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Ritual and crisis

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I.

It is said by some students of ritual that it is a response to danger. By re-enacting contact with sacred things and re-affirming their rightness, ritual enables the crisis to be confronted and dealt with an anticipation of effectiveness. Ritual is a pattern of symbolic actions for renewing contact with the sacred, with the source and centre of rightness. It is a protection against destructive and immoral forces. It sanctifies the participant by infusing him with a tincture of sacredness, which is a state of being. Ceremony and etiquette belong to the same family, although at different distances from its centre.

Ritual has had a bad name for the past century among intellectuals raised, as so many of us have been in the past fifty years, in utilitarian traditions. Ritual is regarded as useless, as on the same level as 'incantation,' which also has a bad name. It is thought to be out of touch with the facts, 'empty', 'hollow', 'external'. There is a certain embarrassment in its presence, even on the part of many who enjoy participation in ritual practices, because it is integral to beliefs which they either do not share or do not wish to acknowledge as sharing. It is thought that ritual is out of touch with the times, that our time is by its inherent nature alien to ritual and that rituals that exist in this society are merely survivals from the past without any value except as 'spectacles'. None the less, the exercise of great authority which is constructed to maintain order, to protect and enhance life, and to deal therefore with great vicissitudes continues to be surrounded by ritual. When a president is inaugurated, even in a country which believes that it has freed itself from the encrustations of aristocratic ceremonial and etiquette, the ritual is quite elaborate. There is a complex etiquette involved in approaching presidents and prime ministers. Armies still insist on considerable ritual, particularly at the higher levels of authority. Universities, and not just the ancient universities of the United Kingdom, have extensive ceremonials. Rituals do not exist only in institutions with a long and continuing tradition from a ritually more ample past. They also come into existence in new institutions and even in the personal relations of individuals. They certainly exist in families and serve to confirm their identity and continuity. They are an assurance against the danger of dissolution. Crises of transition from one stage to another in the course of life of ordinary human beings tend to be ritualized, as is the end of individual life itself. Neurotic ritualization is a pattern of conduct in which the individual seeks to protect himself from dangerous impulses within himself and to undo acts of destruction instigated by such dangerous internal impulses. Crises are times of danger and rituals are responses to danger. Rituals are about crises, actual and anticipated. By affirming solidarity among individuals and by re-establishing contact with essential principles they probably function to give those who practise them the sense that the rightness of their path is confirmed.

II.

The danger of war, of nuclear war especially, must be reckoned as part of the crisis of this age. The possibility of nuclear war is the cause of the greatest crisis the human race has ever confronted, apart from death itself. Death is a permanent certainty and the permanence and the certainty have permitted over a long time development of beliefs and rituals to alleviate to some small extent the terror which it inevitably inspires. One of the mechanisms which makes the thought of death a little more tolerable is belief in the survival of the collectivity. The nuclear war danger is all the more drastic because it offers the prospect of death, individual and collective, simultaneously and uncertainly. Furthermore, the nuclear war danger came upon mankind suddenly and dramatically, about twenty years ago. Measures to be taken to reduce the losses inflicted in a nuclear war once it has occurred seem trivial; the techniques of its prevention, given the other attachments of human beings, are indeterminate.

There are other crises such as those resulting from the rapid growth of population, the expansion of the scale of society and corporate bodies, the automation of industry, and the prospect of a workless life for a large proportion of the members of a society, the intensity of activity attendant on the growth of affluence and opportunity, etc. These cause distress but the source of the distress is often hidden in obscurity, they act gradually and imperceptibly. Moreover, they are very unevenly effective and many people do not experience them at all as deprivations. Remedies or preventive measures, although not easy to imagine, seem at least to fall within human powers.

The other miseries which afflict the human race—accidental death and maiming, natural disasters, poverty, illness, unhappiness—have always existed. They are crises to those to whom they occur, but they are usually segregated and there is usually little apprehension about them on a society-wide scale. There are more specific actions which can be taken to avert or to remedy some of them. They cannot in any sense be called modern crises, yet it is possible that the heightened sensitivity and hedonism of the contemporary human race over much of the earth's surface have caused these ancient catastrophes and adumbrations of death to be experienced more painfully than used to be the case.

How have men reacted to these three classes of crisis? Have they engendered ritual modes of defence? The quantitative evidence is not very decisive, in part because it does not go back far enough in time to enable us to compare different time periods with respect to the frequency of ritual activity. And impressions are equivocal. On the one hand, one is impressed by the expansion in the United States of church attendance in almost all sectors of the society, by the major role played by Christian parties in the political life of Western Europe since the war, and by the extraordinarily diminished hostility of intellectuals towards religion in the period since the war. On the other hand, one is struck also by the repeated complaints, especially in Britain, concerning the meaninglessness of religious ritual. There is no indication of an increase in church attendance in the United Kingdom, but the increased interest in religious matters seems significant. There is an interest in religion, but an unresponsiveness to the inherited theology and liturgy. A ritual style or idiom has not been created to correspond to the religious curiosity or sensitivity which is now being more widely and openly expressed.

Ritual still has a bad name in intellectual circles. Yet its absence strikes contemporaries as anomalous, even where they find the inherited ritual to be repugnant. Still, rational contrivance has not been able to devise rituals which it is felt possess the gravity of those which have some substantive affinity with the very rituals which are associated with beliefs which have lost their credibility.

III.

Does this discomfiture make any serious difference? Numerous students of ritual have emphasized that ritual is not technological. It is not part of a chain of means and ends; it is not instrumental in any empirical sense. The strength of ritual practice has not in the past prevented the institutions within which they were practised from foundering or falling into catastrophe. Armies have lost their solidarity, governments have been indecisive when their ritual practices were 'adequate' according to the conceptions of the time and the experts of the ritual.

IV.

If ritual practice is so marginal and intermittent in its significance for conduct, and if so many of our rituals are connected to a theology and liturgy in which beliefs are no longer so firm, it might be asked whether ritual can be expected to survive. I would venture the opinion that in a variety of ways it will survive. As long as the category of the 'serious' remains in human life, there will be a profound impulse to acknowledge and express the appreciation of that 'seriousness' in words and actions of symbolic import. It is this sense of the 'serious' which constitutes the religious impulse in man. For this purpose, the inheritance of religious beliefs with which our dominant rituals are associated will continue to serve. They have already shown much greater tenacity than has been assumed for a long time. The need for order and meaning in order are too fundamental in man for the whole race to allow itself to be bereft of the rich and elaborate scheme of interpretation of existence which is made available by the great world religions. The spread of education and of scientific knowledge will not eradicate them.

The significance of authority is not going to diminish either, nor will the vicissitudes which endanger human life and which infringe on the foundations of morally meaningful order. As long as the biological organism of man passes through stages resembling those now known to us, there will be transitions from one stage to the next; and each successive stage will require some sort of consecration to mark its seriousness.

It is said that ritual, because it follows a prescribed pattern, tends to force conduct outside its own pattern into a similar rigidity. There is unfortunately no evidence on this important problem. The governments of the United States and of the Soviet Union, neither of which is thought to be highly ritualized in its procedures or conduct, have both shown considerably more rigidity than many outside judges regard as appropriate to the very dangerous situation in which they are participating.

In general, nothing much can be said about the influence of ritual practices on the conduct of those who partake of them outside the ritual situation itself. My guess is that such influence as ritual participation has on conduct is very subtle, and it is not massive. It helps to remind its participants of the gravity of some aspect of existence, it recalls to

them some fundamental rules and symbols of a pattern of life. But it is only one among many factors which activate fundamental normative orientations and images in human beings and the maintenance of this state of activation requires constant support from authoritative institutions and environing opinion.

The importance of ritual lies in its expression of an intended commitment. It belongs to the category of things like words of art, music, literature, etc. It is expressive, but not being a form in which an individual expression is made, it is less intensely experienced by many of those who practise it.