

correct, then it is obvious that some of the Semites and Indo-Europeans must have retained a monotheistic faith when other nations had already long degenerated into polytheism. The Egyptian priesthood, for example, continued the practice of animal sacrifice, but polytheism predominated until Akhenaten reinstated a kind of monotheism for a few years. The Minoan civilization of Crete also had animal sacrifice at the centre of its religion, but a degenerate view of the gods is evident before its overthrow.

The earliest religious history of China is very hard to study. The Chinese script, not being phonetic, gives us no linguistic clues to the names of God. In the sixth century BC the joint attack of Taoism and Confucianism virtually obliterated the ancient Chinese priestly and sacrificial worship. We can dimly trace, however, the supreme sky-god who was worshipped as Shang-ti or Hao-Tien. He was approached through the Kiao, Hsian and Hsien sacrifices. These were offered in the open air and, like the biblical sacrifices, included killing an animal, sprinkling its blood, and burning the carcass on an altar. In spite of successive waves of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and early Christianity, Chinese sacrificial worship continued in temples here and there until the communists took over.

So the case for an original monotheism and worship through animal sacrifice, with subsequent degeneration into polytheism, is by no means proved. But it is certainly much easier to fit it into the recurring cycles of history than a gradual upward evolution of religion. Where documented case-histories are available, as among the early Aryans and Hebrews, the evidence for degeneration is strong.

The whole of biblical history, and the subsequent history of the Christian church, illustrates that God reveals himself as Creator, provides a way of forgiveness and fellowship through sacrifice, and all sacrifices have their meaning and fulfilment in the death of Jesus Christ. The Bible and church history also furnish many

tragic illustrations of man's inveterate desire to add deities which are less demanding, and turn sacrifice or the communion service into a bribe to force God's hand.

## Priests and priestcraft

Why was the emergence of priestcraft as an institution common to ancient India, China, Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, many other civilizations, and even the medieval Christian church?

First we must try to picture worship based on animal sacrifice in its simplest form. To modern man the very idea of animal sacrifice conjures up revolting images of dark, superstitious rites and gory victims. It is important to realize that before the rise of Jainism and Buddhism in the sixth century BC men were meat-eaters, as they still are in most parts of the world. If animals are to be eaten, they have to be killed, and most races have agreed that the blood should be drained out from the carcass. This happens in our Western civilization in thousands of slaughterhouses. We turn away our eyes, but for early man each 'sacrifice' had a spiritual significance. When we read of thousands of animals being sacrificed by Solomon, we could simply paraphrase 'he gave a big feast for all the people'. In both Greek and Hebrew the same word is used for sacrifice and killing animals.

The important thing about animal sacrifice in the Bible is that God used the joyous occasions of eating meat as visual aids to teach spiritual truths. There is nothing more primitive or obnoxious about attaching spiritual truths to animal sacrifice than to bread and wine. The animal sacrifices looked forward to Christ's death and resurrection just as the Christian communion services look back. That a wide variety of spiritual meanings was attached to animal sacrifice is evident from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. These various rites can be seen as different facets of the death of Christ and the same facets of his death are now expressed in the communion service or eucharist.

## Myths and Symbols

Douglas Davies

If we had just heard a moving piece of music, we would find it strange if someone asked us whether the music were true or false. Music, we might reply, is neither true nor false. To ask such a question is inappropriate. Most people know that music can, as it were, speak to them even though no words are used. In fact, some of the great symphonies can affect us almost more deeply than any number of words, while choral works such as Handel's *Messiah* can produce an effect greater than the text alone could ever do.

As with music so with people. The question of what someone 'means' to you cannot fully be answered by saying that he is your husband or she is your wife, because there are always unspoken levels of intuition, feeling and emotion built into relationships. The question of 'meaning' must always be seen to concern these dimensions as well as the more obviously factual ones.

### Myths

Myths take many forms depending on the culture in which they are found. But their function is always that of pinpointing vital issues and values in the life of the society concerned. They often dramatize those profound issues of life and death, of how man came into being and of what his life is really about, of how he should conduct himself as a citizen or husband,

as a creature of God or as a farmer, and so on.

Myths are not scientific or sociological theories about these issues. They are the outcome of the way a nation or group has pondered the great questions. Their function is not merely to provide a theory of life which can be taken or left at will; they serve to compel a response from man. We might speak of myths as bridges between the intellect and emotion, between the mind and heart—and in this, myths are like music. They both express an idea and trigger off our response to it.

Sometimes myths can form an extensive series, interlinking with each other and encompassing many aspects of life, as has been shown for the Dogon people of the River Niger in West Africa. On the other hand, they may serve merely as partial accounts of problems such as the hatred between men and snakes, or the reason for the particular shape of a mountain.

One problem in our understanding of myths lies in the fact that Western religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—are very concerned with history. They have founders and see their history as God's own doing. This strong emphasis upon actual events differs from the Eastern approach to religion, which emphasizes the consciousness of the individual. Hinduism and Buddhism possess a different approach to

history, and hence also to science.

In the West, the search for facts in science is like the search for facts in history, but both these endeavours differ from the search for religious experience in the present. In the West, history and science have come to function as a framework within which religious experiences are found and interpreted, and one consequence of this is that myths have been stripped of their power to evoke human responses to religious ideas.

The eminent historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, has sought to restore this missing sense of the sacred to Western man by helping him to understand the true nature of myths. The secularized Westerner has lost the sense of the sacred, and is trying to compensate, as Eliade sees it, by means of science fiction, supernatural literature and films. One may, of course, keep a firm sense of history and science without seeking to destroy the mythical appreciation of ideas and beliefs.

### Symbols

Religious symbols help believers to understand their faith in quite profound ways. Like myths, they serve to unite the intellect and the emotions for the task of discipleship. Symbols also integrate the social and personal dimensions of religion, enabling an individual to share certain commonly-held beliefs expressed by symbols, while also giving him freedom to read his own private meaning into them.

We live the whole of our life in a world of symbols. The daily smiles and grimaces,

handshakes and greetings, as well as the more readily acknowledged status symbols of large cars or houses—all these communicate messages about ourselves to others.

To clarify the meaning of symbols, it will help if we distinguish between the terms 'symbol' and 'sign'. There is a certain arbitrariness about signs, so that the word 'table', which signifies an object of furniture with a flat top supported on legs, could be swapped for another sound without any difficulty. So the Germans call it *Tisch* and the Welsh *bwrdd*.

A symbol, by contrast, is more intimately involved in that to which it refers. It participates in what it symbolizes, and cannot easily be swapped for another symbol. Nor can it be explained in words and still carry the same power. For example, a kiss is a symbol of affection and love; it not only signifies these feelings in some abstract way: it actually demonstrates them. In this sense a symbol can be a thought in action.

Religious symbols share these general characteristics, but are often even more intensely powerful, because they enshrine and express the highest values and relationships of life. The cross of Christ, the sacred books of Muslim and Sikh, the sacred cow of Hindus, or the silent, seated Buddha—all these command the allegiance of millions of religious men and women. If such symbols are attacked or desecrated, an intense reaction is felt by the faithful, which shows us how deeply symbols are embedded in the emotional life of believers.



The power of symbols lies in this ability to unite fellow-believers into a community. It provides a focal point of faith and action, while also making possible a degree of personal understanding which those outside may not share.

In many primitive societies the shared aspect of symbols is important as a unifying principle of life. Blood, for example, may be symbolic of life, strength, fatherhood, or of the family and kinship group itself. In Christianity it expresses life poured out

in death, the self-sacrificial love of Christ who died for human sin. It may even be true that the colour red can so easily serve as a symbol of danger because of its deeper biological association with life and death.

Symbols serve as triggers of commitment in religions. They enshrine the teachings and express them in a tangible way. So the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in Christianity bring the believer into a practical relationship with the

otherwise abstract ideas of repentance and forgiveness. Man can hardly live without symbols because he always needs something to motivate his life; it is as though abstract ideas need to be set within a symbol before men can be impelled to act upon them. When any attempt is made to turn symbols into bare statements of truth, this vital trigger of the emotions can easily be lost.

*In Bali the myths and legends of Hinduism are re-enacted each year in dramatic dances. Here Hanuman the monkey-god had come to help the prince Rama rescue his wife from the demon-king Ravana. Behind is the Barong, a friendly dragon.*

Even before Moses we find four aspects of sacrifice which were common knowledge to the Hebrew patriarchs, the Aryans of India, the ancient Greeks, and probably many other races.

- The most common was the sacrificial *fellowship meal*, whenever men sat down to eat joyfully before God.

- An extension of this was the idea of a *covenant*, based on eating together, witnessed by the blood of the animal. The covenant might be between two men or tribes, or between men and God.

- Then there were occasional whole burnt offerings, usually presented by a king or patriarch to indicate *worship, consecration, or thanksgiving to God*.

- And when there was known sin, or a flagrant breaking of the moral order, a *sin offering* or expiatory sacrifice was required.

The earliest sacrificial worship was conducted by the head of the family or tribe. In settled conditions the development of a regular priesthood was inevitable, especially with the growth of cities and the increasing pomp of a royal court. There were dangers, but nothing inherently wrong, in having a full-time or even a hereditary priesthood. Moses appointed his own brother Aaron as the head of a hereditary, exclusive line of priests. His own tribe, the Levites, became full-time attendants on the service of God, and were supported by the tithes of the other tribes.

Similarly in the settled conditions of city life, the building of permanent facilities for sacrificial worship was acceptable to God. A temple with altars for large numbers of people, together with the attendant buildings, was required in the reign of Solomon. It is interesting, however, that the argument of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews goes back to the mobile tabernacle rather than the elaborate temple. There were certainly great dangers in the use of temple and elaborate altars, as there were in the development of a full-time priesthood, and the prophets constantly had to fight priestly rapacity and the misconceptions of the people. Where there were no

prophets, priesthood and temple worship always degenerated into the ugliness of priestcraft.

## Ritual

The clearest documented account of this degeneration appears in the history of the Brahmin priesthood of India. The earliest group of Vedic hymns called the *Rig Veda* were first collected in an oral form, say about 1500 BC, as the Aryan tribes were invading north-western India. The collection may have been the work of the first regular priests. At this time sacrifice could still be offered by any Aryan, and priesthood was by inclination, probably on a part-time basis. Under settled conditions the power of the priests tended to increase. They suggested that unless the right sacrifices were offered the gods would be displeased, and therefore only highly trained priests could learn the prayers and rituals which were necessary.

Some specialization began, and a school of singing priests (Udgatri) arose who chanted the special hymns for each sacrificial occasion. Their collection of 1,225 hymns (the *Sama Veda*) were all from the *Rig Veda*, except for seventy-five new ones. Then a third book called the *Yajur Veda* was produced by a class of priests who did the actual offering of sacrifice. Their collection was mainly the ritual formulae muttered in a low voice during the various stages of the sacrifice.

Thus by about 900 BC there were at least three groups of priests with their own special duties and training schools. The priests had leisure to study and teach, and knowledge brought power. It was only natural that the priestly schools should produce notes and commentaries on their books (the same kind of thing happens today). The material is called *Brahmanas*, which includes explanation of the hymns, the rituals of sacrifice and the duties of the priests. The study of this material produced an elaborate scholasticism.

By the time of the *Brahmanas* (about 800-700 BC), the Brahmins had become a hereditary priesthood in charge of all sacrificial duties, for