

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF RITUAL

By Frater I.D.V.A.

Let me begin by telling you what this paper is not. There will be no history of specific rituals nor of ritual forms in general – although we must consider the various types and applications of rituals – and I am not concerned with the practicalities (the organisation and the mechanics) of particular rituals. The essence of my text is the personal experience of ritual: the manner in which it affects us physically, psychologically and psycho-spiritually; the moral and spiritual end to which a given ritual is directed; and the way in which the effect of the ritual is dependent upon that specific goal.

But first we need to answer the question, what *is* ritual? It must be defined, and it must also be distinguished from words that are commonly, if somewhat inaccurately, used as synonyms for ritual – especially among freemasons, who ought to know better. Just as there is much confusion over the proper use of such terms as Order, Rite and Degree in a masonic context, so the words rite, ritual, ceremony and ceremonial are often used indiscriminately, as nouns, as if they were interchangeable. They are not.

There is the added problem that the word ‘ritual’ has different meanings in different contexts. In contemporary secular society a ‘ritual’ tends to be seen as an irrational and meaningless activity – a perception not helped by the tendency of psychiatrists to describe the obsessively repeated trivial actions of the anxiety neurotic (such as counting and recounting railings as one walks past them) as ‘ritualised behaviour’. These actions are simply inappropriate *habits* that need to be unlearned. Other problems of perception arise from vague and misleading definitions of the term ritual, such as ‘any habitual detailed method of procedure’ – which definition more properly applies to a *custom*.

Customs, especially the calendrical customs so assiduously collected by folklorists, may, however, enshrine the rules of a vanished social order and will often involve rituals. This gives us the anthropologist’s definition of ritual, for whom a ritual refers to any prescribed pattern of social acts, while the word itself is defined as meaning ‘corporate symbolic activity’. Such a definition may avoid any contentious value judgement, but it also denudes the concept of ritual of any sense of the numinous – the religious awe that it properly possesses. For that we must turn to its liturgical use, that is, within the context of public religious worship, especially the service of Holy Communion. Here ‘ritual’ refers to the prescribed form of *words* that constitute an act of worship, as opposed to the performance of the sequence of actions, which are termed variously, the ‘ceremony’, ‘ceremonial’, or ‘rite’. For our purposes, to avoid confusion, I shall include both words and actions under the heading of ‘ritual’ and will define it as,

the prescribed or customary form for conducting a religious or other solemn ceremony.

What constitutes a ‘solemn ceremony’ is, of course, a subjective matter, but for our purposes we may consider it to be an event in which a sense of awe is both anticipated and engendered – by both the active participants and the passive observers (and here I

should point out that the boundary between participant and observer is often blurred). The ceremony in question need not be religious: solemnity is expected, if not always present, in many secular ceremonies. For example, in the civic ceremony of investing a Lord Mayor; in the academic ceremony of awarding degrees; in the legal ceremony of opening a court sitting; and in such State occasions as the opening of Parliament by the monarch. And in each of these secular examples the setting identifies the purpose of the ceremony; it is clear from the outset, to observers as well as participants exactly what the ritual is for.

It is also possible for the secular and the sacred to combine ritually in one setting. An obvious example is the spectacular pageant of the coronation ceremony. In this, temporal triumphalism is balanced by the public statement of the earthly ruler's subordination to divine authority. Traditionally a coronation emphasised and cemented the hierarchical relationship between God, king and subject, and although this original purpose has gone with the passing of belief in the Divine Right of kings, and the loss by royalty of any real temporal power, coronations – and other royal pageants – , and still serve a significant social function. They serve to promote a sense of both national identity and national unity, and to ensure continuing social cohesion. There is also something else.

The prevailing mood of contemporary society is egalitarian, but public reaction to such ceremonies suggests an underlying acceptance of some form of innate hierarchical social order, if not in the material world then in the spiritual realm. The drama and pageantry of this kind of public ritual (and this was especially evident at the funeral of Princess Diana) seems to trigger in us an awareness, at a deeper level than that of the conscious mind, of the spiritual world; a world whose nature and structure we cannot adequately express in everyday language; a world which we can comprehend most easily in terms of a hierarchy, and for which we tend to seek parallels in the hierarchies of this world. That, of course, is a psychological explanation for such feelings and actions; we cannot prove objectively by the aid of *any* ritual that there is a spiritual reality beyond the material world.

We might reflect, however, that every human society, from the earliest known human culture to the present day, has developed ceremonies designed to build a bridge between this world and that. The form and structure of such ceremonies have changed with our changing views of the spiritual world and of our relationship to it, but there are two constant factors. First, there is an acceptance of the reality of the spiritual world, and second there is an experience of a change in our state of being as we become aware of that world. Such states of awareness are today described as 'Altered states of consciousness' and it is these that may be attained as a consequence of participation in the 'corporeal symbolic acts' of certain religious and quasi-religious rituals. It does not follow, and I am certainly not suggesting, that this is a necessary consequence for each individual in the course of every act of religious worship.

Public religious worship implies an acceptance of the reality of a spiritual world, but it is not necessarily directed towards attaining a state of awareness in which we directly experience that world. However, the element of personal experience is now recognised as being of much greater importance than when J.G. Frazer defined religion as,

a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed

to direct and control the course of nature and of human life.¹

Today propitiation has given way to the establishment of a fellowship between God and man, a personal relationship that is expressed in public worship (within the many branches of the Christian faith) through the ceremony of the Eucharist: the formally structured ritual that enables us properly to respond to God. Our response to this communion is, of course, deeply personal and while it may indeed bring about a change in consciousness, this is neither an inevitable nor a necessary consequence. Ritual is not solely about exalted religious experience, but it *is* about change.

The change with which ritual is concerned varies according to its nature. Secular rituals may celebrate the arrival of a new incumbent in public office, the commencement of a new session of a public activity, or an advance in academic or professional status. In general they relate to a material change of association for the individual in a communal setting; they are rarely, if ever, concerned with a change in the inner state of the individual. Public religious rituals reflect the desire of individuals to show their personal and communal commitment to a specific faith, and while such desire may follow a change in inner state, the rituals do not of themselves cause such a change. Inner change is the province of rituals of initiation.

And what is initiation? For freemasons the word brings to mind the Entered Apprentice ceremony in Craft Freemasonry, for that is the ritual by which we were initiated into Freemasonry. But we must take a wider view of initiation. The most satisfactory definition is that given by the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, for whom,

The term initiation in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition: the novice emerges from the ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become *another*.²

The act of initiation may also be described as a 'Rite of Passage'. This is a term coined by the Belgian anthropologist, van Gennep. He applied it to rituals which had been developed specifically,

to ensure a change of condition or a passage from one magico-religious or secular group to another.³

Van Gennep divided such rites into three stages. First comes the 'pre-liminal' stage (from the Latin *limen*, a threshold), a stage of separation in which the individual, or group, is taken either literally or symbolically out of his or their previous state. Next is the 'liminal' stage, a transitional state of which the characteristic is marginalisation, and which often involves ritual trials or disorientation. Last is the 'post-liminal' stage, in which the individual is reintegrated into society with a new status conferred upon him, or is integrated into a wholly new condition. The function of this last stage van Gennep termed 'aggregation' and 're-aggregation'. Fortunately for us we do not need to use the terminology of social anthropology.

¹ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. 1911, 3rd ed. Vol. 1, p222

² Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. New York, 1965, p x

³ Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage*. 1909 [English translation, *Rites of Passage*. 1960, p11)

In western society, initiation in an institutional religious context is usually represented by baptism, the rite by which the would-be Christian is initiated into the body of the Church, either directly and personally or, in the case of infant baptism, with the aid of proxies who undergo the verbal trial – the recital of the catechism – on the child's behalf. This is not the only form of initiation ritual within sacramental Christianity: the change of state may be that of entering the priesthood, or becoming a professed religious (*i.e.* a monk or nun) subject to a new set of rules by which he or she must live. One must presume that all of these forms of initiation involve an alteration of the inner state of the individual, leading at least to a new perception of spiritual reality.

But what of initiation in the context of esoteric ritual ? By this I mean the rituals of 'closed' groups that are, like the Church, dedicated to bringing about a profound change in the consciousness and approach to life of their members, but which carry out their ritual practices in private. Such societies include Freemasonry, although what Freemasonry seeks to convey is quite different from the teaching content of what are more properly termed 'Esoteric Orders'. An Esoteric, as opposed to a Masonic Order has been defined as a fraternity,

wherein a secret wisdom unknown to the generality of mankind might be learnt, and to which admission was obtained by means of an initiation in which tests and ritual played their part.⁴

An esoteric Order (as opposed to a magical Order, the nature of which we will consider in due course) might also be described as a communal spiritual path that seeks, by way of ritual practice, to return to the presence of God and ultimately to attain the union of the created with its creator. Its doctrines are an exposition of the nature of the Fall and of the Way of Return, while its practices are concerned with actively finding that Way. These practices are analogous to those of the secret part of the Mysteries of Eleusis, which were

designed to bring the initiate to an awareness of the holy and of the timeless state in which it exists, and for him to gain a secret wisdom which must not be shared with the outside, uninitiated world.⁵

One might add that such secret wisdom entailed a means of access to a *gnosis*, a secret knowledge that helped the initiate to understand the mechanics of the fall (however it may have been expressed mythologically) and to comprehend the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds, their distinct natures, and the correspondences that exist between them. No such secret wisdom is to be found – nor is it offered – within Freemasonry, although the nature of the initiatic process is the same for both masonic and esoteric Orders. So let us now consider the ritual structure that is common to *all* 'closed' rituals of initiation.

Before the ceremony of initiation proper begins, the candidate for initiation will have passed through van Gennep's first or pre-liminal stage. This will have consisted of an examination or assessment – usually verbal – as to his (or her) fitness to be initiated, followed by acceptance or rejection of the candidate by the future peer group. As all such initiations must be voluntary, the candidate will already be aware of the ethos and

⁴ Dion Fortune, *The Esoteric Orders and their Work*. London, [1928], *pix*

⁵ R.A. Gilbert, *Elements of Mysticism*, 1991, pp4-5

general belief system of the peer group to which he seeks admission; but he will not know the form and structure which the ritual initiation takes, nor will he be aware of the specifics of any teaching which he may receive. On the day of the initiation he will be prepared for the ceremony by being suitably clothed (or unclothed if it is a masonic ceremony) and often by receiving instruction as to his inner preparation, *e.g.* an appropriate subject for reflection.

In the ceremony itself most, if not all, of the following elements will be present:

- 1) The candidate will enter in darkness so that the unfolding ceremony brings him into light.
- 2) He (or she) will undergo one or more numerically significant symbolic journeys involving tests and trials (both verbal and practical); the ritual use of musical sound (usually the unaccompanied human voice); and the stimulation of the senses of touch (perhaps with a symbolic weapon) and of smell (by the use of incense).
- 3) He will give an Obligation to keep secret what he has learned and undergone during the ceremony, and to accept the responsibilities of his new situation [he is, of course, unable to divulge the essence of his inner *experience* of the ceremony as that is, by its very nature, incommunicable to another]
- 4) He will be entrusted with secret knowledge (both practical in the form of signs of recognition; and theoretical as he begins the process of acquiring secret wisdom).
- 5) He will be welcomed into his new peer group in sacramental form (usually by sharing a sacred meal).

The first three of these elements form van Gennep's second, liminal, stage and the final two make up his third, post-liminal stage. However, it will be immediately apparent to freemasons that the theoretical part of element (4) is very attenuated, and element (5) is absent from most masonic rituals of initiation [for those of you who are members of it, a particular masonic Order in which a special point is made of the symbolic communal 'meal', will immediately be recognised]. Of course, one could perceive the purely social festive board as representing a shared sacred meal – but this is a parallel extremely difficult to justify for those with experience of masonic dining.

There are clear similarities between masonic and non-masonic esoteric rituals. A hierarchical structure is necessary for the effective working of the ceremony (as it must also be for the effective administration of any organisation), and specific regalia to identify the role of all those taking part in the ceremony is also necessary. It should also be recognised that symbols which convey new or unfamiliar concepts to the candidate in non-verbal form are the common currency of all ceremonial, whatever the message that they are designed to convey. But there are equally clear differences between the two.

In Freemasonry, although the specific content of the ceremonies is kept private, the ceremonies themselves are designed solely to convey a series of simple moral precepts - nothing more and nothing less. That this is so is also common knowledge, for Freemasonry is essentially an 'open' organisation: it does not hide the fact of its existence or require its members to conceal the fact of their membership; it openly declares its aims and objects; and it makes no secret of the fact that it works ceremonies of initiation to inculcate and reinforce its moral message. And there is no progressive unfolding of secret knowledge through experience of the rituals.

In their nature, esoteric Orders are very different. Their doctrines, practices and membership are reserved from the outside world, and even their very existence may be kept secret. This secrecy is not for any dubious reason, but to keep private what cannot manifest except in an enclosed environment in which there can be an effective psycho-spiritual interaction of the members of the Order or Society in question. There is also a progressive unfolding of secret knowledge, or gnosis, which is made meaningful by way of ritual experience and the discipline of private spiritual practice (*e.g.* prayer, meditation and spiritual exercises such as those laid down by St. Ignatius Loyola). In general terms esoteric movements are illuminating, revelatory and spiritually revolutionary, whereas Freemasonry is prosaic and representative of orthodoxy and the mores of the established social order.

But despite these differences, the nature of the rituals of initiation is the same: the initiate has undergone a transformative experience which has, or should have, subtly altered his self-awareness. It must be admitted that in Freemasonry the change of psycho-spiritual state within the candidate is metaphorical rather than an actual, and while one cannot deny the possibility that *some* initiates into Masonry may have truly experienced such a change, I suspect that for the great majority of them this is not so. Despite this the structural identity of the rituals remains, and on a subjective level change of a kind, however superficial, does take place. Separation from the old, and identification with the new peer group is one defining characteristic of rituals of initiation, and this is as true for the newly made mason as for the neophyte of an esoteric Order. He is now a part of Freemasonry, with all the privileges and responsibilities that entails – none of which applied to him in his old, non-masonic state.

All of this, however, is outer change. What inner, subjective effect do rituals of initiation have? The elements of alternating sensory deprivation and sensory stimulation are designed not only to disorient the candidate but also to concentrate his attention and to place him in a receptive state of mind both mentally and emotionally. It would, in theory, be possible to measure the precise neuro-physiological changes taking place in his nervous system throughout the ritual of initiation, but however discrete the recording devices were they would be a distraction for the candidate and for his initiators, and would distort both the setting and the process of the ritual. To understand the subjective experience we must, therefore, rely upon the skill of the initiate in communicating what he remembers of his thoughts and feelings during the ceremony, and in describing his new state of being.

The subjective experience of inner change on the part of the initiate will necessarily involve an altered state of consciousness, in which state, in the words of the psychologist Charles Tart, he,

clearly feels a *qualitative* shift in his pattern of mental functioning, that is, he feels not just a quantitative shift (more or less alert, more or less visual imagery, sharper or duller etc.), but also that some quality or qualities of his mental processes are *different*. Mental functions operate that do not operate at all ordinarily, perceptual qualities appear that have no normal counterparts, and so forth.⁶

⁶ Charles T. Tart (Ed.), *Altered States of Consciousness*. New York, 1972 2nd ed. pp1-2

But as a consequence of this qualitative shift the initiate no longer has an adequate vocabulary to describe what has happened. As with mystical experience, and with *all* exalted religious experience, there is no direct descriptive language, only metaphor, simile, paradox, and even this must often be expressed in the form of visual imagery rather than words. This difficulty is overcome within the ritual by the use of symbols in preference to verbal explanations, precisely because symbols 'can touch something in us which words and conscious reasoning cannot, or at the most, can do so only with great difficulty'.⁷

This is not because the initiate is inarticulate or incoherent, but simply because the experience falls outside the range to which everyday language can be applied. The experience is perhaps best understood by an outsider in terms of social, behavioural changes – moral changes in effect – that may take place as a consequence of the initiation. Masonic as well as esoteric initiation should result in the conversion of the initiate into a more 'moral' person as he accepts and acts upon the codes of morality and spirituality that prevail in his new peer group. But is it necessarily so ?

Here we must consider the problems, the pitfalls and the dangers that may be encountered when working initiatic and other rituals. They may result from poor construction of the ritual itself, from the incompetence or arrogance of the active participants, or from a wrong attitude or intention on the part of either initiate or initiators.

Constructing a successful ritual requires careful attention to ensuring that both actions and words are appropriate to the desired and stated aim. They must be relevant, unambiguous and readily understood by the initiate. For example, the use of symbols and customs drawn from operative Masonry satisfies all of these requirements in the context of a masonic initiation; they would be inappropriate in, let us say, an esoteric ritual based upon the Rosicrucian myth – more significantly they would confuse the initiate and render the ceremony meaningless and void. It is also essential that the setting in which the ritual takes place is suitable in terms of size, acoustics and privacy: a symbolic journey with numerous steps and turns is utterly ineffective in too confined a space; spoken instructions and directions must be clearly audible, while external sounds must be effectively blocked out.

All of this can be ensured well in advance of the performance of the ritual, and careful rehearsing of the parts to be played by the various active participants (the officers) will avoid unsettling mistakes. But it is also essential that when sensory stimulation is called for it is appropriate and effective, especially in the choice and performance of music, whether vocal or instrumental. Similarly, the colour, shape and appearance of regalia and symbolic images should accurately represent what is called for by the theme and aim of the ritual. In my own experience, as an observer, I hasten to add, one ceremony of exaltation into the Holy Royal Arch was ruined for the candidate by the ill-fitting robes of the Principals, faulty floor work by other officers, and a failure to ensure the proper changes from light to darkness and vice-versa. It is also a *sine qua non* that the officers should know the sense of what they are supposed to say,

⁷ Rev. C.J.S. O'Grady, 'The Philosophy of Ritual' [Offprint from *Transactions* of the Metropolitan College, SRIA] 1925, p1

even if they lose the exact wording. Extempore lines that are relevant to the ritual are much to be preferred over unhelpful corrections offered from the sidelines.

This was emphasised by C.J. O’Grady in his essay on ‘The Philosophy of Ritual’. I make no comment on the propriety of his working, but the essence is sound. ‘What I always remember with pleasure about the Irish system, where I was made’, he wrote, is that we have no set ritual in words. We adapt our wording to the candidate so that he will see what we mean. This I know has good and bad points, as it depends so much on the brother who is conferring the degree, but the principle is, I think, the right one.’⁸

His statement serves also to emphasise the need for all those participating in the ritual to understand its nature. And given that they do understand they should also believe in both its purpose and its efficacy.

If the Master, the Adept or the Priest has no faith in, or despises, the belief system which underpins the ritual he is performing, he degrades himself, deceives the initiate, and devalues the ritual to the point at which it becomes a mere vain observance. On the other hand, if the ritual is worked well technically, does the absence of commitment and belief on the part of the initiators prevent an inner change from taking place in the initiate ? I suspect that it does, if only because even the most consummately skilled actor will have difficulty in conveying as spiritual truth what he perceives as untruth – unless he can willingly suspend his disbelief, and if so, then for what ? To perpetuate a deceit ? A willingness to do that suggests something more malign in his actions.

Which brings me to an area that may arouse your incredulity. I firmly believe that just as there is spiritual good, so there is spiritual evil, and that those persons predisposed to propagating spiritual evil will utilise ritual forms for their own purposes. It is perfectly possible to initiate someone towards an evil rather than a good end. And here I will turn to the question of magical Orders, specifically the rituals that may be worked by self-styled magicians. These may be initiatory rituals or rituals designed to command spiritual forces to a selfish end.

There is a clear distinction between esoteric and magical Orders, set out concisely by Gerald Yorke – who was himself for some years a follower of Aleister Crowley, the very embodiment of the self-centred magician. Yorke used the term ‘Hermetic’ where I would use ‘magical’, and ‘Rosicrucian’ where I would use ‘esoteric’, but the two types of Order are clearly distinguished:

Now hermetic Orders as such are only Christian in that they include some Christianity but do not stress it. Rosicrucian orders on the other hand are primarily Christian but draw on other pre-Christian sources. In other words the Hermetists always try to become God in his anthropomorphic or in some instances theriomorphic form. They inflame themselves with prayer until they become Adonai the Lord ... whereas the Chjristian approached God the Father through Christ (Adonai) but never tried to become Christ, only to become as Christ.⁹

⁸ *op. cit.* p3

⁹ Quoted in Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn*. Dublin, 1972, p13

A distinction, in other words, between arrogance and humility, between selfish and selfless. It does not follow that a ritual undertaken in a spirit of greed, spiritual pride and self-aggrandisement will fail. Human beings, as well as Satan, can say 'Evil be thou my good', and a desire to be initiated into an evil fellowship can be fulfilled if the ceremony of initiation is properly constructed and properly worked. Evil intentions do not preclude the successful working a technically correct process. But lest you be tempted to meddle with this ritual underworld I would remind you that rituals performed with a wholly selfish intent will be devoid of spiritual safeguards. There is no need to fear external demons: such rituals can draw to the surface destructive forces that lie deep within the innermost self, and it is not easy to hold them at bay. The consequence of drawing them up is, ultimately, the disintegration of the self and the onset of psychosis. There is also the question of spiritual destruction, but this is neither the right time nor the right place to be debating the question of the nature of spiritual evil.

Let us then return to the new initiate and his inner state. We may not be able to access directly the inner state of another, but we can experience the effect of his change of psycho-spiritual state. Whether his initiation has been into a masonic or an esoteric Order it will, almost certainly, be marked by a more positive attitude to himself and to his fellow men. The change will have been for the better; if it were not then we would not be here, for are we not all the products of a great and ancient initiatic system ? The value of ritual lies in what we can achieve by using it correctly – the conversion of good men into better men, both morally and spiritually.

Now that would be an ideal point at which to draw to a close. Admittedly, I have left much unsaid because I have simply rambled through the landscape of ritual pointing out such of its features that seem to be of particular interest, to me if not to you. But I would add a codicil. I have pointed out that in terms of its technical structure ritual is morally neutral: an initiation may be conducted successfully (as far as its technical performance is concerned) even when the intent is wicked. Is it then possible for a tried and tested ritual of initiation, that has worked successfully and beneficially for almost two centuries, to be consciously altered and distorted in its structure while yet maintaining its good end ? Or will such distortion render its working null and void ? I ask this, of course, concerning a hypothetical situation. I could not possibly comment on its having any apparent, but clearly quite unintended, reference to any current situation in the world of esoteric and masonic ritual.