

certain of ever finding out what is true.

What separates different Christian denominations is not the Bible, but the differing interpretations of the Bible—in other words the differing traditions. For this reason it would be an illusion to start thinking that the Bible could bring us together again; only when our traditions draw closer together can we agree about the Bible. In effect this means that only the Holy Spirit of God, who gives us an understanding of the Bible, can open our eyes so that we can together understand the Bible. Exegesis by itself cannot unite us, only God can do that.

The Nature of Christian Worship

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Men of all ages and of every civilization have felt the need to offer worship to the being or beings on whom they acknowledge dependence. Their worship usually takes the form of animal sacrifices, the offering of food and drink and sacred meals, all of which are accompanied by dances, hymns and prayers, and regulated by the observance of sacred seasons and holidays. This is the pattern of what we call religion. It is the way in which man responds to the idea of the 'sacred', to the terrifying appeal of that awful otherness of the being he believes to govern his existence. From the anthropologist's point of view Christian worship, in spite of all its distinctive traits, is one more manifestation of general religious behaviour. There is no need for believing Christians to run away from such a point of view. In spite of divine revelation and in spite of the institution of Christ, our habits of worship remain very human phenomena. In an age where the reasonableness of religious behaviour is widely challenged and rejected, it would be very foolish for Christians to forget this fact.

Sacrifice plays a central role in many religions. Comparative study shows that behind the practice of sacrifice there lies the idea of two distinct orders: the sacred and the profane. The first is characterized by its holiness or awe-inspiring difference from the sphere with which man

is familiar, and by its immunity from all the limitations of that sphere. Through the practice of sacrifice man displays a desire to bridge the separating gap, to enter into communion with this otherness and share in some way the power of the divinity. St Augustine in the fifth century very rightly defines it as a work performed so that we may be joined to God in a holy society (*De Civitate Dei* X, 6).

In the Old Testament God commanded his people to offer him a worship similar to the worship of the peoples round about them, but purified from any false idea that sacrifice was a magic act which provided in itself an entry to communion with the divine, a means by which man could appease God's wrath and bend the divine power to serve his own purposes. Again and again through his prophets, God told his people that he had no need of their offerings or their sacrifices, their dances or their hymns; what he wanted of them was that they should believe in his existence and acknowledge him as their creator, repent of their sins and keep his commandments. He ordained an elaborate ritual of sacrifices because that was the most natural way for them to express their worship. For the Israelites, however, ritual was subordinated to the interior dispositions of the heart; if these were evil no sacrifice, no festival, no prayers were of value in the sight of Jahveh (Isaiah 1.10-17; cf. Hosea, 6.6; Amos 5.24; Ps. 40.7 ff.; 50. 15-23).

An examination of Israelite sacrifice reveals the following elements in it. Man takes an offering from his crops or his herds, from what is most precious to him and on which his subsistence depends. He destroys it, immolates it so that it can no longer be of any use to him, thus putting an end to its existence in the profane world. Then he gives it to God, making it pass into the divine sphere. If it is an animal he takes the blood which contains the life of the victim and smears it on the horns of the altar, which are a symbol of God's presence. Sometimes the blood is sprinkled against the door of the sanctuary where Jahveh dwells in the midst of his people and once in the year, on the day of atonement, it is taken within the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the throne of the propitiatory, in this being brought as near to the divine presence as possible. Significantly 'to bring near' is the root meaning of the most frequent Hebrew word for sacrifice. Food offerings were 'brought near' by being placed upon the altar. All that has been brought near is holy: it has ceased to be of this world and belongs to the realm of the 'other'.

This ritual expresses the conviction that all things belong to God and the hope that, if a part is ritually given back to the creator, man may safely continue to use the rest for himself. More important, however, is

the idea that if God accepts the sacrifice he receives into his friendship the one who offers it, freely contracting an obligation towards him and establishing a covenant. In accepting the gift God pardons the sin which is at the root of man's estrangement from him and the profanity of this world. The ritual meal which often followed the sacrifice and at which part of the victim was shared by the worshippers gave expression to this idea of covenant; man, partaking of the table of the Lord, is united with him in a holy society.

God has no need of man's worship: that was the message of the prophets. It is man who needs to worship for, as St Augustine says, God made us for himself and our hearts are restless till we find ourselves in him. All the worship man offers to God is of benefit to man not God. God commands man to worship because he knows that so long as man remains distant from him in the separation of sin he is unable to become what he was created to be. But God can only unite man to himself through the free response of worship.

The tragedy of man's situation was that, conscious of his separation from God through sin, he could do nothing to appease the one he had offended and had no gift he could offer as his own. All he had, even his own being, was a gift from God and existed only by God's bounty. He was reduced to expressing the agony of his situation in the acted prayer of ritual sacrifice, a pathetic mime in which the offering he would make if he were able is portrayed as accepted and as resulting in a holy communion with the divine around the table of God. If a true union were to be achieved the initiative must come from God, raising man up from his fallen state. That is why the sacrifice of Christ was necessary.

God sent his only begotten son into the world to become man. He alone of all mankind was sinless in God's sight and capable of offering a sacrifice worthy of acceptance. The sacrifices of the Old Law offered back to God a portion of his creation in token for the whole: Christ as man and in the name of mankind offered the sacrifice of his own humanity in order to reconcile the whole race to God. The sacrifice he offered was not made in symbolic ritual but in living reality: a life of loving obedience culminating in destruction at the hands of evil men. God's acceptance of this sacrifice was also a reality: the man Jesus Christ was raised from the dead to sit in glory at the right hand of the Father united to him for ever in a holy society.

Through the voluntary offering of Jesus on the cross, a member of the human race died to the world and passed out of the profane sphere of separation from God; through his resurrection he entered into close

association with the divine holiness. This is the idea expressed by St John in the phrase, 'When Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should pass out of this world to the Father' (Jn. 13.1). Again in St John's gospel Jesus speaks of the event as a sanctification of himself, that is a making holy of his human nature in a way that it was not holy before, by raising it up out of this world to the throne of God. In becoming man he identified himself with the 'world' which had estranged itself from God. In this sense St Paul says that God made him sin for our sakes (2 Cor. 5.21). By his death he put an end to this, as it were, profane existence—'the death he died he died to sin once for all' (Rom. 6.10) : by raising and ascending to the Father his human nature took on a new existence sanctified by the glory of the Father, made holy at his right hand—'the life he lives, he lives to God' (Rom. 6.10).

By penetrating into the Holy of Holies Christ sanctified, not just his own human nature but mankind. 'If one died for all', writes St Paul, 'then all are dead' (2 Cor. 5.14); and similarly if one is raised from the dead for all, then all have been made alive with new life. Seated at the right hand of the Father, Christ receives power over all flesh to give eternal life to all who will accept it. In the great prayer for the acceptance of his sacrifice recorded by St John he says: 'For their sakes I sanctify myself that they also may be sanctified in truth' (Jn. 17.19). From the right hand of the Father he sends down the Holy Spirit who sanctifies them, giving them everlasting life which sets them apart from the 'world of sin' and makes them belong to the divine sphere. They are in the world but not of the world and Jesus prays for them: 'I have given them thy word and the world hates them because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world' (Jn. 17.14).

The Jewish priests according to the law, as the epistle to the Hebrews says, 'stood daily at their service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God to wait till his enemies be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified' (Heb. 10.14).

The old order of ritual sacrifices is now made useless and the old order of priests abolished. The true sacrifice offered by Christ our priest, the only mediator between God and man, achieved all that the old ritual had tried to express; it need never be repeated.

The second person of the blessed Trinity became man so that God might be glorified; worship was his purpose. The worship which he

offered as a man on earth is continued through the worship of the men in every generation whom he has sanctified and associated with himself in a holy society.

Whenever throughout the centuries a man comes to believe in Christ of his own free will, then the sanctification of mankind accomplished by Christ's passion and resurrection becomes for him a reality and takes effect in him, for 'by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified' (Heb. 10.14). The believer is filled with the Holy Ghost sent by Christ, quickened with the supernatural life which flows from Christ as the sap wells up from the stem of the vine into its branches. The life the new Christian lives is a share in Christ's resurrected life. His old life to sin is destroyed and, in St Paul's phrase, it is not he that lives but Christ lives in him (Gal. 2.20). Thus all Christians form one body of Christ. The spirit of Christ who lives in them enables them to believe and to dedicate their lives to doing God's will. Such a life is the true spiritual worship which God desires; as St Augustine says, 'a man consecrated by the name of God and dedicated to him is himself a sacrifice in so far as he dies to the world in order to live for God' (*De Civitate Dei* X, 6).

This Christian worship is the effect of the Spirit sent down by Christ as a result of his resurrection. The worshippers themselves are the members of Christ's body. Their worship is, then, the worship which Christ himself continues to offer the Father through the members of his mystical body, the effect and prolongation in time of the worship which in his natural body he offered upon the cross. Proceeding from it and absorbed into it the worship of Christians is one with the worship of their head.

Thus the Christian religion knows only one sacrifice, the sacrifice of which Christ is both the priest and the victim, the sacrifice in which as head of the body he offered not only himself but also all those who in virtue of his act would receive the grace to die to sin and live to God. In the words of St Peter: 'Christ died once for our sins, the just for the unjust, that he might offer us to God, put to death in the flesh but alive in the Spirit' (1 Pet. 3.18).

It is clear, then, that for Christians cult and religion have been moved to another plane. Worship ceases to be primarily ritualistic, and becomes a life in imitation of Jesus Christ. 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from this world' (Js. 1.27); in these words St James expresses the new idea of worship. St Paul says to the Romans:

'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, this is your spiritual worship' (Rom. 12.1). The worship of the members of Christ's body is their life in the Spirit who sanctifies them and sets them apart from the world which is cut off from God. As members of Christ's body they share in his sacrifice, not only as victims but also as priests, for Christ has anointed them with his grace making them a holy people and a kingly priesthood (1 Pet. 2.9; cf. 2.5). In the early Church, as far as outsiders could observe, there were no temples, no altars, no sacrifices and no priests. The pagans were shocked by this and charged the Christians with being atheists, but they replied that they had no need of such things since the worship which God desired of them was a spiritual worship.

This absence of exterior worship, however, was only the impression received by outsiders. Despite the fact that he had put an end to the ritual sacrifices of the Old Law, fulfilling them in the unique sacrifice offered in living reality on the cross, Christ did not leave his Church without a ritual means of expressing her worship, for as we have seen, the need to express ourselves in some form of religious ritual is very deep-seated in human nature. By instituting the Sacraments, he laid the foundations for a new kind of external worship which later generations of Christians were to develop into an elaborate ritual according to the general laws of religious behaviour. This new form of religion, however, is distinguished by the characteristic of sacramentality.

Christ became man to reveal to mankind the plan of God's loving mercy. The man Jesus Christ was the incarnate revelation of God's love, giving it a visible form which men could understand. As the epistle to the Hebrews says, in Christ God spoke to us in a Son (Heb. 1.1.). Through Christ the disciples came into contact with God and with his divine power, for Christ's human nature was not only the revelation of God's saving plan, but the instrument through which this plan is carried out. In this sense Christ is called by theologians the sacrament of God's saving plan because he both reveals to us the mystery of our salvation and carries it into effect.

Christ is no longer visibly on earth, but he has established what the liturgy and the second Vatican Council call 'the wonderful sacrament of the entire Church' (*Constitution of the Liturgy*, 5). This society of men manifests on earth the saving plan of God in Jesus Christ. It is his body. The man who meets this society encounters Christ and he who persecutes this society persecutes Christ, so that St Paul heard the voice of Jesus saying: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9.4). Like

Christ the Church is spiritual as well as corporeal, in the world yet not of the world, made holy in the Spirit of Christ and belonging where its head already sits in glory (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, 2). Christ has established this society on earth so that in every generation men may be brought into contact with his saving mystery and obtain eternal life.

The Church carries out its mission by means of the seven sacraments. These are actions of the Christian community, the body of Christ on earth, through which Christ applies to individuals the effect of his death and resurrection in a way which reveals to them the mystery in which they are involved. It is these sacraments and the ritual which surrounds and prolongs them which make up the liturgy.

The sacraments look two ways: they are Janus-headed. They are the symbolic actions by means of which Christ manifests and accomplishes his mystery among men, and they are also the rites through which Christians offer their worship to God.

Let us take the first aspect. Every sacrament is a personal act of Christ working through his body, the Church, for the salvation of mankind. Through them Christ communicates to men the grace-life which makes them members of his body, and associates them with himself in a holy society. Through the sacraments he deepens, restores, and preserves their grace-life according to need. The symbolism of these rites enables us to gain some understanding of the mystery they communicate to us. Their symbolism is threefold: they recall the great events of Christ's passion and resurrection, they indicate the effect that these mysteries have upon us and they speak of the glory to which all is leading.

But the sacraments have another aspect. Just as Christ by his passion and resurrection not only worked our redemption but at the same time offered to God a perfect sacrifice, so the sacraments which portray this act are not only the channels of his redemptive grace, but the symbolic ritual through which the Church offer to God the worship which this grace produces. The worship of the Church is primarily spiritual, the activity of the Spirit in the lives of Christ's members—yet, as we have seen, ritual worship corresponds to a deep-seated need of human nature, and redemption has not changed this nature. It is not enough for us to worship by the faith, hope and charity of a Christian life, we must give external expression to our worship. Just as it is not enough for us to love, but we have to speak our love, so our worship seeks expression in prayer, song and corporate ritual acts—not because God needs to be told, but because we need to tell. Further, let us remember that language is not merely a means of communication. By expressing ourselves we form

and develop our own characters—become what we are. So in religion the expression of our worship helps to create the worship we would express.

But there is another reason, more important still, why Christians should come together to celebrate a corporate worship. Salvation does not come to us as isolated individuals, but in so far as we are members of the body of Christ. Similarly the worship of our lives has no value considered in itself but only in so far as it forms part of the worship which Christ offers to the Father through the Spirit. We have no approach to God's sanctuary except through Jesus Christ our high priest. In the sacraments Christ unites the worship of all his members on earth with his own unique sacrifice.

The Christian sacraments are not the agonized expression of human desire in the mime of an unobtainable communion with God: they are the ritual symbols which manifest the sanctification and redemption accomplished by Christ who unites man with God in a holy society—'the signs of sacred events in the act of sanctifying men' (S.T. IIIa 63.2). Through them he communicates to man the salvation his sacrifice achieved, sanctifying them in the Holy Spirit, enabling them to live a life of spiritual worship, and at the same time by their means he unites their worship to his own sacrifice and offers it to the Father. The Second Vatican Council sums this up when it defines the liturgy as 'the exercise of the priestly function of Jesus Christ, in which by perceptible signs the sanctification of man is both signified and realized in a manner appropriate to each one of them, and in which a complete public worship is offered by the mystical body of Christ, that is by both the head and the members' (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, 7).

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