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RITUAL

A discussion by

The Epiphany Philosophers

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OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT:

This is the BBC Third Programme. We are now broadcasting a discussion by the Epiphany Philosophers about Ritual.

The Epiphany Philosophers are a group of philosophers and psychologists who are also communicating members of the Church of England. The traditional story for the Feast of the Epiphany, namely that of the Wise Men from the East being led by a star to Bethlehem, provides a close parable of the approach to religion made by philosophers and scientists of this kind. This approach is undertaken not through accepting the established ways of traditional thought and worship, but by trusting to an intuition that there is something to be investigated and by following the methods of thinking which science and philosophy supply.

CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENT:

That discussion on Ritual was by the Epiphany Philosophers.

R.H.T. I have heard a true story about a scientifically minded person who found he couldn't leave a College Chapel where a Eucharist was being performed. He was so upset at what he saw and heard that he rushed round the building hammering at the windows and shouting. The question is, Why did he do this?

D.C.R. What he did doesn't seem altogether reasonable. He may have supposed that this was regarded by other people as some kind of effective magic: but, from his point of view, nothing of importance would really be happening.

M.M.B. In fact, from his point of view, he was having a hysterical reaction - because in fact, in one basic sense, nothing was happening.

J.C.H. Then why did he make such a fuss - if nothing was happening?

D.C.R. The view that nothing important was happening can't be the whole story. Ritual does seem to affect people violently one way or another.

R.H.T. Let's try to get clear about this. When you talk about ritual, what is it you mean?

M.M.B. That's one of the most difficult questions in practice to answer, you know, partly because the very subject of ritual, let alone the fact of it, becomes so explosive in discussion. Those talking about it find it impossible to pursue the subject calmly. What detailed non-theological disciplines are there which deal with the matter? I suggest that we try to approach it by one of these rather than by theology because it is just the theological approach which so rouses everybody's passions.

J.C.H. I agree - at any rate provisionally.

D.C.R. Well, apart from the archaeological disciplines, the main disciplines which study ritual are social anthropology and psychology. And there's also this new study of animal behaviour - called ethology.

M.M.B. Yes, but do all these sciences use 'ritual' in the same sense?

D.C.R. Well, let's take the animal behaviour people first. They use the word 'ritual' or 'ritualisation' very widely indeed. For instance, when the naturalist, Lorenz, talks about the Siamese fighting fish inviting the female to the nest by swimming before her, he says "The essentially ritual nature of this swimming movement is readily understood; everything that enhances its optical effect, as the movements of the body or the waving of the tail fin, is exaggerated in mime, whereas all the means of making it mechanically effective are decreased". The action in question, that is, is dissociated from the strictly practical problem of moving through the water.

R.H.T. And doesn't Lorenz describe submission ritual in wolves and dogs, in which the flank of the animal is presented to its enemy, as a sign of the fact that it has given up the fight?

D.C.R. Yes, he does. The whole animal world is full of ritual, and, in every case, when it is ritualised, the action is rather elaborate and formal. Ritual patterns of action are a sort of embroidery on the primary actions of fighting, eating, mating, etc. And the point from which I think we must start this discussion is that whatever else religious ritual is, it is something like these things.

J.C.H. How did the term 'ritual' get applied to this sort of ceremonious animal activity?

D.C.R. Oh, I think the term 'ritual' was taken from the terminology of religion by people who, generally speaking, considered that religious ritual was a useless activity. They therefore applied the word to apparently useless activities in animals. You see, most activity in animals is neat and economical. There are insects, for instance, which bore their holes in trees in such a way that they can get through the bark when they emerge from the chrysalis stage. Then there is concealment behaviour in many birds and animals; neat, precise, methodical. No superfluous movement. The time and motion experts who have studied many industrial processes with a view to cutting out waste movements, some of which indeed they call 'ritual'.

R.H.T. Well, I don't think the only criterion was the apparent redundancy of ritual. I think the term was taken not only because the scientists thought that religious ritual was useless, but also because they thought that this sort of behaviour was like religious ritual in being dignified and ceremonious.

D.C.R. Yes. But let's turn to human beings. All human groups seem to develop rituals, for example, as ways of symbolising and celebrating accomplishments of one kind or another, like the club dinner or the regimental dance or the victory teas at the end of the war, or the launching ceremony in a shipyard.

J.C.H. Your thesis, then, is that these human rituals and the animal rituals are the same sort of thing.

D.C.R. Yes, because they are extra actions, actions somehow set apart from practical necessary actions. But the fact that the ritual patterns of action of animals are not directly practical doesn't mean either that they are a waste of time physiologically speaking or that they are unnatural.

M.M.B. You know, I don't agree with the psychologists when they say that ritual is useless. Might it not be that the ritual form itself has got a purpose? For instance, are the animals concerned perhaps communicating with one another in some way? Or again, does the ceremonious form itself produce some physiological effect?

D.C.R. I think that either or both of your suggestions may be right. Among ethologists the opinion that ritual is useless is by no means universally held. What most people would hold is that ritual activity is natural.

M.M.B. Ah, yes, but now we come to a second very important question. The word 'ritual' was originally taken, not from courtship ritual nor from fighting ritual, but from religious ritual. It comes from the Latin 'ritus', meaning a religious custom or service. Now, if we admit with you that ritual is a universal animal activity, and that it may well be a useful activity when it accompanies actions of mating, and fighting and so on; what have we to say about the religious ritual from which the whole notion originally came? The term 'ritual' is, in its ordinary sense, a religious word, and it is to religious patterns of action, not just to any ceremonious patterns of action that it primarily refers. So that it doesn't seem to me to help the discussion at this point at all for us to bring up more and more examples of any old ceremonial action in animals and men and then to call them 'rituals'.

D.C.R. On the contrary, I feel that it is only by collecting and bringing together examples from every field of patterns of action

which have been called rituals that we shall ever be able to get more insight into what ritual behaviour really is.

J.C.H. Yes, but we must devise a criterion for finding out what it is that we are investigating. How does one normally proceed in exploring a half-factual, half-analytic subject of this kind?

R.H.T. There is no agreed method of proceeding; that's just the trouble. We are moving all the time, in this discussion, in an intellectual territory which is somewhere between science and philosophy.

M.M.B. -And which is therefore likely to be disowned by both; for the scientists will say that it is not really science, and the philosophers that it is not really philosophy.

R.H.T. I think there are two different things which can be done. The first thing to do, which is the ordinary thing, is to take either a technique or a hypothesis which has already been successfully applied in some existing field and extend it to the new field and see what it gives. This is the usual method of scientific extension. Now the point I want to make about it is this. If the new field is really closely cognate to the old field - if, that is, there really is a close analogy between the techniques which are appropriate to the old field and the ones that are appropriate to the new, this will be the method which will yield results. But if the two fields aren't very much alike - still more, of course, if they are totally unlike - then this method will not yield useful results. And, if everyone isn't careful, scientific public opinion will tend to conclude that there is no new field to be investigated. I think the work on which we are engaged constitutes an extreme case of this. For when we apply scientific method as it is used in the existing inexact sciences, - as it is used, for instance, in psychology, - to religious phenomena, we are trying to connect two very dissimilar fields; with the foreseeable result that no results are gained. For example, some psychologists have applied to such things as praying and mystical development, techniques taken from the laboratory, from experiments on the behaviour of rats, and from questionnaire investigations into social activities. The detailed results are, at best, trivial; and the general result is that the scientists in question have concluded that there is really no such thing as praying or as mystical activity. And this means not only that genuine and fruitful investigation of religious phenomena is deferred but also that the dogmatic and ascetic theologians, who know perfectly well that there is something to investigate erect their barricades and entrench themselves behind them, trying to forbid any language other than the theological language from ever being used for interpreting religious phenomena.

J.C.H. The theologians feel that an attempt is being made to make them dumb, by an attack on their language, on a subject they believe to be of supreme value not only to themselves but to everybody else as well. They think, too, that the really important things aren't going to be investigated.

M.M.B. That's all very well, but the trouble is that when theologians feel this, all serious discussion just stops. The two sides, theologians and scientists, differ too much to communicate with one another.

R.H.T. Exactly. Well now, the main point I want to make here is just this, that in such a situation quite a different sort of investigation is what's required. What you need to do is to get close to the new material, collect data about it in any way you can,

J.C.H. Then we must distinguish between the professed public purpose of human ritual and the effects upon the individuals who take part in it?

D.C.R. Yes, we must; but not only between the professed public purposes of the ritual and the effects on the participants. We must also distinguish from both of these the apparently redundant ceremonial aspect of ritual in terms of which we defined it at the outset. I want to call this aspect the celebrative aspect. And I further want to say that this celebrative aspect is always present in human ritual, though there may be great variety of professed purposes. Take, for instance, the launching ceremony in a shipyard; it isn't itself a practical kind of action, but it helps us to understand and to feel the significance of practical actions which are related to it. That is why I want to say that the group ritual celebrates the group activities; it sharpens, intensifies and in a way defines the significance of those activities. The ship has been built by a lot of men, each on a specialised job, and each man going on with his specialised job, week after week, in a routine sort of way. Interest and insight tend to diminish, as in all long-continued activities. But this insight is revived, and as it were focussed, when the ceremony of launching her is performed. Here the group is celebrating its achievement, and the ritual is related to the group's co-operative activity.

J.C.H. I think this is all much more complicated than that; suppose we consider Legal Ritual. I suppose you could say that when a Judge of Assize parades in full robes and with much pomp and ceremony first to church and then to the court of Assize for the reading of the Commission, he and those concerned with him are 'celebrating' the Majesty of the Law. But I doubt if that helps us very much. I do think, however, that this ritual has a public purpose, to impress upon the people the power of the law "-Take care - Be obedient - this is a powerful thing". It's the same in Court, there's an equally elaborate ritual there. The Judge is robed and exalted on the Bench and Counsel are thrown into the limelight in the well of the court. And the argument and so on takes place before the Jury, and there the public purpose is this, I would have thought, to see that the evidence is thoroughly tested and evaluated. All these rituals, I think, are from the public point of view successful. But what seems to me to be interesting is that constant participation in legal ritual of this kind has a marked effect on those who take part in it and this falls outside its public purpose. Judges and Counsel can become egocentric, they can also become something very like saints and yet the ritual is the same.

M.M.B. Indeed the situation is more complicated than you think. Let's go back to religious ritual. What for you is the professed purpose of religious ritual as opposed to its general celebrative aspect, and what are its psychological and physiological effects?

D.C.R. I would rather not make a sharp contrast between religious ritual and other social rituals.

M.M.B. Yes, but you see, many religious people do want to make the contrast which you say does not exist. Moreover, such people would not be at all happy or satisfied if you told them that their religious sacramental ceremonies and rituals were primarily the group celebrating itself and its achievements, and only secondarily something else which might be concerned with religion. What such people would be sure to want to say is that religious rituals are primarily activities of praying and praising God. It is only incidentally and secondarily, it would be felt, that they celebrate any special thing such as an anniversary, a triumph or a disaster, of the

group which performs them. In fact, we find certain religious groups, such as the Society of Friends, who reject all reference in their corporate worship to such particular anniversaries. But the members of these groups would certainly assert that they are praying and praising God. And they are certainly also following a ritual.

D.C.R. I admit that there are difficulties in bringing religious ritual under the theory I suggested. But if you object so fundamentally to my theory as failing to account for religious ritual to the satisfaction of religious people, I would now like to ask you in your turn to say how the religious people you've just mentioned would explain the existence of animal rituals?

M.M.B. I am all right! You see, I am prepared to speculate even more boldly than you. For I think that religious ritual, psychologically considered, is like mating ritual, eating and fighting ritual in this, that it also is a primarily physiological activity.

R.H.T. That is speculation indeed. What do you think we do, speaking physiologically, when we celebrate religious ritual?

M.M.B. I think we grow. We talked at the beginning of the physiological activities of fighting, mating and all the rest, but no one's mentioned the deepest physiological activity of all, namely that of growth or development itself.

D.C.R. But how can you say in any straightforward sense that an activity like taking part in a religious ritual can make you grow?

M.M.B. That can perfectly well be said, provided that certain qualifications are made. I don't assert that the shape or size of the mammalian skeleton is altered by taking part in religious ritual. But growth is a much wider thing than getting larger. By growth I mean development in all its forms, and there is quite a case for maintaining that in the wider and more indirect senses the activity of praying can make you grow. Of course people can take part in religious ritual in such a way that they don't grow or develop; they can also take part in it in such a way that they become distorted or stunted. But religious ritual, taken at its best, can have both a creative and a liberating effect. Moreover, this effect can also be examined as physiological.

J.C.H. I still don't see. When you say that religious ritual is primarily a physiological activity, what is it that you are trying to say?

D.C.R. Surely it doesn't make sense to suppose that there is any animal behaviour analogous to specific human religious rituals.

M.M.B. I'm not sure I agree, that is, not if we're really allowed to speculate. It seems to me that animals might have religious rituals; if "religion", that is, is here understood in a physiological sense. When we find corporate animal ritual which is apparently purposeless, such as, for instance, the corporate morning or evening howling of wolves, or the dawn chorus of birds, it doesn't seem to me totally unreasonable to say that these are, in this extended and social physiological sense, the more specifically religious rituals of animals. It seems to me that in such cases the birds or animals may be doing nothing else than just rejoicing in the light or the dark or the warmth or wind or wet. Or perhaps they are reacting to something even more fundamental of which they are more physiologically aware than we are. Nor is the idea that this might be so wholly foreign to the mystical tradition within Christianity. St. John of the Cross, who knew a good deal

about animals, says somewhere that birds and animals do indeed worship God, as men do, and that the difference is that they cannot pronounce the sacred name. You see, I don't think that you can avoid defining the religious issue in drawing your analogy between human and animal ritual. For since all human ritual derives from religious ritual and men, in performing ritual patterns, are like animals, then animals must be envisaged as very religious indeed.

D.C.R. That may be so, though most people would question it. I've no objection to supposing that the birds and animals are rejoicing, though I prefer to use the word "celebrating;" the birds may be celebrating nothing more specific than the fact of being alive.

M.M.B. I find that extraordinarily unconvincing. Does each bird "celebrate" the fact of being alive, or may the birds here be considered as a society? I think you weaken the ethological case all the time by only considering the possible effects of ritual on animals, taken individually. You very much underestimate the effect on animals, of living in society. Packs of wolves, as Lorenz has shown, form quite a highly integrated society: so do flocks of geese, and other birds. And bees and ants live in a more tightly integrated society than ever men do. So I think the same analytic scheme might well be applied to animals which have have elaborated for men: and that some animal rituals may have social purposes too.

D.C.R. Oh, I'd concede that. But I must still ask, what are physiological effects of religious ritual in men?

M.M.B. Well, as a matter of fact, ... biochemistry more than physiology is the science which would be relevant here, and anyone desiring to investigate this suggestion that I am trying to put forward should obtain all possible detailed information about the regenerative and pathological effects of endocrinal secretions. Are the pathologists right, for instance, who postulate a general stress-syndrome; a complex of symptoms, that is, which is caused by over-stimulation of the pituitary and adrenal glands, due to worry and strain, and the effect of which is to produce ascertainable physiological bad effects?

D.C.R. What exactly is the relevance of this sort of research to your hypothesis? I don't quite see the point.

M.M.B. Well, then, I'll restate my hypothesis. It is not merely that such activities as praying, fasting, and participating in rightly conducted religious ritual, can produce physiologically regenerative effects by correcting a presumed antecedent biochemical imbalance caused by the strain of modern life. It is, more fundamentally, that all religious phenomena are closely and essentially connected with the developmental processes: the prayers, and the stages of prayer, of the mystics: the penitential and ascetic practices of the saints; the corporate rules and habits of the enclosed communities, and also, - almost incidentally as it were - rightly conducted sacramental and ritual ceremonies. Now, the relevance of biochemistry to all this is that it gives us the essential hint as to the mechanism whereby this apparently assorted set of causes may produce a common effect. It shows how very highly generalised 'psychological' factors may produce apparently utterly dissimilar, specific, physiologically isolatable effects.

R.H.T. I don't think your hypothesis is inherently impossible, though it's one with very far-reaching implications, and needs to be set out in a systematic way. I expect the truth is a good deal more complex than you at present allow for. But I must say, putting the matter crudely and in commonsense terms, religion seems to me to be a great deal more likely to be connected primarily with development than

primarily with sex.

D.C.R. Yes, but now let's go back to the other question. Is it your hypothesis that the curative effects of religious practices merely tend to restore a biochemical balance, or that religious practices in a few special people initiate a further process of development which most of us don't go through?

R.H.T. The original suggestion was that you can examine human ritual and animal ritual on the basis that they bear an analogy to one another. You now suggest that there might be, speaking now metaphorically, an antecedent fundamental force making for religious behaviour, as there is one making for mating behaviour and for fighting behaviour and eating behaviour. So then it would be a primary behaviour. But now we get into a new set of difficulties. For now all the considerations which have been brought forward as applying to other forms of human social ritual must be thought of as applicable to specifically religious ritual. But what is the goal for which religious ritual must now be considered as preparatory?

M.M.B. I am pretty sure, you know, that development can be considered as a goal-directed process, with insect-metamorphosis merely as the extreme case. Subsidiary goals would then occur at stages within a total much longer process of developmental change. I think further that the solitary praying behaviour of the penitential contemplative saint can be seen pretty clearly to be a developmental activity, and also a goal-directed activity of this kind. And to get back from consideration of growth to consideration of ritual - I think this analogy might be further extended to cover the corporate behaviour of penitential contemplative saints, say in cloistered communities. And of course, this behaviour, as also the behaviour of the solitary contemplative, both contains a lot of rituals and is itself very highly ritualised.

Moreover, these religious rituals are clearly celebrative in the sense that you have defined; especially when they are concerned with redemptive sacrifice. Offering sacrifice has always been believed to be the great way of promoting growth among widely different peoples all over the world. It's universally considered, for instance, as a way of helping growth in that sacrifice helps the crops, or the tribe, or the sun or even the world to grow.

R.H.T. Let's see where we are. At present we've before us only two alternatives. The first is that religious practice is an activity of restoring balance and maintaining stability, whether in an individual person or in a group. This is, on the whole, the view of it that anthropologists take.

The other alternative is that religious behaviour is concerned with growth and development in which there are alternating stages which might perhaps be called stages of balance and unbalance. The question is, which alternative is right.

J.C.H. I'm very much inclined to accept this drive for growth as being essentially connected with religion since it seems to me that people when they first find themselves seized with an urge to pray are struggling against a kind of disintegration which they find possessing them - disintegration which seems to have no end. It seems to me that this kind of disintegration might be linked in some way to what has been described.

When this urge to pray begins to find some kind of expression then one's starting upon what could be called growth, - though I think I'm using your term 'growth' in a wider sense here - in a way that isn't adequately described in terms of balance and

unbalance, but is the start of development in the widest and deepest sense; development that seems to involve a continuing alternation of disintegrations and growths. It involves grappling with every factor of human experience and so is not an escape from life but an effort to discover what it is to be alive.

So it seems to me that you can't just talk about restoring balance on the one hand and growth on the other as though they were quite separate; for in the process of growth and development in the widest and deepest sense the question of whether or not balance has been restored will become irrelevant.

Then there's another point I want to make. Certainly, we can say I think that people in enclosed religious communities are wrestling with this problem of disintegration and growth. But I don't think this is just something that concerns advanced contemplatives but equally the more ordinary committed Christian who is risking something. He, too, I think, is likely to find himself let in for a process of disintegration and growth of this kind.

M.M.B. Yes, I agree. So long as you will admit that the disintegration and growth of the ordinary Christian will have to have outward and observable effects in the end, I don't mind you widening the hypothesis in this way. The advantage, you see, of looking at the matter this new scientific way is that it postulates the possibility of finding an objective test couched in terms of observable behaviour in order to establish the existence of any deep spiritual change. Now this prevents wishful thinking of the part of would-be saints from blurring the differences between the great saint and the ordinary man. But, of course, I also would have to admit, being a Christian, that in a certain sense we are all called to be saints, and also that there are stages in becoming a saint; stages which the normal christian person probably goes through some of, but not through the rest. What I think religious people tend far too much to think is that they can have the deep experience of disintegration and growth without these experiences at any stage causing changes in their lives or disturbances in the society in which they move. Of course it's allowed by everyone that conversion may produce moral change. But what is not allowed for, is that it may produce developmental change; what might be more generally called social creative change. This is where the saint begins to clash with his society, and also where apparently in many cases he begins to clash with the ritual of his church.

D.C.R. But I thought you were saying that ritual was itself a manifestation of development and that the saint was in the special sense we have been indicating a growing being himself. How then, on your view, could the one clash with the other? The anthropologist and the social psychologist wouldn't like that since they conceive of the ritual as something so intimately connected with the society within which it is embedded that it's nonsensical to suppose that the two could clash.

R.H.T. The saint needn't clash with the ritual. Many of the great saints haven't.

M.M.B. No. But when a saint is specially concerned with ritual, I think a clash is likely to occur, especially at first. For the ritual if it's to be really an agent of growth has not got to become too fixed and invariant though in fact it nearly always does. It's got to be able to take at need differing forms, and it may have to be the case, too, that if the moral intuitions of the society in which it is to be found improves, the ritual may have to change.

D.C.R. Oh, yes, quite! A society which once sacrificed its first-born may come to have a circumcision rite instead.

M.M.B. Exactly. Now those who consider that the function of ritual is only to maintain stability or to commemorate something always fail to account for ritual change at all. Usually, you know, it's only those who don't really believe in ritual or don't feel the force of it who feel able to change it, and then they tend to produce what the more devout people feel to be only frivolous changes. But, in contrast with this, it is one of the functions of the penitential saint, praying in both a compelled and yet in a spontaneous way, to initiate and to carry through new patterns of ritual.

R.H.T. I think you should give some examples of these new patterns of ritual.

M.M.B. Well, the Roman Catholic saint St. Margaret Mary Aloccoque spontaneously originated, as far as one knows, the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Then there's the tradition also to the effect that St. Francis of Assisi originated the devotion of the crib at Christmas. Then St. Dominic either invented or transplanted the ritual device of the rosary. And in more modern times, and in Protestant society, not Catholic, George Fox, who was himself an ecstatic contemplative certainly started the silent meetings of worship of the Society of Friends. And then, of course, and in exactly this same kind of way, Christ himself instituted the Eucharist on the evening before His death.

J.C.H. But, look here, there are immense difficulties which arise when you come to consider new rituals and ritual change. We have talked at great length about growth in several senses of the word; if we evaluate ritual simply in terms of which the people who take part in it grow or become stunted we might find ourselves participating in rituals which were promoting an aggressive or malignant kind of growth. No doubt the Nazi Storm-troopers who shouted Sieg Heil Sieg Heil in jackboots in an elaborate ritual were growing in one sense, but is this a sense in which we want to grow?

R.H.T. Quite so.

J.C.H. This is why in Christian history those who have been able to introduce new ritual changes have been precisely the penitential saints - those who have been right in the heart of the central tradition of the church and who have found themselves most deeply involved in the process of disintegration and growth to which we've referred. They were also the people who were most deeply imbued with charity, or so we think - so that charity has seemed in a sense to control the first of growth in them.

M.M.B. Yes, I agree. My development theory, you know, is an inexact scientific theory, or at least it was meant to be in the beginning, it doesn't sound quite like it now!; and therefore, like all such theories, it has no place for moral concepts. So when it comes to distinguishing the sort of mystical daemonic development you refer to from what I think we have to call growth in charity, my theory, you see, will almost inevitably break down. But I do think, just the same, that the development theory does explain some things about religious behaviour, even if it doesn't explain every thing about religious behaviour.

R.H.T. I'm not sure that your theory does entirely break down. Wouldn't it be possible to say, as I believe some of the old Chinese sages used to say, that man's nature is in origin good, that his true principle of growth, if left undisturbed, is also good; that if

he grows completely to his full stature without distortion and interference from outside, he grows, by his very nature, in sincerity, in self-renunciation, and in love?

D.C.R. In that case the saints would literally be what they are in the pictures by El Greco and the statues in Catholic churches; that is, men and women who are more than life size.

M.M.B. Yes, I suppose you could say that; on this view they'd then have to be envisaged as men and women in whom the drive of development had taken control of all the other drives; and you would have to say too that in its final stages the outward form of development could be equated with that of charity. But, you know, I think you could also say that in so far as, in the human being, growth becomes controlled by growth in charity, a new principle is somehow being injected which guides and overrules the development which would naturally occur.

D.C.R. I'm not sure when you judge the whole matter in terms of objective tests that it matters very much which of these you say.

R.H.T. I doubt whether anyone will ever be able to explain the phenomenon of charity. But, I take it, we are all agreed that what we want is growth in charity. Therefore what we want above all from corporate religious ritual is the promotion of growth in charity in the society within which it occurs.

J.C.H. Yes, and the christian case is that people who go to the Eucharist can and do become increasingly confronted by the problems of disintegration and growth which we have been talking about and by the power of charity controlling it. And that, in fact the eucharistic ritual promotes and expresses this.

M.M.B. And yet you know the christian eucharist was once seriously defined to me as the ultimate horror for creating uncharity. And I've several times wondered since whether this definition wasn't the right one.

J.C.H. Do you think then the christian ritual would be better abolished?

M.M.B. No, no, no! I think, even taking the whole matter at its lowest, that otherwise rituals might come to take its place. People might begin to sacrifice cocks at dawn, or sheep in cellars, or, in the extreme case, as Bertrand Russell has imagined in his latest book against religion, a woman philosopher might be sacrificed on the feast of Epiphany. Moreover, seen against the history of human sacrifice the christian ritual is a transformation of the possibly pre-human and certainly primitive act of sacrifice into something which can be seen as an act of charity. It says, in effect: "granted the assumption that to promote growth we have to sacrifice something previous, - the tallest son or the handsomest prisoner or the most exquisite virgin is not precious enough. The only thing that is sufficiently precious to be acceptable is the most precious thing one has, namely, one's own natural self. The sacrificer has himself to become the sacrifice".

J.C.H. 'And here we offer ourselves our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice ...'

R.H.T. Yes. Yes. But aren't we losing a sense of realism here? We've been talking, perhaps with a certain amount of vagueness, about promoting growth and charity, but would it be agreed that ritual did do this? The typical scientific reaction towards religious sacrificial ritual is one of revulsion; ritual is, religious sacrificial ritual,

assumed unquestionably not merely to be mumbo-jumbo, but worse, something tainted, unclean, something that it's morally wrong to encourage or take part in. Social psychologists say that it's obsessive, produces inflexible patterns of activity, with anxiety when it is omitted or not done just right. Certainly some anthropologists may take a more sympathetic view but most of them wouldn't care permanently to take part in the kind of rituals which they go out into the field to study and describe.

M.M.B. Or my development view, of course, the force making for religious ritual is a pre-moral force; even - as we have suggested - a pre-human force. If it's to be adapted to the purposes of a moral religion, such as, for instance, Judaism or Confucianism, it has to be moralised. If it's further to be adapted to express the proposition 'God is Charity' it has again and on top of this - if you will allow the word - to be charitised. And this purpose of charitising, and of recharitising, a ritual which has in fact come down from primitive times, is a continual struggle; for, quite apart from the fact that the songs sung and the actions performed in the ritual may be by their very nature uncharitable, the whole thing is at once so subtle, and so complicated that any shift of emphasis, or change of balance may change into something bad what was once something good. You remember just now, when you were describing legal ritual, you said that the same court ritual might coarsen some judges while it turned others, I think you said, almost into saints.

J.C.H. Yes, it does. Can you explain the fact?

M.M.B. Well, only by the wildest possible guess. The insolent judge, increasingly inflamed by the ritual, sees himself as a potentate. The humble judge remembers only that Christ was in the dock. And I think, in more specifically religious ritual, a priest can either inflame or humble himself, in an analogous way. The humble priest sees his own pride broken, and his own blood shed. The arrogant priest becomes like a star-actor, 'up-stage'. And the hardest case of all is that of the priest who desired to be humble, but who, almost in spite of himself, has become upstart. I once saw an expression of anger on the face of such an inflamed priest who, through a mistake, had to wait while the congregation finished a hymn; and it was exactly analogous to the expression I had seen on the face of a star-actor, who, by the mistake of a fellow-actor had to cut a whole page of his lines.

J.C.H. Well, then, do you think that, when a ritual is seen to be having bad effects on the people taking part in it, something should be done?

M.M.B. Yes, indeed there should be redistribution of roles. If priests are beginning to fall down and worship their own priesthood, for instance, then they must be reminded - and reminded ritually - in the ritual, that all Christians are priests. And I think we must not be afraid of actual ritual change; if it promotes charity. You see, once given charity it doesn't matter if we do make mistakes in the ritual, though people always seem to think it does.

J.C.H. 'Once given charity'. That's a very difficult condition for a group to fulfill, don't you think?

D.C.R. I think the whole of this is a very dangerous doctrine, because corporate ritual is a natural phenomenon occurring in a society which would not persist if it were not adapted to that society. You can't just weigh in and alter it as you choose.

M.M.B. Well, a few weeks ago I went to a small country church and attended an Anglican sung mass. In the middle of the church, in a wheeled chair, was a woman who could no longer walk, she had paralysed legs. When the time for communion came, two acolytes moved to each side of her, the organ played, everybody prayed for her, and the priest, who was also her husband, came with the utmost splendour and gave her communion in both kinds. Now you would say that the honouring and cherishing of that woman, and the incorporating of her into the communion ritual, of which her part was the climax, was just a natural phenomenon, a ritualisation of the honour we pay the sick in our community. But seen historically it's nothing of the kind. The primitive idea was that crippled and sick people must be ritually excluded as being blemished and tainted, unworthy. The distinctive christian idea gradually grew up then that the poor, the old, the children, the sick and the maimed, far from being the outcasts of the church, were the treasure of the church, because their weakness had brought them nearer to God: this idea both affected Christian ritual and in the end permeated society; and the result was the honour paid to a crippled woman in the mass.