

# THE SHAPE OF THE LITURGY

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY

THE origin of this essay was a paper read at their request before the Cowley Fathers during their General Chapter in August 1941. I have ventured, therefore, in this different form to offer it again to the members of the oldest, the most respected and in more ways than one the greatest of our Anglican communities of priests.

The re-writing of the original very condensed paper for a less specialised public involved, I found, much more expansion and alteration than I at first intended. It seemed worth while to take this trouble with it because it set out information which I was told would be interesting and useful to many people, if it could be put before them in a way reasonably easy for non-specialists to understand. To a pragmatic Englishman that word 'useful' is always a temptation to embark on lengthy disquisitions, and I found that I had succumbed before I knew it. The subject of the paper—the structure of actions and prayers which forms the eucharist—has, of course, a permanent interest for christians. But it is beginning to be recognised that this has a much wider and deeper significance than its ecclesiastical or even than its purely devotional interest. It is only within recent years that the science of Comparative Religion has fully awakened to the value of the study of 'ritual patterns' for the appreciation of any given system of religious ideas and its necessary consequence in human living—a 'culture'. The analysis of such a pattern and the tracing of its evolution opens for the historian and the sociologist the most direct way to the sympathetic understanding 'from within' of the mind of those who practise that religion, and so to a right appreciation of the genius of their belief and the value of their ideas and ideals of human life. We christians have naturally been a little shy of making this new approach to the understanding of our own religion; at least it has been little studied up till now in England. Yet, rightly used, it should lead to a deepening and enriching of our own christian faith, a new sensitiveness and balance and discrimination in our belief and practice; and also—what is urgently needed—a new comprehension of the causes of our differences between ourselves. This, and not a despairing agreement to ignore them, is the only effective first step to their removal.

Of all christian 'ritual patterns' that of the eucharist is by common consent central and the most important. True, it is neither christian nor scientific to isolate it altogether from those which embody the christian conception of the eternal responsibility of each individual soul (technically, baptism, confirmation and penance), or from those which express the social, organic quality of fully christian life (the sacrament and idea of

different 'orders' in the church, and the perpetual round of the divine office as a representative worship).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, so far as this world is concerned, these others are directed towards and centre upon the eucharist, and their results are largely expressed in the eucharistic action. It is accordingly the ritual pattern of the latter which is the most revealing of the essential christian understanding of human life.

The book which has emerged from the process of re-writing the original paper, after delays due to the claims of other work and the difficulties of wartime publishing, is quite different from the one I had expected. This is a not uncommon misadventure with authors, and in itself a fact of no interest; but the change had better be explained. The paper was written by an Anglican for Anglicans; it dealt with a troublesome contemporary Anglican problem, from the ordinary Anglican standpoint and assumptions. Even so it was found impossible to state clearly what this specifically Anglican problem involves, to explain its causes or to discuss it usefully, without relating it to a much wider background. Herein lies the change between the paper and the book. The latter remains quite obviously something written by an Anglican, and I am happy that it should be so. But I recognise that what was the background of the paper has become the substance of the book, and that the domestic Anglican problem has assumed a more scientific proportion to the subject as a whole.

That is as it should be. The most isolated christian—say a celtic anchorite (the nearest equivalent to a christian Robinson Crusoe)—in so far as he is specifically christian, does not come to God like the pagan mystic, as the alone to the Alone. Even if he does not use a traditional formula like the Lord's prayer or the 'Glory be to the Father', he prays within a whole framework of christian ideas received from others. When his prayer is most spontaneous and from his own heart, the belief according to which he prays, the general type of his prayer and much—probably most—of his actual phrasing are still largely drawn from what he has learned from others—his teachers, christian services he has attended in the past, his mother, his bible, many different sources. Ultimately it all comes to him, even the use of his bible, from the tradition of prayer evolved in the worshipping church. And it is with local churches as with individuals. Behind each of them stands the classic tradition of christendom, making its influence felt all the time, even if only by their attempts to react against it. Behind the Church of England, for instance, and her present official eucharistic rite, there stretches the vast tradition of performing the eucharist in much more ancient and more numerous churches for fourteen centuries before Archbishop Cranmer was born. We cannot cut ourselves off from this immense experience of the eucharist in the past, even if we

<sup>1</sup> Unction and matrimony stand a little apart, but they can be attached to these two groups.

would. It has moulded and contributed to our own in all sorts of ways, far more numerous and complicated and subtle than we readily recognise. And in so doing it has largely created both our present advantages and our present difficulties, so that we can neither fully profit by the one nor effectively remedy the other without some understanding of their causes. This inescapable solidarity of all christians in their prayer, even of the most resolute and exclusive sectarians with whom it is utterly unconscious, is a striking and at times ironic lesson of christian history. It is inseparable from the nature of christianity itself, and rooted in the biblical view of religion, that of the Old Testament as well as the New. It is not surprising that it finds its most obvious and universal expression in the history of what is the climax of christian living, that christian corporate worship whose centre and gauge from the beginning has been the eucharist.

From one point of view the eucharist is always in essence the same thing—the human carrying out of a divine command to ‘do this’. The particular eucharistic rite we follow is only a method of ‘doing this’. It might seem strange at first sight to the conventional ‘Martian enquirer’ that there is not one single way of ‘doing this’, absolutely identical throughout christendom; and that none of the many ways of ‘doing’ it has anywhere remained the same from the days of the apostles until now. On the contrary, this simple bond of christian unity has a peculiarly complicated and ramifying history of variation. It is true that by careful analysis there is to be found underlying most of these varying rites and all of the older ones a single normal or standard *structure* of the rite as a whole. It is this standard structure which I call the ‘Shape’ of the Liturgy. But it somewhat disconcertingly appears that this standard Shape or sequence of the Liturgy has in at least one major particular been altered from the pattern originally laid down at the last supper; and that this alteration was nowhere undone from the first century to the sixteenth, and even then only in one or two groups which have won no general approval. Apart from these isolated groups that standard Shape has everywhere remained unchanged for more than eighteen hundred years, overlaid yet never refashioned. But within that rigid framework the eucharist has adapted itself perpetually with a most delicate adjustment to the practical conditions and racial temperaments and special gifts of a multitude of particular churches and peoples and generations.

Here, I suggest, is something of the greatest significance as a clue to what is authentically christian in life and thought. That standard structure or Shape of the Liturgy can be shewn to have had its first formation in the semi-jewish church of the apostolic age. But it has persisted ever since, not because it was consciously retained as ‘apostolic’ or even known to be such—it was not even recognised to be there—but only because it fulfilled certain universal *christian* needs in every church in every age, not only for outstanding saints but for the innumerable millions of plain nameless sinful



christian folk, for whom in different ways the eucharist has always been the universal road to God.

The intricate pattern of local variety overlaid on the unchanging apostolic core of the rite is the product of history. It is the proof that the christian liturgy is not a museum specimen of religiosity, but the expression of an immense living process made up of the real lives of hosts of men and women in all sorts of ages and circumstances. Yet the underlying structure is always the same because the essential action is always the same, and this standard structure or Shape alone embodies and expresses the full and complete eucharistic action for all churches and all races and all times. The action is capable of different interpretations, and the theologies which define those interpretations have varied a good deal. But they can vary only within certain limits while they interpret one and the same action. Whenever and wherever the eucharistic action is changed, *i.e.* whenever and wherever the standard structure of the rite has been broken up or notably altered, there it will be found that some part of the primitive fullness of the meaning of the eucharist has been lost. And—in the end—it will be found that this has had equally notable results upon the christian *living* of those whose christianity has been thus impoverished. It may sound exaggerated so to link comparatively small ritual changes with great social results. But it is a demonstrable historical fact that they are linked; and whichever we may like to regard as the cause of the other, it is a fact that the ritual change can always be historically detected before the social one. To take two cardinal instances: There is an analysable relation between the *non-communicant* eucharistic piety which begins in the later fourth century and certain obvious weaknesses and special characteristics of the christianity of the dark and middle ages, which first shew themselves in the fifth century. There is again a clear relation between, on the one hand, certain special tendencies of Latin eucharistic piety in the later middle ages which come to full development in the sixteenth century all over the West, and on the other that post-renaissance individualism, first in religion and then in living, which has had such outstanding consequences upon the general situation of Western society in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is the 'ritual pattern' of the eucharistic action which is here studied, as it is 'done' by this standard structure of the Shape of the Liturgy. This involves approaching the whole matter not so much from the standpoint of the theologian (though one cannot ignore theology in dealing with it) nor yet directly from that of the pure historian (though history supplies the bulk of the material), but from that of the liturgist. Since I am thus attaching a label to myself, I hope I may be allowed to explain what I conceive the word to mean. It means neither an antiquarian collector of liturgical curiosities for the sake of their own interest, nor yet an expert in modern ecclesiastical rubrics, but merely a student of Comparative

Religion, who is himself a believing christian, exercising his science especially on the practice of worship in his own religion.<sup>1</sup> It is true that that practice—and especially the standard structure or Shape of the Liturgy—was not formed and is not maintained by theories and scientific analyses at all, but by the needs and instinct of ordinary christians living in the most direct contact with history and under its pressures. That is part of the practical value to ourselves in an age of confusion of an analytical study of it. A book on this subject need not be a particularly difficult book, though if it is to be thorough it must needs be a long one, because it deals with something which underlies and accompanies the whole history of Western civilisation for nearly two thousand years, with which it has continual mutual interactions.

What I have tried to understand, therefore, is not only when and how, but *why* that standard structure or Shape of the Liturgy took and kept the Shape it has. There is necessarily a good deal of history in this book but (I hope) no archaeology for archaeology's sake, which is unfortunately what most people seem chiefly to expect from liturgists and their works. The very word 'liturgy' has, I know, a distinctly archaeological and even 'precious' sound in many people's ears. (I regret that I cannot find another which will quite serve its purpose.) What are called 'liturgiologists' are apt accordingly to be treated by English churchmen with that vague deference accompanied by complete practical disregard with which the Englishman honours most forms of learned research. From the ecclesiastical authorities they usually receive kindness tempered with a good deal of suspicion, as experts in some mysterious and highly complicated theoretical study, whose judgement it may be expedient to satisfy if that can be done without provoking a qualm in the Diocesan Conference, but whose labours have in any case no practical bearing on what goes on in the ordinary parish church. Liturgists have no particular reason to be pleased with the mandarin-like position thus accorded them. They are in reality only students of what actually goes on and has gone on in every parish or other church in christendom and went on before there were special buildings called churches, ever since thirteen men met for supper in an upper room at Jerusalem—the 'common prayer' of christians. And precisely in so far as their studies are scientifically conducted they are capable of useful and important practical applications.

Yet it must be admitted that the liturgists have largely had themselves to thank for the reverent disregard with which their labours are so generally treated. They persist in presenting their subject as a highly specialised branch of archaeology with chiefly aesthetic preoccupations, as though the

<sup>1</sup> The technique of the liturgist must be fully as 'scientific' in its methods as that of the *religionsgeschichtliche schule* in Germany. But I think it will be obvious to anyone carefully studying their works that they lost much in insight into their material by not sharing the belief of those who produced it.

liturgy had evolved of itself in a sort of ecclesiastical vacuum remote from the real life and needs of men and women, who have always had to lead their spiritual lives while helping to carry on the whole muddled history of a redeemed yet fallen world. Archaeology is no doubt fascinating to specialists but it is a recondite business. And though beauty is an attribute of God and as such can be fittingly employed in His worship, it is only a means to that end and in most respects not a directly necessary means. The ordinary man knows very well that prayer and communion with God have their difficulties, but that these arise less from their own technique than from the nature of human life. Worship is a mysterious but also a very direct and commonplace human activity. It is meant for the plain man to do, to whom it is an intimate and sacred but none the less quite workaday affair. He therefore rightly refuses to try to pray on strictly archaeological principles. And so he feels quite prepared to leave what he hears called 'The Liturgy' to be the mystery of experts, and is content instead humbly to make the best he can of the substitute (as he supposes) good enough for him and his like, *viz.* taking part in 'worship' as he finds it in the customary common prayer at his parish church, grumbling a good deal if the clergy alter the service with which he is familiar so that he cannot follow it for himself. This, of course, happens to be 'The Liturgy' in some form. And this attitude of the layman seems to me, if I may say so, not only justifiable but also very 'liturgical' in the strict sense of the word. It has been the normal attitude of the good layman in every age of the church, and it is easy to shew that it has been among the strongest forces making for the maintenance of the liturgy from the very beginning.

The position of the clergy in the matter is different. The cleric has a professional or technical interest in 'worship' as such because it is his special business, an interest which the layman does not, or certainly need not, share. The cleric is therefore much more disposed to consider and to experiment with novel ideas in this field. Further, the parochial clergy have a pastoral responsibility to help their people to worship as well as possible, for the greater glory of God and the profit of their souls. It says something for their sense of duty that over most of christendom during the last century various practical changes in public worship (*e.g.* in church music) which are now universally admitted to be improvements and generally adopted, have been introduced almost entirely through the efforts of the parochial clergy and ministers, not seldom in the face of opposition from the laity and without encouragement from higher ecclesiastical authority.

This is natural enough. The clergy have a conscientious responsibility for the *quality* of worship, and the laity of necessity follow rather than lead in such questions. But one might well have expected that the lead everywhere would come from the official chief pastors of the church. In theory it should be so, and in the ancient church it largely was so in practice. But

the unfortunate fact is that all over christendom, ever since about the twelfth or thirteenth century, the higher ecclesiastical authorities have largely been absorbed in administrative routine.<sup>1</sup> It can hardly be hoped that the administrative mind will ever be either in sufficiently immediate touch with the contemporary spiritual needs of ordinary individuals or sufficiently at leisure for constructive thought, to be able to make very striking contributions in this field. It is much the same case everywhere.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless most christian leaders regret their own preoccupation with machinery. It is an obvious danger, against which the church was obliged to take precautions in the first years of her existence.<sup>3</sup> But now that these are no longer very effective, it is unfortunately true that all over christendom the most valuable contribution to the progress of ideas which can ordinarily be looked for from authority is the adoption without too much obstruction and delay of useful ideas promoted chiefly by the subordinate clergy. Nevertheless, a survey of the history of christian worship everywhere reveals the encouraging fact that though the action of authority can usually delay, it can also often hasten and almost never finally prevent movements of thought and changes of practice which have a real theological motive. The usual interval which elapses between the efforts of the pioneers and their recognition by authority seems to be, on the average, between seventy years and a century, though Rome—exceptionally conservative—has often taken anything between one hundred and five hundred years to legalise long accepted changes in her own discipline of worship.<sup>4</sup> Apart from such

<sup>1</sup> Probably the feudalisation of the episcopate and the complication of business by the systematising of canon law were responsible for this sterility in the West, while the transformation of the Eastern churches into a bureaucracy in the later Byzantine period and subsequent Turkish oppression have had much the same effect in the East.

<sup>2</sup> A great French prelate was discussing with an Anglican the parallel development (*mutatis mutandis*) within their respective churches of certain liturgical ideas which have both devotional and social applications. 'Et vos évêques anglicans?'—asked the Frenchman—'Que pensent-ils de tout cela?' 'Oh! Votre éminence connaît assez bien les évêques. Quand une idée quelconque s'énonce nouvelle, tous les évêques se mettent à la condamner immédiatement.' 'Ah! Oui. C'est par force d'habitude, n'est-ce-pas? C'est leur métier.' 'Mais si ça persiste et devient moins impopulaire, peu à peu on trouve que les évêques se taisent. Enfin, tout d'un coup, on trouve les évêques en tête.' 'Alors, c'est chez vous comme partout. Mais maintenant, en quelle phase se montrent-ils, vos évêques?' 'Maintenant, éminence'—(hopefully—this was in 1936)—'nos évêques commencent à se taire.' 'Admirable! En France ils ne sont pas encore toujours aussi prudents. Mais si on gagne les curés, c'est tout ce qu'il faut pour la marche des idées.'

<sup>3</sup> Acts vi. 2 *sqq.*

<sup>4</sup> Among innumerable modern illustrations one might give, here are a few: The *Motu proprio* of Pope Pius X in 1910, adopting the principles of the reform of church music first advocated at Solesmes in the 1840's; the extension by Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI of the cultus of the Sacred Heart, propagated ever since the seventeenth century by the Jesuits and others; the provision in the proposed Anglican revision of the *Prayer Book* in 1928 for the 'Harvest Festivals' inaugurated by Hawker of Morwenstow seventy years before; the adoption in the Scottish *Book of Common Order* in 1938 of liturgical reforms advocated forty years before by McCrie and other presbyterians. (This appears to be almost a record for speed in such matters. The Moderator and other administrators hold office only for one year.)

exceptions and the avowed liturgical revolutions of the sixteenth century, the interval of at least two generations seems to have been fairly constant all over christendom since the thirteenth century.

There have appeared in modern times a number of movements for the deepening of the christian idea and practice of worship—the *Zoe* movement among the Greek Orthodox—the ‘Liturgical Movement’ in the Roman Church, and another going by the same title in Scottish Presbyterianism—the ‘Wesleyan Sacramental Fellowship’—sporadic Lutheran movements before the war (the best known but not the most interesting being that with which the name of F. Heiler was associated)—and the various off-shoots of the ‘Oxford Movement’<sup>1</sup> in England which began in the last century. There is an obvious relation between them all throughout christendom. They have met with slightly varying degrees of official patronage and hindrance, and about the same intensity of popular misunderstanding, wherever they have appeared. But on the whole it can be said that in every case their most solid support has come from the younger parochial clergy and ministers. In the Roman Church on the Continent, where the movement has made the greatest practical headway (despite certain mistakes of tactics and presentation, which gave an impression of concern with inessentials) a great deal of valuable study and guidance has been afforded by the religious. But even there the effective impact on the life and devotion of the church has been chiefly due to the efforts of the parochial clergy and a nucleus of keen lay support, with the bulk of the laity slowly adapting themselves to the new ideas, and the bishops (with certain great exceptions) following—acquiescently, apathetically or reluctantly as the case might be—safely behind. So, at all events, the situation before the war was described to me by more than one scholar or prelate who should have known. Continental catholics have something else to think about at present, and the situation may well have changed when they can give their attention to it once more.

In England there has been the additional handicap of a great lack of literature on the subject which can be covered by the useful French term *haute vulgarisation*—I mean books which will meet the needs of the thoughtful and educated christian, cleric or layman, who is not and does not intend to become what he calls a ‘liturgiologist’, but who is aware that ideas are stirring on this subject. Such a man may have a natural desire to understand without prejudice what it is all about, but roughly and without too much technical jargon and stretches of untranslated dead languages. Above all he wants to know its bearing on his own christian life and prayers and his ordinary worship in his parish church. I have tried to keep in mind this need and desire, and to serve such a reader with what is neither a manual

<sup>1</sup> In this respect it is more properly described as the ‘Cambridge Movement’. It was the ‘Cambridge Ecclesiological Society’ which led the way in changes in worship expressive of the changes in theology advocated at Oxford.

of 'liturgiology' nor a book of devotion, but an explanation of what is after all a technical and somewhat complicated subject put in as untechnical a way as the matter seems to allow. I assume only that he wishes to understand it from a certain practical point of view, that of the worshipping christian, with a serious interest in the subject but no great background of technical knowledge.

I must admit that the book has been swollen more than I like by the need to cite at some length the historical evidence which is the basis of the explanation. Probably this will not detract from its interest for most readers, and in any case it could not be avoided. Modern research has greatly altered this groundwork of the subject in recent years, but it has done so almost unnoticed and piecemeal. The standard manuals in English are without exception disfigured by obsolete information, and the new and more scientific investigations are scattered broadcast in scholarly periodicals and monographs in many languages. In the circumstances there seems to be a need for a book which with the aid of some new material and fresh investigations will give a coherent statement of the new view of the subject as a whole. I have tried to do this in outline, and as such I have hopes that even scientific students of liturgy will find some things to interest them here.

The book having taken this form, it must largely avoid the specifically Anglican interests of the paper from which it began. It is true that I have added a chapter on certain changes made in the Anglican rite at and after the Reformation, and also some considerations on the difficulties of the liturgical situation in Anglicanism at the present time. That is because I conceive that no Anglican could do otherwise at present, if he wishes to serve his own church. But it will be found that I have not prejudiced my attempt to explain by the advocacy of any particular proposals. Two years in a parish since the war began have left me with an intense sympathy for the lay communicant and his parish priest in facing those difficulties, which are ultimately not of their making. They have also left me with strong doubts as to whether any of the current proposals, official or otherwise, are based on a sufficiently searching analysis of what those difficulties really are, or why they have come to be felt as difficulties. Yet until some such analysis has been established and understood we are not likely to get on to the right road to a solution. In any case, there are already advocates enough before the church. It is the vocation and justification of scholarship not to plead a case but to discern and illuminate the problem for the jury.

Sixteen out of seventeen chapters, however, deal with a wider theme, even if some marks of their origin are still upon them. These things are the common inheritance of all the baptised, the legacy of our common Mother before our family quarrels had grown so sharp and tragic. It would be an additional reward for fourteen months of writing and fourteen years of study if that on which I have laboured to serve my own brethren should

help others also to love God better through their own liturgies. Many different rites are drawn on here, and though I do not pretend to think that they have all the same meaning, they are all, I believe, alike at least in one respect. No liturgy is simply a particular 'way of saying your prayers', which would be only an instrument for one department of life. Prayer expresses a theology or it is only the outlet of a blind and shallow emotion; and like all prayer a liturgy must do that. But because it carries prayer on to an *act*, every eucharistic liturgy is and must be to some extent the expression of a conception of human life as a whole. It relates the individual worshipper to God and His law, to redemption, to other men, to material things and to his own use of them. What else is there in life?

In this period of the disintegration and attempted reconstruction of thought about our secular society, the individual's relation to society and his need for and securing of material things are the haunting problems of the age. There is a christian pattern of a solution which is expressed for us and by us at the eucharist. There the individual is perfectly integrated in society, for there the individual christian only exists as a christian individual inasmuch as he is fully exercising his own function in the christian society. There his need of and utter dependence upon material things even for 'the good life' in this world is not denied or even ascetically repressed, but emphasised and met. Yet his needs are met from the resources of the whole society, not by his own self-regarding provision. But there the resources of the society are nothing else but the total substance freely offered by each of its members for all. There, too, is displayed a true hierarchy of functions within a society organically adapted to a single end, together with a complete equality of recompense.

But the eucharist is not a mere symbolic mystery representing the right order of earthly life, though it is that incidentally and as a consequence. It is the representative act of a fully *redeemed* human life. This perfected society is not an end in itself, but is consciously and wholly directed to the only end which can give meaning and dignity to human life—the eternal God and the loving and conscious obedience of man in time to His known will. There the eternal and absolute value of each individual is affirmed by setting him in the most direct of all earthly relations with the eternal and absolute Being of God; though it is thus affirmed and established only through his membership of the perfect society. There the only means to that end is proclaimed and accepted and employed—man's redemption through the personal sacrifice of Jesus Christ at a particular time and place in human history, communicated to us at other times and places through the church which is the 'fulfilment' of Him. That is the eucharist. Over against the dissatisfied 'Acquisitive Man' and his no less avid successor the dehumanised 'Mass-Man' of our economically focussed societies insecurely organised for time, christianity sets the type of 'Eucharistic Man'—man giving thanks with the product of his labours upon the gifts of God, and

daily rejoicing with his fellows in the worshipping society which is grounded in eternity. This is man to whom it was promised on the night before Calvary that he should henceforth eat and drink at the table of God and be a king. That is not only a more joyful and more humane ideal. It is the divine and only authentic conception of the meaning of all human life, and its realization is in the eucharist.

GREGORY DIX

NASHDOM ABBEY

BURNHAM, BUCKS

*Corpus Christi* 1943

#### NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

A new edition having been called for within three months of the first publication, I have taken advantage of it to correct a few misprints which had escaped my notice and a number of minor slips. There has been no time to take account in this edition of a certain amount of fresh evidence which has been most kindly put at my disposal by various scholars, for which I am grateful, and to which I hope to adjust my own findings at some future date. But I am happy to say that such expert criticism as the book has already received suggests that this will affect no more than details and isolated points, leaving the general presentation of the subject here substantially unchanged.

GREGORY DIX

NASHDOM ABBEY

*St. Benedict's Day* 1945

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