

# NEW AGE RITES

## The Recovery of Ritual

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THE DEMISE OF RITUAL is a principal feature of the corrosive effect of modernity on the Christian Churches of northern Europe. The declining appeal of Christian ritual amongst the urbanized European masses in the nineteenth century provided the first indication of the decline in the influence of institutional Christianity which was to become such a feature of Christianity in modern western Europe. Consequently controversy over the character of ritual rapidly overtook the new urban churches in the early modern era. Contemporary ritual controversies concerning the gender of the leaders of ritual, and the language of the rite, continue to provide the principal focus of struggle over the shape and identity of the churches as they respond to the erosion of their influence and appeal in advanced industrial society.

The rejection of religious ritual is a central feature of modernity, modernity being understood as the experience of personal and social disintegration which characterizes life in modern societies. As Maurice Berman puts it, to experience modernity 'is to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air'.<sup>1</sup> Instead of the ritualized world-view of pre-modern peoples, through which they intended to control nature and the spirit of place, to communicate with the gods, and to determine the destiny of the tribe or community, modernity erodes community and the links of human life with the rhythms of nature and the ways of the spirit. The technological and rational control of human and natural life excludes mystery and depth, and dissolves the relations between people and place and spirit. Consequently ritual loses its physical, social and spiritual location, and religious ritual is impoverished. In pre-modern societies people constructed rituals to enable them to relate significant events to the life of the gods and to their own destinies. But significant events in modern societies from the birth of a baby to the moving of the family home to the experience of dying now take place without any form of ritualization.

People whose horizons are set by modernity have become the subject of what Tom Driver calls 'ritual misapprehension' whereby the perceived need for ritual, and in particular religious ritual, is lost.<sup>2</sup> This ritual misapprehension has contributed to the increasing difficulty of Christian ritualizers in making sense of the symbols and wisdom of the Christian tradition in relation to the cultural and social context of modernity. Consequently Christian ritual is perceived by most non-churchgoers, and some churchgoers, as boring, arcane and out of touch with the realities of contemporary life. People suffer a residue of Christian ritual for certain rites of passage, but they do not make these rituals their own, nor do they see the need for ritual in relation to their experience of life as a whole.

The need for rituals in secular societies has not however diminished and indeed popular culture is mobilizing ritual action in a range of ways. The ritual enactments of Michael Jackson or Madonna in their fantastical stage shows and videos, when they are not descending to the merely pornographic, have utilized the whole panoply of Christian symbols and ritual ceremonies.<sup>3</sup> Those who attended, or watched on television, Jackson's 1992 Bucharest concert saw him donning a great range of ritual clothes and postures, representing everything from the evil, horned goat to the ascended Christ as his stage show climaxed with a literal ascension in a jet pack out of the stadium. Crucifixion, resurrection, the demonic and the angelic, Christ and the devil, the conflict between good and evil – ancient Christian symbols were paraded before a transfixed audience in a ritual performance, a kind of laser-light mystery play, or an orgiastic and blasphemous abuse of Christian symbols and imagery, depending on your point of view.

Aside from the banal commercial exploitation of ritual in popular culture and mass entertainment, there are a number of indicators of the re-emergence of ritual as a significant element in new social movements and new religious movements in the West. The huge memorial quilt of the 'Names Project' being created in memory of those who have died from AIDS with a square for each person who dies, and the candles and vigils of peace campaigners such as the women of Greenham Common or their contemporaries outside the Faslane Base of the Trident submarines in western Scotland, represent just two examples of the mobilization of ritual in recent protest movements. The recovery of ritual can be seen even more clearly in that assemblage of therapies, belief systems, communes and religious orientations which is the New Age.

In order to understand the nature and function of ritual as it is finding expression in the New Age movement, it will be helpful first briefly to

consider the elements and functions of ritual as these have been identified by social anthropologists from observations of primal and pre-modern societies where ritual is a central feature of social and cultural life. Ritual action may be defined as behaviour which is repetitive, stylized and performative, and which is characterized by sequential regularity and involves some kind of obligation or prescription.<sup>4</sup> It also involves social interaction of a controlled kind. Its purpose may be to re-enact a myth, it may be cathartic, a way of releasing tension or pain in a society or community, or of dealing with struggle or even violent conflict. It may also be designed to invoke the presence of divinity or ancestral spirits, to bridge the gulf between the human and physical world and the world of spirits and the unseen. Ritual involves self-forgetfulness, the fusion of wills, as all take their parts in a collective dance or drama – it involves an inner consent and an outer submission to the forms and rhythms of the rite, often enabled by music.<sup>5</sup> Ritual also involves the breaking of the usual boundaries and hierarchies of social life – what Victor Turner calls the liminal moment where identities are fused and social status is temporarily abrogated.<sup>6</sup>

Ritual is also 'make believe' – an 'as if' experience. Ritual magic removes the participants temporarily from the regular context of their lives and puts them in a place or state they dream of or hope for. Through ritual the participants may seek a kind of transformation of consciousness, or a healing of the self – an individual experience, through the collective, of conversion, of a changed self-perception, or a collective expression of a desire for the values of another world.<sup>7</sup> The experience of transformation through ritual may help resistance to a culture of oppression, or indeed of secularism, where spiritual values or the moral and social aspirations of the group are reaffirmed in contradistinction to their exclusion from everyday life – 'doing is believing'.<sup>8</sup>

While some social scientists emphasize the collective and transformative aspects of ritual, others emphasize its individualistic and conserving functions.<sup>9</sup> Social scientists of a secularist hue tend to see ritual as a mechanism for preventing social change, for adjusting the individual to marginality or oppression. And indeed much ritual, especially Christian ritual, is not transformative. The tendency of the Church, far from transforming or liberating the individual, is often to load the ritual participant with guilt. The mostly male-led, stone-encased, organ-accompanied rituals of the Christian Church seem to disable rather than empower individuals and communities for personal and spiritual liberation. The dysfunctional nature of much contemporary Christian ritual is one of the central features of the decline of mainstream Christianity in the face of modernity in Western Europe.

According to the authors of the *New Age encyclopedia* the defining experience of New Age is an experience of personal transformation.<sup>10</sup> This experience, which they characterize as a religious experience, is of a psychological and spiritual nature. The moment of transformation often arises from a personal crisis resulting from the domination of negative experiences such as poverty, illness, stress, relationship breakdown, boredom or purposelessness. The New Age experience is said to produce a new openness, new egalitarian relationships, a sense of abundance, of health regained, of excitement, intensity, and hope for a new future. New Agers seek to utilize New Age tools or rituals to maintain the effects of the initial conversion experience. These rituals may take individualistic or collective forms. Individual rituals may include the wearing of crystals, physical exercises such as yoga or Tai Chi, and various forms of meditation. Collective rituals are practised at various New Age centres, including holistic health or meditation centres, at gatherings or seminars led by New Age speakers such as Sir George Trevelyan, and in New Age communities like the Findhorn Community in Forres, Scotland. For the purposes of this paper I will be drawing upon two sources of New Age ritual as practised in Britain. The first is the rituals which participants practise and experience on seminars and workshops in the Findhorn Community. The second is a ritual manual called *Sacred times. A new approach to festivals* by the New Age writer William Bloom.<sup>11</sup>

The Findhorn Community began thirty years ago in a remote corner of north-east Scotland. In the late 1960s Peter and Eileen Caddy, David Spangler and others established an ecological, meditative 'alternative' community which has become a focus for the global movement of the New Age and draws thousands of visitors annually from Northern Europe and North America. Physically the community has grown up around a collection of caravans to include various meeting halls, energy-efficient wooden houses, two large community houses, Cluny and Newbold, where guests may be accommodated amongst community members, and a garden, the Findhorn Park, renowned for its outsize vegetables. The community is now a charitable foundation and has spawned a variety of enterprises in Forres, including associated retreat and conference houses, a Steiner School, and old people's home, and computer and ecological consultancies.<sup>12</sup>

A major part of the Findhorn operation is its experience and workshop programmes. There are a variety of rituals which participants will experience on these programmes. The first is 'attunement'. This involves participants standing around in a circle holding hands in silence

to establish a sense of oneness and of spiritual presence. This will be done before a meal, or before any group exercise or event. Another ritual is the sharing of what are called 'angel cards'. These cards, which are the size of very small playing cards, have on them the name of a particular virtue or emotion, such as joy, charity, compassion, peace, gentleness or creativity, and a pictorial representation of a figure which displays this virtue. Each person in the group receives one of the cards and they are supposed to make that virtue their own and to evince the power they have within them to become the virtue given to them. Another ritual is a circle dance where the participants hold hands and dance round in a circle. The circle may take the form of a spiral or a more linear circle. Typically this is performed to music. The shape of the circle symbolizes the equality of all the participants. The moving circle, or spiral, represents the weaving together of separate wills into a common purpose. Another ritual is the inward-outward experience. This involves particular participants in the group working on various issues in their own spiritual and personal quest, perhaps a broken relationship or a bad experience going back to childhood. The purpose of the ritual action would be for the individual to represent the experience by movement and actions and to achieve inner release or healing. This inward-outward experience will draw other members of the group into the action as necessary. Most small and large group activities at Findhorn involve 'sharing' where each member vocalizes how the experience was for them to the rest of the group, or shares a meaningful event from the day in the community, or a particular issue from their lives which they believe that the workshop is opening up for them. Finally the community often meditates together as a collective. The day begins with a collective meditation of around twenty minutes, and there is another at lunch-time. Meditation may be followed by visualization, where the well-being which these collective acts generate is envisaged as spreading to calm the world.<sup>13</sup> Alongside these collective rituals, individuals are encouraged to meditate in the sanctuary and the Park where various symbols, and the strange fecundity of the garden itself, are said to encourage spiritual awareness and inner harmony.

The aim of all that happens at Findhorn is personal and social transformation. The rituals of the workshops, and the community life, are designed to address the crises of materialism, self-alienation and ecological catastrophe which characterize society at large:

People can best begin to transcend such a state through the discovery and development of connection with the source of all, the Indweller, the divine reality underlying all forms and present in each of us. Then life

becomes meaningful, empowerment develops and effective action can be taken within any social situation.<sup>14</sup>

The use of ritual and technique at Findhorn is, according to Carol Riddell, a member of the community, for two purposes. Firstly they are designed to help on the journey inward to the 'higher self'. Secondly they are designed to help in healing of the self-identity and the removal of selfishness, to unblock inner resources and remove obstacles to love and compassion.<sup>15</sup> The transformation of individuals and of the Community is said to contribute to a wider natural and social, even global, transformation. According to Riddell the spiritual energy radiating from the Community, through its members and the web of those who have experienced Findhorn and taken the experience back to their own contexts, is an energy which contributes to the formation of a 'new humanity' and a new ecological harmony between humanity and all living things which will eventually save the planet from the destructive path that civilization is currently pursuing.

In a manual of ritual and festival William Bloom identifies various motives and functions for New Age ritual. These include the quest for spiritual authenticity through a re-engagement with the sacred, the need to explore the interactions between human consciousness and the spiritual realm, the quest for ecological harmony, and the need to find inner freedom from the hooks of psycho-social reality, to find true self-identity and psychological well-being. Through ritual and festival New Agers aim to discover an authentic spiritual source within themselves instead of submitting to the imposing spiritual authority of traditional religious rituals. The ultimate aim of New Age ritual according to Bloom is that participants are empowered to become their own 'sacred celebrants'.<sup>16</sup> 'I love these festivals for the spiritual strength they give us. It is beautiful to see men and women, ordained by nothing other than their own inner calling, leading ceremonies, meditations and festivals.'<sup>17</sup>

According to Bloom ritual is not only participative but also changing, open, fluid, it represents the spirit 'for us' but does not fix the spiritual reality into prescribed and unchanging forms or rigid rules. Instead it follows ecological and psychological rhythms and harmonies, the natural rhythms of sun and moon. The inner ecology which the rituals create and reflect also contributes to and draws upon a cosmic ecology. The energy which these rituals create empowers individuals and spreads beyond the collective and the festival to all the dimensions of life on earth.

The rituals that Bloom describes relate to life events such as birth and death, and to natural cycles such as the movements of the sun and moon.

In a ceremony of greeting of a new-born baby are included these words of welcome to the child: 'Dear and beautiful thing, we welcome you and we honour your presence. You have chosen to manifest in this form, in this incarnation, and we celebrate this cycle of your existence.'<sup>18</sup> Bloom commends ceremonies which follows the lunar cycle because the movement of the moon 'not only relates to the tides but to human psychological states'. Thus in a ceremony entitled 'Full Moon Meditation' the participants after centring and earthing themselves on the ground where they stand or sit, are encouraged to focus on the problems of the world: 'With the fire of compassion we become aware of world problems – those areas and situations of conflict, pain, injustice and cruelty, in need of healing'.<sup>19</sup> They are then encouraged to focus on 'the source', a source of power which appears to recall both the external nature of the moon as well as an inner light of inspiration and love:

And we become aware of a point high above us, a source of love, light and healing. With all our discipline and aspiration, we lift our consciousness up to touch that high source of spirit. And with discipline and strength we hold that high focus.<sup>20</sup>

The celebration of the passage of time and solar and lunar cycles not only brings joy and meaning to life, but symbolizes the death and resurrection of members of the cult, and the occult or hidden knowledge of the connection of festivals, temples and certain energized places to the earth's energy. This celebration brings blessings to the environment and to the individuals who take part.<sup>21</sup>

Bloom is critical of traditional religious ritual which he sees as hierarchical, formalist, empty of meaning, cerebral, excluding the dimensions of feeling, sensation, dance and rhythm, as well as the natural rhythms and cycles of the cosmos. The authoritarian rituals of the traditional religions do not transform or heal humans or nature, or promote ecology. The rituals of the New Age are not like these old, discarded religious forms. The new rituals are constantly changing and recreating the spiritual dimension and this reflects the fact that for New Agers this dimension itself is constantly in process.<sup>22</sup>

New Agers are seeking to reinstate ritual as a source of spiritual identity, or collective action and belonging, and of personal and social transformation within modernity. New Agers have taken up many of the functions and characteristics of ritual as it operated in primal, pre-modern cultures and re-engaged it with the quest for individual meaning and psychological well-being in the flux and *mêlée* of social and cultural life which represent the experience of modernity. The articulation of the

primal with the modern is a central feature of the movement as a whole.<sup>23</sup> New Age rituals reflect the smörgåsbord character of the religious ideology and the symbol structure of New Age, drawing upon many different spiritual paths and religious systems, combining elements of western paganism and Christianity with elements drawn from Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Participation in a New Age seminar or a Findhorn retreat can cost a considerable sum – from £30 for a day seminar to £350 for a week-long workshop. The entrepreneurial character of New Age therapies and seminars, and their appeal to modernist individualism and utopianism, expressed through the quest for personal, social, ecological and cosmic transformation, indicate the extent to which the movement has successfully located itself within modernity, while at the same time drawing on many elements of pre-modern traditions and culture.

It is precisely in this dimension of the relation between the ancient and modernity that Christian ritual has become inherently problematic. As liturgies and rites have been ‘modernized’ in an attempt to bring them into closer touch with the language and culture of contemporary life, the mystery and awe of the old ceremonies has often been lost while at the same time the new rites often maintain the older hierarchical, clerical structure. Consequently the link between participation in ritual and personal and social transformation is not reconstructed by liturgical reform. If the Church is to reconstruct its ritual in such a way as to re-engage with modernity then it may be that Christian ritualizers have much to learn from New Age rites.

It is certain that the rituals of the first Christians were charismatic – that is, spontaneous and inspired – performative and transformative. The ecstatic experience of believers brought the Spirit alive in the midst of the congregation, the dangerous (because of its cannibalistic connotations) shared meal of the eucharist re-created the experience of the founder, it made Christ present through the ritual performance of the eucharistic gathering, the agape meal, which challenged the social, ethnic and even sexual hierarchies of the time. Modern liturgical reform has sought to re-create the spirit of early Christian worship but it has tried to do this by means of textual archaeology. The assumption has been that the provision of new liturgical texts will itself produce a renewal of worship in the context of the declining appeal of the old rites in modern societies. Not enough attention has been paid to the significance and function of ritual, collective performance and celebration as the means of legitimating and making real the spiritual quest of Christians.



The hierarchic sacramentalism of Catholicism, and the cerebral word-based worship of Protestantism, both represent aberrations and distortions of Christian ritual practice which have disabled the Church in responding to modernity. The modernist rejection of ritual was assimilated by many western radical and liberal theologians, with the effect that the management and revision of ritual in the churches was often left to those of a more conservative and hierarchical tendency.<sup>24</sup> The response of theological modernism to this dilemma has been to seek a 'religionless Christianity' in Bonhoeffer's famous phrase. This response has de-legitimated mystery and ritual and capitulated to the modernist myth of secularization and the techno-rational control of human and natural life. New Age represents a rejection of both these features of modernity which Christianity in western Europe has preferred to assimilate rather than to challenge, while at the same time New Age embraces the mobility and pragmatism which also characterize modernity. The strengths of New Age ritual and spirituality are precisely in the reincorporation of pre-modern cosmology, the relocation of ritual in relation to spirit and matter, and all the major events of human life. In opposition to rationalism and secularism New Age represents a resacralization of human life in all its dimensions and offers ritual means for rediscovering the sacred in everyday life.

New Age rites reflect a range of beliefs which Christians do not share and may find heretical or at least misguided: the pagan connotations of praying under a full moon, the belief in reincarnation, the vague references to spiritual power or energy. Christian theology sets the function of ritual in its proper context, in the sacramental life of the Christian Church which is a sharing in the life and nature of God as creator and sustainer of the cosmos, as Jesus Christ the redeemer of life, and as present Spirit. But like the New Age rites Christian ritual needs to be reconstructed in such a way as to re-engage with the cosmic and the natural, with the seasons and the passage of time, with matter and spirit, the psychological, the political and the social, realizing the ritual power of Christian ceremony to transform human life in the context of modernity.<sup>25</sup>

In the present phase of human history, as the problems of ecological limitations approach us, Christian ritual, like New Age ritual, needs to recreate an experience of participation in spiritual reality which also relates to the quest for wholeness in the creation and in the human self. We need a new approach to ritual which takes up the power of ritual as still recognized and affirmed in so many non-western cultures, and increasingly by New Agers in the West. Ritual is powerful. It may be

used for good ends, and for bad. Rituals may be utilized to legitimate totalitarianism, or to promote the global marketing of a pop idol. In their struggle with modernity the churches of the West should seek to reclaim the power of ritual to legitimate the Christian message, to create spiritual experience, to empower participants for healing and conversion, to build community, and to resist the values of a secular and materialist age. As Beverly Harrison has said 'the goal is to ritualize', to invoke, to make present the powers of God as Trinity, and of the Spirit in the midst.<sup>26</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Berman, *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p 345.

<sup>2</sup> Tom F. Driver, *The magic of ritual. Our need for liberating rites that transform our lives and our communities* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Roberts, 'A Postmodern Church?', Open College Lecture, University of St Andrews, 3rd December, 1992 (unpublished).

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Lewis, *Day of shining red. An essay on understanding ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp 6, 7.

<sup>5</sup> S.J. Tambiah, *A performative approach to ritual. From the Proceedings of the British Academy* vol 65 (1979) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure* (London: Allen Lane, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Mayerhoff, 'The transformation of consciousness in ritual performances: some thoughts and questions' in Richard Schechner and William Appel, *By means of performance. Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp 245-249.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> This is the approach to ritual characteristic of the writings of Emile Durkheim. See further his *The elementary forms of the religious life* (second edition, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> J. Gordon Melton, Jerome Clark and Aidan A. Kelly, *New Age encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> William Bloom, *Sacred times. A new approach to festivals* (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Carol Riddell, *The Findhorn Community. Creating a human identity for the 21st century* (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Press, 1990), pp 1-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 146. <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 39. <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 44.

<sup>16</sup> William Bloom, *op. cit.*, pp 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 75. <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p 91. <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p 5.

<sup>23</sup> See further Michael S. Northcott, *The New Age and pastoral theology. Towards the resurgence of the sacred, Contact Monograph No 2*, (1992).

<sup>24</sup> Driver, *op. cit.*, p 9.

<sup>25</sup> For a collection of Christian rituals which take up New Age approaches to ritual, such as the concern for nature and the seasons, the celebration of all of life, and the quest for spiritual experience and wholeness through ritual, see Scott McCarthy, *Celebrating the earth. An earth-centred theology of worship with blessings, prayers and rituals* (revised edition San Jose, California: Resource Publications, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Beverly Harrison, cited Driver, *op. cit.*, pp 212, 213.