only the first is normal and that the second, or if one so prefers, the "Constantinian" stage, represents merely an illegitimate, hypocritical and faithless state of petrification. A religion cannot remain for ever in the cradle, it is by definition destined to become a state religion and in consequence to undergo the adaptations—in no wise hypocritical, but simply realistic—that this new situation demands. It cannot but ally itself with the ruling power, on condition, of course, that the ruling power submits to its guidance; on this account one has to distinguish thenceforth between two Churches: the institutional Church, immutable because of its Divine institution, and the human Church, necessarily political through being linked to a total collectivity, failing which it would have no earthly existence as a great religion. Granting that this state Church is bad—and it is necessarily so to the extent that men are bad—the Holy Church has need of it in order to survive in space and time; it is from this human and imperial Church that there springs that qualitative prolongation of the primitive Church which is the Church of the Saints. Moreover to this transition from the "Church of the Catacombs" to the "Constantinian Church" there necessarily corresponds a liturgical and theological re-adaptation, for it is impossible to speak to an integral society as one would speak to a handful of mystics.

Mention has also been made of adaptation to providential ethnic groups, who in the case of Christianity are broadly speaking—after the Jews—the Greeks, the Romans, the Germanic and Slav people's and a minority of Near-Easterners. Here again it is wrong to speak of "a time" when we are dealing with factors which depend, not on a period as such, but on a natural unfolding which could take place in a variety of periods. Theological and liturgical forms clearly bear a relationship to ethnic mentalities, at least to the extent that the question of a diversity can arise in this domain.

There remains the paradoxical problem of what amounts in a certain sense to a progressive manifestation of the religious genius. On the one hand, religion displays its maximum sanctity at its origin; on the other hand, it requires time to implant itself solidly in the human soil, where it

needs to create a humanity in its own image in order to bring about a maximal flowering of intellectual and artistic values coinciding with a new flowering of sanctity, which might make one think of an evolution; this unquestionably takes place, but only in a specified human respect and not in terms of intrinsic spirituality. In every religious cycle there are four periods to be distinguished: the "apostolic" period, then the period of full development, after which comes the period of decadence, and then lastly the final period of corruption; Catholicism however exhibits an anomaly in as much as its period of development was brutally cut short by an influence wholly foreign to the Christian genius, namely the Renaissance, so that in this case the period of decadence was placed in a completely new dimension.

For the innovators, the expression "our time" is obviously not entirely devoid of meaning; in practice it is identified with the relativistic idea of evolution, and everything belonging to the past is viewed according to this false perspective, which ultimately reduces all phenomena to evolutionist or temporal fatalities, whereas the essential lies entirely in the eternal present and in the quality of absoluteness whenever values of the spirit are in question.

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Starting from the idea that the liturgy is the outward clothing of the spiritual order and that in a religious, and hence normal, civilization nothing is wholly independent of the sacred, it will be admitted that the liturgy in the most ample sense of the term embraces all artistic and artisanal forms in so far as they are referable to the sacred realm, and that, for this very reason, these forms cannot be just anything⁹; this notwithstanding the fact that in practice, one is obliged to understand by "liturgy" only those forms that are directly sacred or pertaining to worship. The essential point here is that in Europe the liturgy taken in its widest sense has been radically false for several centuries, as if the visible and the Invisible no longer had any connection with one another; it would be absurd to maintain that this state of affairs is devoid of influence on the spiritual order, so far as the general conditions governing environment and development are concerned. A particular saint may have no need of imaginative and aesthetic symbolism, but the collectivity needs it and the collectivity should be able to produce saints; whether one likes it or not, the big things in this world are bound up with the small ones, at least extrinsically, and it would be unnatural to view the outward expressions of a tradition merely as an affair of decoration.

But let us return to the liturgy properly so called, or more exactly to the problem of its possible re-adaptation. There is no sort of charity which permits or demands degradation; to place oneself at the level of childhood or of naivety is one thing; to sink to the level of vulgarity or pride is another. The faithful have had imposed upon them the idea of the "people of God", or of the "holy people" even, and a sacerdotal function that they have never even dreamt of has been suggested to them, and this in an age when the people are as far removed as could be from sanctity, so much so indeed that it is felt to be necessary to lower the level of the liturgy, and even of the whole of religion, for their use. This is all the more absurd from the fact that the people still deserve something much better than the leveling down that is wished on them in the name of a perfectly unrealistic ideology; under the pretence of introducing a liturgy on a level with the people, it is the people who are forced to lower themselves to the level of this substitute liturgy.¹⁰ From every point of view one would do well to remind oneself of this saying of St. Irenaeus: "There can be no triumph over error through the sacrifice of any of the rights of truth".

Man dies alone, he is judged alone; he alone is responsible for his actions; he stands alone

before God. No prayer in common can replace personal prayer; the intimate dialogue between the soul and God is incommunicable and irreplaceable. All the communal settings in the world can never alter this. What man seeks in the sanctuary is solitude with his Creator; so much the better if the sanctuary shelters more than one man's solitude.

To pretend that the ancient and normal, or sacerdotal and hence aristocratic liturgy simply expresses "an age" is radically false for two reasons: firstly because an "age" amounts to nothing and explains nothing, at least in the order of values in question here; and secondly because the message of the liturgy, or its justification, lies in fact outside and beyond temporal contingencies. If one enters a sanctuary, it is with the object of escaping from time; it is to find an atmosphere of the "Heavenly Jerusalem" which delivers us from our earthly moment in time. The merit of the ancient liturgies is not that they expressed their historical moment, but that they expressed something that went beyond it; and if this something gave its imprint to an age, this means that that age enjoyed the quality of possessing a non-temporal side, so much so that we have every reason for loving it to the extent that it possessed this quality. If "nostalgia for the past" happens to coincide with nostalgia for the sacred, this is a virtue, not because it is directed towards the past in itself, which would be quite devoid of meaning, but because it is directed towards the sacred, which transforms all duration into an eternal present and which cannot be situated elsewhere than in the liberating "now" of God.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

'How would you distinguish, Sir, between sin, fault and infirmity?'—*It is sin to cleave with desire to anything that does not make for God. By a fault I mean any accidental falling short of God. And infirmity may be defined as not having the mind fixed on God all the time.*

Meister Eckhart.

¹ That is to say the liturgical element, an extremely restrained one, is not super-added but is comprised in the Sunna itself; its principal content is the chanting of the Koran. In Judaism, the Thora provides an example of a liturgy that is both very rich and integrally revealed.

² One theologian has even had the temerity to write that St. Paul, in order to apply the divine message, "had to invent", which is the most flagrant as well as the most ruinous error imaginable in this realm.

³ In many cases the vernacular languages run the risk of becoming the instruments of alienation and cultural tyranny: oppressed populations must henceforth have the Mass in the language of the oppressor, which is supposed to be theirs, and tribes speaking archaic languages—languages which thus are capable in principle of liturgical use though they are not widely prevalent—will find Latin replaced by another foreign language, linguistically inferior to their own and moreover charged for them with associations of ideas far removed from the sacred; the Sioux will have Mass, not in their noble *Lakota*, but in the English of the Far West. Doubtless it is impossible to translate the Mass into all the Red Indian and Negro languages, but this is not the point, since the Mass in Latin does in fact exist.

⁴ In early ages, the "people" possessed in a large measure the naturally aristocratic character that flows from religion; as for the "plebs"—made up of men who do not seek to rise above themselves—it could not determine the nature of the language in general. It is only democracy that seeks, on the one hand, to assimilate the "plebs" to the "people" and, on the other hand, to reduce the latter to the former; it ennobles whatever is base and debases whatever is noble.

⁵ That is to say they are over-given to dotting the i's, as the present author also is compelled to do—but then he is not writing for medieval readers, nor does he necessarily think in quite the same way as he writes.

⁶ It should be noted that these fine shades of meaning seem to escape many of the Orthodox also, who appear to reason thus: since Slavonic, which is not Greek, is worthy of liturgical use, modern French, which is not any more or any less Greek, is also worthy of such use. When one is alive to spiritual under-tones and to the mystical vibrations of forms, one cannot but regret these false concessions, which moreover are not limited to the realm of language, and which impoverish and disfigure the expressive splendor of the sacerdotal genius of Orthodoxy.

⁷ Latin nevertheless did not possess every kind of superiority. The Italian of Dante has many more musical and imaginative qualities; the German of a Walther von der Vogelweide or a Meister Eckhart has more plasticity, more intuitive and evocative power, and is of a more symbolic nature than Latin. But Latin enjoys obvious pre-eminence in relation to its derivatives and to the later Germanic dialects; it is furthermore the language of the Roman empire and imposes itself for this very reason, given moreover that there is no occasion for envisaging a plurality of liturgical languages in this linguistically and culturally over-divided sector.

⁸ It goes without saying that logic is only valid provided it possesses sufficient data and draws real conclusions from them. But there is also the question of imagination, and not of logic only: an imagination which is completely at ease in a world of din and vulgarity, to the point of finding everything not belonging to it abnormal and ludicrous, divests itself of all right to pronounce on sacred matters.

⁹ Anyone wishing to see a strictly liturgical and even truly celestial art should visit the Sainte Chapelle or, in Venice, the Basilica of St. Mark (the later mosaics apart). People attribute some sort of "mystique of joy" to Baroque art; in reality its character of dream-like inflation and dissolution partakes of Satanism, be it said without exaggeration; it is the paradise of a nightmare. Greco-Roman classicism could never be harmonized definitively with the Christian mentality, even adulterated as this had become by the Renaissance; but instead of returning to the Romanesque and Gothic styles an attempt was made to satisfy the need for imaginativeness and musicality from below, whence the Baroque style—already rendered alluring by Michelangelo—and its indescribable prolongation in the eighteenth century.

¹⁰ A most questionable Council wished to "open a window"; but the window should have been opened Heavenwards! That window was already open: it was the ancient liturgy. It is true that there are other possible openings, also towards Heaven, but these would never be so much as mentioned.