TALAL ASAD

TOWARDS A GENEALOGY
OF THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL

What the symbolic action is intended to control is primarily a set of mental and moral dispositions....

Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*

I

EVERY ethnographer will probably recognize a ritual when he or she sees one, because ritual is, of course, symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behaviour of everyday life. There may be some uncertainty and disagreement over matters of explanation, but not in identifying the phenomenon as such.[1] But was this always the case? When did we, as anthropologists, begin to speak of 'ritual'? And why did we decide to speak of 'it' in the way we do now? In this paper, I try to answer these questions in a preliminary way in the hope that this will help identify some conceptual pre-conditions for our contemporary analyses of religion. I must stress that my primary concern here is not to criticize anthropological theories of ritual, still less to propose or endorse alternatives. It is to try and discover what historical shifts might have made particular concepts of ritual plausible.

I propose to begin by examining some general statements on the subject which can be found in old encyclopaedias, because they provide us with clues to the shifts that are worth investigating. I shall then enlarge, tentatively, on

1. See J. Skorupski, *Symbol and Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976.

points that emerge from this examination by referring to medieval and early modern developments. My general conclusion will be that something has happened to institutional structures and organizations of the self to make possible the concept of ritual as a special category of behaviour.

II

In the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in Edinburgh in 1771, there is a brief entry under 'ritual': 'a book directing the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies, and performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, order, or the like.'[2] In the third edition (1797) this entry is expanded to include, by analogy, a reference to pre-Christian religions:

> RITUAL, a book directing the order and manner to be observed in performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, or the like. The ancient heathens had also their rituals, which contained their rites and ceremonies to be observed in building a city, consecrating a temple or altar, in sacrificing, and deifying, in dividing the curiae, tribes, centuries, and in general, in all their religious ceremonies. There are several passages in Cato's books, *De Re Rustica*, which may give us some idea of the rituals of the ancients.

The first edition also contains an entry under 'rite': 'RITE, among divines,' it reads, 'denotes the particular manner of celebrating divine service, in this or that country.' Thus although the two terms are distinguished, they are complementary.

Both entries are repeated in successive editions up to the seventh (1852). After that, there is no entry at all for 'rite' or 'ritual' until the eleventh edition (1910), when a completely new entry appears under the latter for the first time. It is now five columns long and divided, after an introductory passage, into named subsections: 'The Magical Element in Ritual', 'The Interpretation of Ritual', 'Changes in Ritual', 'The Classification of Rites', 'Negative Rites'. This article is also supplemented by a substantial bibliography which contains references to general works by Tylor, Lang, Frazer, Robertson Smith, Hubert and Mauss, as well as ethnographic items by Spencer and Gillen and by Cushing.

The length of the 1910 entry seems to indicate that far more was now known about 'ritual' as a cultural phenomenon than was the case in the eighteenth century, but in fact what we are given here is an account of something quite new, something that the first entries did not attempt to deal with. Although many of the exemplifications are related to concerns that flow from evolutionist assumptions, the central questions which were to occupy later anthropologists are already evident. 'Ritual', we learn, is found not only

2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. iii (Edinburgh 1771), p. 553.

in Christianity or in the religions which Christianity superseded. A crucial part of every religion, 'ritual' is now regarded as a type of routine behaviour which symbolizes or expresses something and, as such, relates differentially to individual consciousness and social organization.

The routine, repetitive character of ritual is firmly linked in the 1910 entry to psychological and sociological functions:

> ritual is to religion what habit is to life, and its *rationale* is similar, namely that by bringing subordinate functions under an effortless rule it permits undivided attention in regard to vital issues.... Just as the main business of habit is to secure bodily equilibrium...so the chief task of routine in religion is to organize the activities necessary to its stability and continuance as a social institution.

But given its essentially *symbolic* character, ritual is not confined to religion. The concept presented in 1910 allows that symbolic action is an integral part of ordinary life because it is essential to any system of interlocking social roles, and therefore also to the social structure as a whole:

> In order that inter-subjective relations should be maintained between fellow-worshippers, the use of one or another set of conventional symbols is absolutely required; for example, an intelligible vocabulary of meet expressions, or (since this is, perhaps, not indispensable) at any rate sounds, sights, actions, and so on, that have come by prescription to signify the common purpose of the religious society, and the means taken in common for the realization of that purpose. In this sense, the term 'ritual', as meaning the prescribed ceremonial routine, is also extended to observances not strictly religious in character.

This emphasis on 'ritual' as symbolic behaviour is entirely modern, although some other notions are not. Perhaps the most important difference between the concept of ritual presented here and that found in later anthropological writings hinges on the fact that more sophisticated theories of interpretation are employed in the latter. But both share the idea that ritual is to be conceived essentially in terms of symbolic behaviour—a type of activity to be classified separately from practical, i.e. technically effective, behaviour. And it is this idea that the earliest entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lacks—or at any rate does not make explicit. There is, however, another idea which is central to the 1771 entry and which becomes marginalized in the 1910 version. This is the conception of ritual as a book.

The conception of ritual as *a book* directing the way rites should be performed is very much older than the eighteenth century. Rituals appeared as separate books as early as the ninth century, though only in monasteries.[3] And, of course, the term 'ritual' continues to be used in certain circles to denote prayer-manuals even today. But now it has been displaced, in the normal vocabulary of most non-religious people, by the modern conception of ritual as prescribed symbolic *action*. As such, 'ritual' becomes virtually synonymous with 'rite', which may help to explain why the later editions of the

3. G. J. Sigler, 'Ritual, Roman', in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. xii (New York etc.: McGraw-Hill 1967).

Encyclopaedia Britannica do not have separate entries for 'rite' and 'ritual' as the earliest ones do.[4]

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'ritual' entered English as a substantive in the middle of the seventeenth century, when it conveyed the sense either of the prescribed order of performing religious services or of the book containing such prescriptions. By then, in 1614 to be precise, the Catholic Church had produced the first authorized version of the Roman Ritual.[5] It is only in the latter part of the nineteenth century that 'ritual' comes to signify the actual performance of certain kinds of acts.[6] These changes in linguistic usage parallel the conceptual reorganization of 'rite' and 'ritual' recorded in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

This shift in the usage of 'ritual' from what is literally *a script* (including texts to be uttered and instructions on how and by whom, as well as on the accompanying actions, etc.) to 'symbolic' *behaviour,* which is *likened* to a text, is connected with other historical changes. Among these is the nineteenth-century view that ritual is more primitive than myth—a view which neatly historicizes and secularizes the Reformation doctrine that correct belief must be more highly valued than correct ritual form.[7] Thus, the 1910 entry states:

> A valuable truth insisted on by the late W. Robertson Smith…is that in primitive religion it is ritual that generates and sustains myth, and not the other way about. Sacred lore of course cannot be dispensed with; even Australian society, which has hardly reached the stage of having priests, needs its *Oknirabata* or 'great instructor'…. The function of such an expert, however, is chiefly to hand on mere rules for the performance of religious acts. If his lore include sacred histories, it is largely, we may suspect, because the description and dramatization of the doings of divine persons enter into ritual as a means of magical control. Similarly, the sacred books of the religions of middle grade teem with minute prescriptions as to ritual, but are almost destitute of doctrine. Even in the highest religions, where orthodoxy is a main requirement, and ritual is held merely to symbolize dogma, there is a remarkable rigidity about the dogma that is doubtless in large part due to its association with ritual forms many of them bearing the most primeval stamp. As regards the symbolic interpretation of ritual, this is usually held not to be primitive; and it is doubtless true that an unreflective age is hardly aware of the differences between 'outward sign' and 'inward meaning', and thinks as it were by means of its eyes.

The semantic distinction between 'outward sign' and 'inward meaning' is an ancient one and has been drawn on by Christian reformers throughout the

4.   And why anthropologists commonly employ the words 'rite' and 'ritual' interchangeably. For a recent example, see J. S. La Fontaine, *Initiation: Ritual Drama and Secret Knowledge Across the World,* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985.

5.   F. L. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* London: Oxford University Press 1974 (2nd edn.), p. 1189.

6.   *OED,* p. 716.

7.   It was Robertson Smith's interest in biblical exegesis that gave modern anthropology its first comprehensive theory of ritual, as Franz Steiner points out in *Taboo,* London: Cohen and West 1956.

ages. As the logical pre-condition of what Nietzsche called 'the will to truth'—that is, of the claim to have penetrated through some formal appearance to the essential reality within—this distinction is central to theological discourse. But not only to theological discourse, for the claim that the unsophisticated who employ 'outward signs' in formal behaviour and speech do not understand the entire meaning being signified or expressed has served as an important principle of anthropological interpretation, although few anthropologists today would endorse the precise formulation of the final sentence in the extract quoted above.

The 1910 article does include a reference to indigenous experts who specify procedures for the proper conduct of rites, but this matter is brushed aside as being of little interest: 'The function of such an expert, however, is chiefly to hand on mere rules for the performance of religious acts.' What now preoccupies the writer of the entry under 'ritual' is its symbolic character, the meanings to be attached to it and the fact that it is a universal phenomenon. Some later anthropologists were to trace these meanings to magical attempts at dealing with the natural environment (e.g. Malinowski) or to effects which maintained the continuity of social structures (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown); yet others to cultural categories by which messages are communicated (e.g. Leach) or to religious experiences which transcend cultural categories and social structures (e.g. Turner). But all of them regard 'ritual' essentially as a species of representational behaviour, present in every culture and identifiable by the ethnographer prior to its meaning and effect being determined.[8]

The idea that symbols need to be decoded is not, of course, new, but I think it plays a new role in the restructured concept of ritual that anthropology has appropriated from theology and developed. For by this idea anthropologists have incorporated a theological preoccupation into an avowedly secular intellectual task—that is, the preoccupation of establishing authoritatively the meanings of *representations* where the explanations offered by indigenous discourses are considered ethnographically inadequate or incomplete. In the case of Christianity, it is the Church that embodies the authority to interpret the meanings of scriptural representations, although that authority is variously exercised according to whether the Church is more elitist or more populist. In societies which lack the notion of authoritative exegesis, the problem of

8.   In a recent survey of anthropological studies on ritual in Melanesia, R. Wagner ('Ritual as Communication: Order, Meaning, and Secrecy in Melanesian Initiation Rites', *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. XIII (1984), pp. 143–55, at p. 143) writes: 'If ritual is, in its usual definition, what Mary Douglas calls a 'restricted code'…then the anthropologist's job is to decipher it. But *what* is encoded and why? And what is the nature of the code and why is it formulated in that way? These questions bear upon the relational role of ritual within the subject-culture, what it *does* as communication, regulation, or whatever.'

In this way, the notion of ritual aims to unify an enormous variety of culturally constituted events. But because 'elaborated and restricted codes' are mutually dependent in every communicative event, and because each type of communicative event presupposes a distinctive arrangement of meaning, feeling-tone, mode and effectivity, and presupposes too a historically constituted self which speaks, hears and *does* things with signs, the notion of ritual as coded action is at once too narrow and too undiscriminating.

interpreting 'symbolic actions' is quite different. The most important difference relates not to greater uncertainty in the interpretation of symbols in such societies, but to the fact that things have first to be construed as 'symbolic' before they become candidates for interpretation, and in fieldwork situations it is the ethnographer who identifies and classifies 'symbols',[9] even where he or she then draws on the help of indigenous exegetes to interpret them.[10]

In this anthropological concept of ritual, an idea belonging to pre-modern Christian traditions (especially monasticism) is now absent. This idea has to do with the shift in sense from a script (a text to be *read and performed*) to an action (a social fact to be *observed and inscribed*), and we can describe it as follows. If there are prescribed ways of performing liturgical services, then we can assume that there exists the requirement *to master the performance of services properly*. Ritual as a prescription is directed at the apt performance of rites, something which depends on intellectual and practical disciplines but does not itself require 'decoding'. In other words, apt performance involves *abilities* to be acquired, not *symbols* to be interpreted: it presupposes not special meanings or

9. A. Gell, in his analysis of the *ida* ritual among the Umedas of New Guinea (*Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society, Language and Ritual*, London: Athlone Press 1975, p. 211), states: 'Among my Umeda informants I found none willing to discuss the meaning of their symbols— to discuss their symbols *as* symbols "standing for" some other thing or idea, rather than as concrete things-in-themselves. In fact I found it impossible to even pose the question of meaning in Umeda, since I could not discover any corresponding Umeda word for English "mean", "stand for" etc. Questions about symbols were taken by Umedas as questions about the *identity* rather than the *meaning* of a symbol: "what is it?" not "what does it mean?" '

For Gell this situation is no bar to symbolic analysis, because he can claim to present an 'observer's construct' whose validity is 'external' rather than internal. But his discreet allusions to psychoanalytic method provoke the following doubt: what can the validation of 'meanings' be in a situation where the ethnographer takes the part both of *analysand*, by putting visual images in words, and of *analyst*, by organizing these descriptive words into a coherent 'symbolic' narrative in which *certain things stand for others*? For an illuminating discussion of the difficulties of securing symbolic interpretations in psychoanalysis, see D. P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, New York: Norton 1982.

10. Dan Sperber (*Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975, p. 112) attempts to overcome the difference I refer to by arguing that symbolism be defined in cognitive rather than communicative terms: 'Symbolicity is therefore not a property either of objects, or of acts or of utterances, but of conceptual representations that describe or interpret them. Theoretical approaches that would look in objects, acts, or utterances for the properties constitutive of symbolism must be bound to fail. By contrast, an adequate theory of symbolism will describe the properties which a conceptual representation must possess to be the object of a putting in quotes and of a symbolic treatment.'

His overall argument employs distinctions between types of knowledge—e.g. 'semantic' as against 'encyclopaedic' knowledge—which recall the old distinction between analytic and synthetic statements (subverted in W. O. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', in his *From a Logical Point of View*, New York: Harvard University Press 1961 [1953]). 'Symbolic knowledge', we are told, has to do with the way 'encyclopaedic knowledge' is organized, so that some statements (e.g. about mime) will be interpreted in a metaphorical sense, and others (e.g. about sacrifice) in a metaphysical one. It should be noted that, like other modern theorists, Sperber's preoccupation is with *propositional* knowledge (knowing that), not with *practical* knowledge (knowing how). And *propositional* knowledge (e.g. in theology, science, or law) invariably raises questions of authoritative interpretation.

rules, nor even particular kinds of experience, but the formation of bodily and linguistic abilities.[11] Apt performance presupposes a programme, and a model of excellence which is part of the programme.

We know that 'rites' in the Christian tradition had to do with 'prayer' and 'worship', but in what sense did that fact render them essentially *symbolic?* The medieval Christian prayed to his or her God in ways that were no more symbolic than the medieval vassal addressing his suzerain. That there were appropriate and inappropriate ways of doing either is true enough—but it is also true of other culturally defined modes of address, and indeed of all conventional usages of language. Rites were, first and foremost, proper ways of doing certain things (see 'Ritus' in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*). As such they were activities which partly defined Christian roles and which were central to conceptions of a Christian life. How a Christian was to perform his or her role included the appropriate performance of rites, not only as things to be done aptly at pre-defined times and places, but in relation to the idea of a total life in which the self *develops* in a distinctive way.[12] The proper learning of how to do something, rather than the symbolic meaning of what is done, is central to the older notion of rite.

Given the shifts to which I have drawn attention, it may be worth considering the possibility that historical changes in Western conceptions of the self and of practices relating to its development have contributed to the emergence of the idea that ritual is essentially symbolic action. Perhaps this suggestion can be clarified by a brief contrast of medieval Christian conceptions and practices with modern ones.

III

In the early Middle Ages, the *Rule of St Benedict* became established as virtually the sole programme for the proper government of a monastic community and the Christian formation of its members.[13] 'We are about to open', states a famous sentence in the Prologue to the *Rule*, 'a school for God's service, in which we hope nothing harsh or oppressive will be directed.' Although most Christians in feudal society lived outside monastic organizations, the disciplined formation of the Christian self was possible only within such communities. The ordered life of the monks was defined by various tasks, the most important of which was the singing of divine services (*Opus Dei*). Because the monk's day was intended to be organized around the routine performance

11. It is worth noting that Steiner (*Taboo*, p. 79) was clearer than many subsequent anthropologists that 'meanings' of rites are a property of what he called 'texts' (verbal accounts) and not of acts or things in themselves.

12. See A. Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth 1981.

13. C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, London: Longman 1984.

of the liturgy,[14] the *Rule* is often as specific about the content and timing of the services to be sung as it is about other matters. It is striking that in the *Rule*, the proper performance of the liturgy is regarded not only as integral to the ascetic life, but as one of the 'instruments' of the monk's 'spiritual craft' which he must acquire by practice (see ch. 4, 'The Instruments of Good Works'). The liturgy is not a species of symbolic action to be classified separately from activities defined as technical, but a practice among others essential to the acquisition of Christian virtues. In other words, the liturgy can be isolated only *conceptually*, for pedagogic reasons, not *in practice*, from the entire monastic programme.

While it is true to say that the monastic programme was conceived in terms of distinctive metaphors—a school for the Lord's service (*dominici schola servitii*), a second baptism (*paenitentia secunda*)—this can only mean that practices were to be organized by such metaphors. The metaphors were intrinsic to an inscribed programme, to the language of prescription, exhortation, exegesis and demonstration, not to individual gestures in themselves.[15] In the *Rule* all prescribed practices, whether they had to do with the proper ways of eating, sleeping, working and praying, or with proper moral dispositions and spiritual aptitudes, are aimed at developing *virtues* which are put 'to the service of God'.

The learning of virtues according to the medieval monastic programme (which, though based on the *Rule*, included other textual and oral traditions) took place primarily by means of imitation. The idea of following a model seems to have become especially important in the many religious organizations which proliferated during the High Middle Ages,[16] but it was always central to the Benedictine programme which aimed at the development of Christian virtues.

The virtues were thus formed by developing the ability to behave in accordance with saintly exemplars. Acquiring this ability was a teleological process. Each thing to be done was not only to be done aptly in itself, but done in order to make the self approximate more and more to a pre-defined model of excellence. The things prescribed, including liturgical services, had a place in the overall scheme of training the Christian self. In this conception, there could be no radical break between 'outer behaviour' and 'inner motive', between 'social rituals' and 'individual sentiments', between activities that are 'expressive' and those that are 'technical'.

For example, the copying of manuscripts, which occupied generations of monks, was a formally recognized type of asceticism.

14. D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1963 (2nd edn.), pp. 448–71.

15. I am here drawing attention not to the experiential priority of bodily movements in relation to words and symbols, as, for example, M. Jackson does ('Knowledge of the Body', *Man* n.s., Vol. XVII, no. 2 (1983), pp. 327–45), but to the teleological character of *learning to be capable*. The logical irrelevance of mental representations to the concept of skilled performance (whether physical or verbal) is argued out in J. Searle, *Intentionality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985.

16. C. W. Bynum, 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. XXXI, no.1 (1980), pp. 1–17.

Deciphering from an often poorly preserved manuscript [writes an ecclesiastical historian] a text which was often long and badly written and *reproducing it correctly* constituted a task which, however noble it was, was also hard and therefore meritorious, and medieval scribes have taken pains to inform us of this fact: the whole body is concentrated on the work of the fingers, and constant and precise attention must be exercised.

Monks described this labour of transcribing manuscripts as being 'like prayer and fasting, a means for correcting one's unruly passions'.[17] In this sense the technical art of calligraphy was, like the liturgy, one part of a monastic programme and therefore 'expressive' like divine service, 'a rite' like any act of penance.

It is precisely through the concept of a disciplinary programme that 'outer behaviour' and 'inner motive' were connected. This can be seen most clearly in the case of the sacrament of confession, so central to monastic life and developed by the monks in the form that was later extended to Christians at large.[18] But that connection was sought in everything which the programme prescribed. A remarkable example, much written about in monastic literature, was the cultivation of 'tears of desire for Heaven':[19] because the compunction for one's sins had to accompany the desire for virtue, the ability to weep became the sign at once of the genuineness of that compunction and of the progress attained by that desire.[20] In this way, emotions, which are often regarded by anthropologists as 'inner', 'contingent' events, could be progressively organized by increasingly apt performance of conventional behaviour.

Of course, medieval monks knew, as everyone knows, that signs of virtue could be displayed or read when that virtue was lacking. But that did not mean that they regarded 'external' behaviour as detachable from an 'essential' self. On the contrary, the presence of hypocrisy, like self-deception, indicated that the learning process was incomplete—or, more drastically, that it had failed. However, the converse, that of *not* displaying signs of virtue even when one possessed it, was itself recommended as a means of acquiring the highest virtue of all: humility.[21]

17. J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, New York: Fordham University Press 1974 (2nd edn.), pp. 153–4.

18. See Talal Asad, 'Notes on Body Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual', *Economy and Society*, Vol. XII, no.3 (1983), pp. 287–327.

19. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 72–3.

20. W. A. Christian Jr., 'Provoked Religious Weeping in Early Modern Spain', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, London and New York: Academic Press 1982 (ASA Monographs, no. 21), describes comparable phenomena for sixteenth-century Spain.

21. Thus in a discourse on the imitation of the saints, Hugh of St Victor resorts to the favourite monastic metaphor of the seal: 'For the figure which is raised in the seal, when imprinted appears concave in the impression in the wax, and that which appears sculptured inward in the seal is shown to be shaped convexly in the wax. Therefore what else is indicated for us in this, except that we, who desire to be reformed through the example of the good as if by a certain seal which is very well sculptured out, discover in them certain lofty vestiges of works like projections and certain humble ones like depressions.... Therefore what in them projects, in us ought to be impressed

IV

I want to stress again that I am not aiming at a history of manners, but trying to draw out some contrasts in concepts of *apt* utterance and behaviour in relation to moral structures of the self.

When the display of 'proper' behaviour is disconnected from the formation of a virtuous self and acquires the status of a *tactic*, it becomes the object of a different kind of theorizing—a meditation not on virtue but on power. But behaviour needs to be *seen* as representation which is conceptually detachable from what it represents before it can invite readings in a game of power, a game in which the 'true' self is masked by its representations, and where this is *aptly* done.

A fascinating early modern attempt to conceptualize the role of representational behaviour in the field of power is Bacon's 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation'. Bacon's world is, of course, more fluid and individualistic in comparison not only with the monastic community but with medieval society outside it. It is a world that encourages a double fragmentation—in individual roles and in social arenas—which was to emerge more clearly in later centuries with the development of bourgeois society.[22]

Bacon's essay is interesting because it takes for granted the possibility of analysing *individuated acts of representation*. And it does this first in distinguishing three degrees of masking: secrecy, dissimulation, and simulation.

> Therefore set it downe; *That an Habit of Secrecy, is both Politick, and Morall.* And this Part, it is good, that a Mans Face, give his Tongue, leaue to speak. For the Discouery, of a Mans Selfe, by the Tracts of his Countenance, is a great Weaknesse, and Betraying; By how much, it is many times, more marked and beleeued, then a Mans words.

But secrecy cannot be maintained without a form of behaviour which protects the truth by misrepresenting it. 'It followeth many times vpon *Secrecy*, by a necessity; So that, he that will be *Secret*, must be a *Dissembler*, in some degree.' Now while dissimulation is the 'negative' form of misrepresentation, that is, pretending not to be what one is (feigning innocence), simulation is the 'affirmative' form—appearing to be what one is not (impersonating). Both involve 'playing a part' in a drama of power, but the former is viewed as *defensive*, and the latter as *offensive*. The text therefore cautions against excessive resort to simulation on prudential grounds: 'But for the third Degree, which is *Simulation*, and false Profession; That I hold more culpable, and lesse politicke; except it be in great and rare Matters.'[23] Representational behaviour is theorized for a self confronting potential opponents and allies. Bacon's text enumerates the uses and dangers of these tactics and balances the demands of

traditional morality with those of an uncertain social world. To the extent that precise calculation is impossible in the courtly world for which Bacon writes, the political effectiveness of conventional behaviour requires the devising of *strategies*, not the imitation of *models* or the following of *rules*. It is only here, in the hidden exercise of strategic power, that 'symbolic' behaviour becomes what I think one may now call ideological.

Thus in this early modern world, the moral economy of the upper-class self was constructed very differently from the way prescribed in the medieval monastic programme. Created and recreated through dramas of manipulative power, at once political and personal, the self depended now on the maintenance of moral distance between public forms of behaviour and private thoughts and feelings.[24] The dramas of power described by historians of the Renaissance were made possible by a sharp tension between the inner self and the outer person. But they were the product too of a radical transformation of appropriate behaviour into *representations* and of skill in manipulating representations, increasingly abstracted from the idea of a disciplinary programme for forming the self. These changes were eventually to have a profound effect on the concept and practice of Christian rites in an increasingly de-Christianized world.

I am not suggesting, of course, that representational behaviour was involved only in political strategies. In the Renaissance the masque, for example, was regarded as representational and morally educative at one and the same time. Thus Sir Thomas Elyot, in *The Book Named the Governour* (1531), writes of dancing in general:

> Now because there is no pastime to be compared to that, wherein may be found both recreation and meditation of virtue; I have among all honest pastimes, wherein is exercise of the body, noted dancing to be of an excellent utility, comprehending in it wonderful figures (which the Greeks do call Idea) of virtues and noble qualities, and especially of the commodious virtue called prudence, which Tulley defineth to be the knowledge of things, which ought to be followed; and also of them which ought to be fled from and eschewed.[25]

Such a conception of the formal dance, by which edifying images are presented and moral dispositions cultivated, is close to the older conception of the liturgy as part of the communal programme for developing Christian virtues—even if the highest virtue envisaged now is 'prudence', not 'humility', and even if the cultivation of virtues is increasingly pushed into the margins of serious life ('pastime') or at most into a preparatory segment of it ('education'). It is no accident that these and other comments by Elyot on formal dancing appear in a book devoted to the education of gentlemen. But my point here is simply that when conventional behaviour is seen as being essentially representational *and*

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within; and what in them is depressed, is to be erected in us, because we when we take their deeds for imitation ought to make the lofty things hidden and the humble ones manifest' (quoted in Bynum, 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?', p. 10).

22. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, p. 190.

23. F. Bacon, *Essays*, London: Oxford University Press 1937 [1597], pp. 24–5.

24. S. Greenblatt (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1980, p. 163) notes that 'dissimulation and feigning are an important part of the instruction given by almost every [Renaissance] court manual'.

25. Quoted in J. C. Meagher, 'The Drama and the Masques of Ben Jonson', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, Vol. XXV (1962), p. 273.

essentially independent of the self, the possibility is opened up of deploying it in games of power. The Renaissance masque, for all its concern with power, was a calculated display of royal authority in which the king and all his courtiers participated.[26] But that display was in the nature of a self-assertion, not of a simulation.[27] Unlike the representations discussed by Bacon, the masque presents no more than itself. In it power may be celebrated, but is not thereby secured.

V

In the medieval monastic setting, the cultivation of moral dispositions required the formation of a proper attitude—at once physical and psychological—which from the twelfth century onward was designated by the Latin word *gestus*. In that century, Hugh of St Victor, a regular canon, wrote a treatise for the instruction of novices which contains the first coherent theory of gesture since antiquity. According to Hugh,

> the novitiate is the road to beatitude: virtue leads to the latter, but it is discipline imposed on the body which forms virtue. Body and spirit are but one: disordered movements of the former betray outwardly (*foris*) the disarranged interior (*intus*) of the soul. But 'discipline' can act on the soul through the body—in ways of dressing (*in habitu*), in posture and movement (*in gestu*), in speech (*in locutione*), and in table manners (*in mensa*).
>
> 'Gesture is the movement and configuration of the body appropriate to all action and attitude.'...*Gestus* designates not so much a unique gesture as the animation of the body in all its parts. It describes outwardly a figure presented to the gaze of others...even as the soul inside is under the gaze of God.[28]

Although gesture in this sense has its own end, Hugh maintains that it should conform to the measure that discipline imposes on it. Disciplined gesture is thus not merely a 'technique of the body' varying from one culture or historical period to another, as Mauss reminded anthropologists, it is also the proper organization of the soul—of understanding and feeling, desire and the will. Thus in addition to relating the outer self to the inner, this conception of *gestus* brings together what later centuries were to separate sharply: cognition and affect. For *gestus* is the disposition of an entire structure of thought, feeling and behaviour which must be properly learnt and controlled.

How did modern anthropology arrive at the distinction between 'feelings' as private and ineffable and 'ritual' as public and legible? That the two are to

26. H. Cooper, 'Location and Meaning in Masque, Morality and Royal Entertainment', in D. Lindley (ed.), *The Court Masque*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984.

27. S. Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theatre in the English Renaissance*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1975, pp. 59–60.

28. J. C. Schmitt, 'Le Geste, la cathédrale et le roi', *L'Arc*, Vol. LXXII (1978), pp. 9–10.

be opposed has long been the dominant assumption in the study of ritual in modern anthropology, although there are some indications that this may be changing.[29]

Several decades ago, Hocart spelt out at length the idea that ritual and emotion are mutually antipathetic, that ritual is an 'intellectual construction that is liable to be broken up by emotion'.[30] In his case this idea fitted neatly into the Gibbonian view of enthusiastic religion, the emotional Christianity of classes who are difficult to govern, as opposed to the polite, orderly, ceremonial Christianity favoured by Enlightenment rulers. 'We have seen', he wrote, 'that it is chiefly in the lower classes that emotion lets itself go, and breaks up the [ritual] structure. We have also had reason to believe that these popular movements can spread through a society and simplify the whole religion.'[31]

Some time later Evans-Pritchard expressed the orthodox position of British social anthropologists as follows:

> Only chaos would result were anthropologists to classify social phenomena by emotions which are supposed to accompany them, for such emotional states, if present at all, must vary not only from individual to individual, but also in the same individual on different occasions and even at different points in the same rite.[32]

In this and other such formulations, the distinction is apparent between the contingency of individual experience and the systematic character of language. The conception of ritual as a language by which 'private' things become 'publicly' accessible because they can be represented is a familiar enough notion. Here is another, more recent, anthropologist:

> Now, if for the purposes of exposition we draw a crude distinction between 'ordinary' communicational behaviour and 'ritual' behaviour (accepting of course that both kinds are equally subject to cultural conventions), then we could say (forgetting the problem of insincerity and lying) that ordinary acts 'express' attitudes and feelings directly (e.g. crying denotes distress in our society) and 'communicate' that information to interacting persons (e.g. the person crying wishes to convey to another his feeling of distress). But ritualized, conventionalized, stereotyped behaviour is constructed in order to express and communicate, and is publicly construed as expressing and communicating, certain attitudes congenial to an ongoing institutionalized intercourse. Stereotyped conventions in this sense act at a second or further remove; they code not intentions but 'simulations' of intentions. People can act meaningfully in stereotyped ways because they have 'learned to learn' in Bateson's sense of deutero-learning, and

29. For example, S. Heald, 'The Ritual Use of Violence', in D. Riches (ed.), *The Anthropology of Violence*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1986. This change is connected with a growing recognition that the language of emotions is intrinsic to their formation: see R. Harré, *The Social Construction of the Emotions*, Oxford: Blackwell 1986.

30. A. M. Hocart, 'Ritual and Emotion', in his *The Life-Giving Myth* (ed. Lord Raglan), London: Methuen 1952, p. 61.

31. Ibid., p. 65.

32. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1965, p. 44.

because the enactment of ritual is the guarantee of social communication. Thus *distancing* is the other side of the coin of conventionality; distancing separates the private emotions of the actors from their commitment to a public morality.[33]

There are, of course, cultural repertoires which can be brought into play only where a conceptual disjunction exists between the essential self and the means by which that self represents its feelings, intentions and responses to others. But perhaps in such cases the distinction between 'ordinary' communicational behaviour and 'ritual' behaviour may be less momentous than we suppose, since the guiding principle of behaviour in both situations will be prudence— including the prudence of committing oneself publicly to a public morality.

VI

I hope that at least some of the differences will now be evident between the conception of rites prescribed in the communal Christian programme of the Middle Ages, and the conception of symbolic behaviour in societies where disciplined forms of speech and gesture are no longer regarded as indispensable to the formation of moral structures, but are regarded as essential for communicating 'a commitment to public morality'. For it is in the latter context, when some particular piece of observed behaviour calls for some account of what it might signify, when it invites the observer to discover what truth lies hidden *behind* the signifying act, apart from an apparent commitment, that we can call it representational. Clearly, there is a fundamental disparity between a 'ritual' which is used to organize practices aimed at the full development of the monastic self and a 'ritual' which offers a *reading* of an individual intention or a social institution. We may speculate on the ways in which the increasing marginality of religious discipline in industrial capitalist society may have reinforced the latter concept. But at any rate it seems that some contemporary Christian circles regard it with favour. Thus a recent book by a theologian entitled *From Magic To Metaphor: A Validation of the Christian Sacraments* draws heavily on modern anthropological work. Christian ritual, it argues, is essentially not instrumental, but symbolic:

> Any rebuttal to our theological contentions must also critique the findings of psychology, sociology, and anthropology which support our theological convictions. The lines of convergence between a behavioural and a theological understanding of ritual's operation and meaning are too strong to dismiss one without the other....
>
> Ritual is a medium or vehicle for communicating or sustaining a particular culture's root metaphor, which is the focal point and permeating undercurrent for its world view. Through ritual's operation, life's binary oppositions are

33. S. J. Tambiah, 'A Performative Approach to Ritual', in *Proceedings of the British Academy, 1979*, Vol. LXV (1981), pp. 113–69, at p. 124.

contextualized within a culture's metaphor and 'resolved' into positive meaning for a culture's individual members and the social unit as a whole.... A people's ritual is a code for understanding their interpretation of life.

Christian sacraments exhibit all the characteristics of ritual in general. They are normal and necessary for Christian culture. They are the medium or vehicle through which the Christian root metaphor of Christ's death-resurrection is expressed and mobilized to 'positively' resolve the binary oppositions of life.[34]

This idea of the sacraments as metaphors inhabits an entirely different world from the one that gives sense to Hugh of St Victor's theology: 'Sacraments', he states, 'are known to have been instituted for three reasons: on account of humiliation, on account of instruction, on account of exercise.'[35] According to this latter conception, the sacraments are not metaphors; they are parts of a Christian programme for creating in its performers, by means of regulated practice, the 'mental and moral dispositions' appropriate to Christian subjects. In modern society, where Christians adopt a wide range of moral positions and live lives that are not clearly differentiated from those of non-Christians, it is perhaps understandable that rites should become 'symbolic' occasions. For symbols, as I said, call for interpretation, and even as interpretative criteria are extended, so interpretations can be multiplied. Disciplinary practices, on the other hand, cannot be varied quite so easily, because learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same thing as learning to invent representations.

This leads me to venture this final question: is it possible that the transformation of rites from discipline into symbol, from practising distinctive virtues into representing by means of practices, has been one of the pre-conditions for the larger conceptual transformation of culture into readable text?

34. G. S. Worgul, *From Magic to Metaphor: A Validation of the Christian Sacraments*, New York: Paulist Press 1980, p. 224.

35. Hugh of St Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith* (transl. R. J. Deferrari), Cambridge, Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America 1951 [1134], p. 156. I have dealt with Hugh's conception of rite at length in 'On Ritual and Discipline in Medieval Christian Monasticism', *Economy and Society*, Vol. XVI, no. 2 (1987), pp. 159–203.