



Baptism Revisited: An Anthropological Perspective

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I. PREFACE

Baptism, according to Christian tradition, is a sacrament: a “holy gift,” a sign given by God to humans in a statement about the coming of the Holy Spirit into the person’s life. Over time various Christian groups have interpreted baptism in various ways, symbolizing the coming of this gift through immersion *in* water, pouring *of* water or sprinkling water *over* adults or infants, according to that particular group’s ritual process and ceremonial life. Anthropologists who study religions of the world have found the study of the sacraments in Christianity to be of interest from several points of view. One of these is their meaning as symbols encoding certain mysteries and messages, stating in visible form that which is otherwise deeply hidden in the collective memory and consciousness. Another of the viewpoints focuses on the rituals themselves as process, choosing to emphasize the function of ritual as rites of passage within human life cycles and in the transitions of families and communities. Yet a third angle of vision seeks to illuminate the connections between symbolic worlds of liturgy and theology and day-to-day worlds of human experience.

My own work over a period of now more than twenty years has woven among these various angles of vision. Sometimes (particularly in my earlier writings, of which this article is representative) I sought to discover and to explain the function of rituals; at other times I sought to explain their meanings. Over time I

have grown to appreciate the fullness of cultural complexity transitorized in ritual, a kind of microchip carrying dense cultural information, making possible both the expression of religious life through layers of symbols and meanings and the transmission of this religious knowledge and power to successive generations. In *Kinship and Pilgrimage* (Oxford University Press, 1987) I explore these complexities of cultural expression in the American south as seen in family reunions, church homecomings, cemetery association days, camp meetings, and denominational conference centers; in *The Mother Town* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 1994) I explore civic ritual, through which the town becomes the unit of identity and locus of meaning in the culture of the borders region of Scotland. Recently I have been extending my study of Protestants through a comparative look at rituals and ceremonial life among Texas Catholics. The article reprinted here first appeared in a Catholic journal, *Liturgy*; and so, the circles of life and work unfold and expand.

Anthropology, especially the method of the ethnographer and the cultural interpreter, has in my view a great deal to contribute to the understanding and appreciation of the church and its

sacraments. It adds *to*, not contradicts, the insights of the theologian, the ethicist, and the pastoral counselor. All would agree that God comes to us in history, in a cultural setting, in a social milieu. The God of the Old and New Testament does not act in the abstract as an idea or a principle, but always as a personal power, in and through the lives and times of individuals, families, and communities. It is my hope that through my ethnographic writings I have cast some small light of understanding on these human institutions, historical processes, and symbolic meanings—which are, after all, the vehicles through which we receive all holy gifts.

II. BAPTISM: A LIFE-CRISIS LITURGY¹

Baptism is a ceremony which carries strong cultural and social meanings in addition to its stated religious and symbolic ones. As educated Christians, we are often more familiar with the religious significance of baptism and other ceremonies than we are aware of the social usefulness of these events in the organization of a human community. In this article I will look at baptism in its social and cultural context, as a life-crisis ceremony, or rite of passage. As a rite of passage, baptism serves three important functions in the life cycle of individuals and communities. One of these is the incorporation of a new infant member into an existing social group. Another is the initiation of the infant's parents into a new social status—that of parents. A third is to provide a ceremonial gathering place for the parents, grandparents, and close friends to affirm the infant and the parents and to accept partial responsibility for assisting in the tasks of child rearing. Before we take a closer look at these three separate but complementary social functions of

¹The remainder of this article appeared as a chapter in *Learning through Liturgy* by Gwen Kennedy Neville and John H. Westerhoff, III (New York: Seabury, 1978) 58-70. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author and publisher.

baptism, it is necessary to examine the meaning and structure of rites of passage as they have been identified and analyzed for a wide range of human communities.

Rite of passage is the name assigned to ceremonies marking abrupt shifts in human social relations resulting from changes in position within the life cycle. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep first defined and described rites of passage after he had noted from his readings and research on human societies that in every culture these marking ceremonies existed.² Individuals move in sequence over time from one state in expected relations with other people into another state. Within the human life cycle, in other words, there is a process of movement from unborn infant to infant, infant to child, child into puberty and then into adulthood, and so on. At each change in state there is a change in expected behaviors which that individual must accept; for example, an adult is expected to behave differently from a child. These shifts in behavior and in group relations are accompanied by ritual and symbolic celebrations of the community or the congregation. In the Jewish tradition, for instance, the Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen marks the social transition of a young man from boyhood into manhood, even though his complete physical growth will not be reached for several years. After this ceremony a young man is eligible to take part in men's activities of the synagogue, and he is no longer expected to behave like a child. The major shifts in behavior accompanying these processes of change are designated as "life crises" because there is a crisis of changed social relations. The individual has passed a crisis when she or he learns to fit appropriately into the new situation. The group also undergoes a crisis

whenever one of its members enters, grows into adulthood, or dies.

Ceremonies also mark social transitions that are not strictly tied to individual growth. In the marriage ceremony, for instance, two individuals who have been treated as single persons socially are transformed within a set ritual from singles into a couple. Ceremonies of initiation into sororities and fraternities mark a transition from pledge into sister or brother. Ordination ceremonies mark a social transition from layman or laywoman into priest or minister. In short, the entire social structure of a society could conceivably be viewed as an interlocking set of life cycles in process from one stage into another. Moving states of each life cycle are set into counterpoint with other states to form the fabric of ongoing human cultural organization.

Because the life crises are integral to understanding human communities, rituals and ceremonies accompanying them have been a focus of study by anthropologists. The internal structure of the ceremonies themselves has been an object of study for those interested in unraveling the threads of ritual language and behavior in relation to everyday life activities. Each ceremony seems to share certain characteristics with every other life-crisis ceremony. Within each ceremony there are three phases: (1) separation, (2) transition, and (3) incorporation. In the first phase, the participant who is being

²Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1909); English ed., *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960).

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moved into a new state of being is separated symbolically from her or his old state of life. This separation is seen most extensively in the weeks or months of withdrawal into the wilderness that is required of young people in many of the world's tribal societies before returning to undergo the rites of passage into adulthood. During this period of separation they are trained by older men or older women in the skills of adult life in that village and often are subjected to a series of ordeals or obstacles which they must overcome in order to be eligible for adult privilege. Many writers have come to compare this elaborate separation-training ordeal endurance period to our own long months or years of separation in training institutions for specialized professions. The comparison also applies to the months of pregnancy during which a woman gradually begins withdrawing from her former way of life and work; in earlier times she was expected to separate herself completely from social interaction during her entire pregnancy. During her first pregnancy, at least, she was undergoing a period of separation before her shift in status from an individual woman to a mother.

The second stage of a rite of passage is the middle, transitional, stage, in which the participant is in flux—"betwixt and between," as noted by anthropologist Victor Turner.³ It is in this period, which Turner calls "liminality," that the core symbolic actions and words serve to transport the individual and the group into a state of highly aroused consciousness in which they are intensely aware and share a heightened expectatedness. Going through a service of baptism or a marriage service together with one's family or friends produces a kind of commonality of religious experience that most people have felt at one time or another, although the feeling is often difficult to explain. This is certainly true of the shared feeling of common experience among those who have undergone a fraternity initiation in which ordeals were successfully performed and obstacles surmounted.

Compared to other phases in the ceremony, the transition phase is often the longest phase

of the ritual event. It constitutes, for instance, a major portion of our contemporary wedding service. At this stage the bride and groom are in a state of being neither married nor unmarried; they have been given over by their parents and have proceeded onto the sacred portion of the chancel, but until the priest pronounces that they are husband and wife they remain in liminality, neither here nor there. It is during this middle segment of a baptism ceremony that the godparent or minister will often take the baby into his or her arms, symbolizing spatially the transition from an unbaptized condition into a new position as a member of a church community.

The third stage in all rites of passage is the stage of incorporation. During this final stage the individual is received into the new group into which he or she has passed. The well-wishers stand outside the church or in the reception hall to receive the bride and groom into their new state, as family and friends celebrate the baptized infant with gifts and good wishes.

One way of analyzing ritual processes is to focus only on the portion of

³Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

events contained by the ceremonial service itself. In our society that would include the part that takes place within the church during the service. A broader view of ritual and of life-crisis transitions focuses on the total process of movement from beginning to end within the interacting social group as the field of analysis. For instance, in this broader view one would look not only at the baptism ceremony and what it explicitly does symbolically but at the transition of the parents beginning from the time they learn of the pregnancy through the end of the baptism, including all the rituals surrounding the pregnancy and the birth.

Using this total process model for analysis we see that baptism fits into a whole sequence of events forming the social transition for both infant and parents to a new social state. Because the infant is officially emphasized in ecclesiastical tradition as the individual who is being acted upon during baptism, we will begin with the social context of baptism as a ceremony for the incorporation of a new member into an already existing group.

III. BAPTISM AS INCORPORATION

The event of birth is, like that of death, a natural happening which has evoked various cultural explanations. In the human group, birth is experienced as both a natural and a mysterious event. For us, the natural, biological development of the fetus and its entry into the outside world through the mother's birth canal have all been explained by modern obstetrics. The mysterious elements are assigned to philosophers to explain in their philosophies of human nature, and to theologians to explain in their religious systems and theologies. There seems to be inherent in the human species a need to categorize and attempt explanations for seemingly unexplainable events.

Birth is mysterious partly because it introduces a new human being into a group that was already getting along in a well balanced way. A new person is thrust suddenly into the social group—an intrusion that must be explained and in some way fitted into the cognitive system which that culture has developed for categorizing human events and explaining the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Christians have explained this relationship in part by assigning the birth of a new human being to the realm of God's activity as Creator. The new member of the social unit is categorized as a creature, a "child of God," and as such it is immediately fitted into existing explanation

systems for reality.

In modern complex society, a child is born into two worlds: the public, civil realm and the private, kin-religious one. In the act of giving a name to a child on the rolls of both county and church, the parents further transform this nonperson into an individual with both a civil and a religious identity. By taking the child to be baptized they are assigning a name to the child in the eyes of God, thus creating a religious-cultural identity to go along with the civil one. While the civil realm will claim the child as he or she is enrolled on the county record, in the social security records, and tax rolls, the religious-cultural realm will claim the same citizen as a member of a separate kingdom belonging to God and the people of God.

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The ceremony of baptism enacts this transformation symbolically within the religious realm. A life-crisis event is being experienced by the infant in its very enrollment as a new citizen and as a citizen of the religious realm. The transition from having been a nonperson into now being an active social person is symbolically accomplished for the civil realm at the time of delivery, with its attendant rituals of cleaning, dressing, washing, taking footprints, tagging with a bracelet, and making out a birth certificate. The same transition into personhood within a faith community is symbolically accomplished within the ceremony of baptism. At this time the infant is ritually separated from the status of the nonmember, moved through a transitional phase of prayers, blessings, symbolic use of water, and finally incorporated into the Christian community through being “baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The infant’s name is called at this time—which in some traditions has been termed a “naming ceremony” or a “christening.” The name of the infant is thus placed symbolically within the circle of the family of the already named believers.

IV. BAPTISM AS INITIATION OF PARENTS

In addition to its social function in marking the incorporation of a new infant into a community, baptism also carries an important function in the initiation of new parents. The baptism of the couple’s first infant is the most significant in this sense, due to the fact that in our society the arrival of a first baby is truly a life crisis of major proportions. Until this time a couple is allowed to remain in the “honeymoon” period of early marriage, concentrating on their personal relationship and their individual careers or interests. Even their friends and social involvements remain similar to those of single young adults, and they are free to take part at their own choice in clubs, parties, trips, or quiet evenings at home. The birth of the first baby brings about a sudden shift in all these activities. Now it becomes necessary to take along the nursing infant or to get a baby-sitter when the couple plans the simplest outing. Quiet evenings at home are interrupted by feeding, fussing, colic, teething, as tired parents attempt to adjust to the requirements of their new role.

The life crisis is made even more traumatic in many cases by the gap in experience of young expectant parents who were not reared in the context of large families with many babies. In our small nuclear families, with cousins living far away, a young couple might enter the formidable period of parenthood without having ever held a newborn infant or cared for a toddler brother, sister, or cousin. Young people learn their child-care skills most often through a combination of Dr. Spock and trial-and-error. Classes at hospitals and at the Red Cross have

emerged to fill the vacuum in preparation for child care, but unfortunately many of these are too brief to meet the many needs of new parents.

Initiation rituals for parenthood begin almost immediately after the woman learns she is pregnant and continue throughout the infant's early months. Central in the prenatal period of ceremonial preparation for the approaching life-crisis event is the obstetrician's office or the obstetrical clinic. Within the context of modern medicine and health care the young woman begins her gradual ceremo-

nial shift in status from individual to mother, surrounded by the recurrent rituals of monthly checkups, medical advice, preparatory exercises, diet, and reading.

Medical rituals surrounding the big change are accompanied by other forms of ceremonies and gatherings in which friends and family assemble for congratulations and to bring gifts—the perennial baby shower, often held near the time when the woman shifts into the new pattern of home-bound activity, having left her job at the office or having taken a temporary leave from her professional life.

The period of separation of the mother from her previous normal activities has fortunately been gradually shortening, and often her separation into seclusion lasts only during the labor and delivery itself. In another very fortunate move, medical centers are increasingly aware of the value of having the father accompany the mother in the labor suite and assist by coaching her on exercises and breathing to ease the delivery. In this way the father is being ceremonially separated along with the mother, and his own initiation into parenthood is marked more significantly than it was in the past.

While in the hospital, the mother remains in a state of semiliminality. She is still in transition into motherhood, symbolized by the separation in most hospitals (at least some years ago) of the baby into a baby nursery. She was not allowed to care for her own infant until the final incorporation was accomplished through going home with her infant in her own arms.

Both members of the couple are welcomed into the social state of parents by hospital attendants, visiting nurses, family, friends, insurance salespeople, newspaper announcements, cards, letters, gifts, and flowers. The church has traditionally played a role in this welcoming when the priest or pastor has come to call on the new parents. Prayers are offered for a safe delivery and for the health of the mother and infant.

In the Christian tradition, the mother is believed to be an assistant in the process of creation, but often a folk belief persists that assigns birth to uncleanness and makes women the victims of practices and unstated fears regarding ritual pollution. In the Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions a special home ceremony was once customary, called “The Churching of Women,” which resembled in many ways some of the ritual cleansing ceremonials practiced by tribal peoples after the birth of an infant.

The goal of ceremonies, services, and prayers surrounding childbirth should be to affirm and support the young mother and to celebrate all the processes of labor, delivery, and breastfeeding as good, clean, and positive aspects of her personhood and of her participation in the ongoing life of the community.

The initiation into parenthood in our society and its subcultural traditions is sporadic and in many instances incomplete. Couples living in cities, away from their parents or other kin, have

scanty support for this awesome new task they have assumed. Doctors, ministers, and priests are most often males who are unable to relate personally to the experience of giving birth and caring for infants; the young woman is left with little encouragement from those her society tells her should be experts.

Baptism acts to augment the slender support base by providing a locus of assemblage for family and friends who fill in this encouragement gap. Even though grandmother and the female kin may live hundreds of miles away, they attempt to come to the infant's baptism, symbolizing spatially their continued support and assistance. Within the enactment of the ceremony all the participants take on a segment of the responsibility for this child's upbringing, thus easing considerably the burden of the overburdened new parents. In the words and prayers, and in the questions and answers exchanged by the parents and the priest or minister, the parents are initiated into the role of parents within their faith community. They have already been incorporated into the civil status of parents by the hospital and the government. Now they are ceremonially transferred into the status of parents within the religious community. Their place in the ongoing tradition is recognized, and their task is placed in the context of a cooperating social group who are willing to share wisdom and aid. Their place as assistants in creation is now overlaid by their place in transmitting a cultural heritage, teaching the child the ways of the people—"raising the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," as stated in one tradition. The parents and the grandparents are initiated into their new roles in the ongoing process of cultural transmission.

V. BAPTISM AS CELEBRATION

We have seen the ways in which baptism serves as a rite of passage for the infant in his or her incorporation into a religious community. We have also examined the function of baptism as a rite of passage for the new parents as they become initiated into a new social position with new responsibilities. There is a third social function served by baptism in relation to the assembled group of celebrants, and in a wider sense to the entire congregation even though it may not be present at the service itself. In the act of performing a baptism, the priest or minister of the congregation is symbolizing the inclusion of a new member for whom the total congregation becomes partially responsible, just as in the civil realm the state is ultimately responsible for the well-being of all its citizens.

In every Christian tradition the arrival of infants is in some way noted, even if infant baptism is not practiced. This is significant, because it tells us that the entire group experiences a change in its group life when another unit is added. In the Southern Baptist church tradition, for instance, where infant baptism is not a custom, many congregations have a custom known as the "Cradle Roll." The cradle roll is a listing of all the infants in the congregation and their parents, supervised and kept up to date by a designated member who often is also designated to visit in the hospital and in the home. A member may, in fact, request a special service called "Dedication" in which the infant is dedicated to God. The mother, father, and infant are often the subject of prayers or announcements in the church bulletin. Thus, in all traditions, the arrival of a new life is an occasion for celebration.

In traditions which do practice infant baptism, the baptismal ceremony becomes the focal

and to the world. Where godparents are selected, these individuals assume duties in relation to the child. Where congregational forms of government and belief prevail, all the members of the congregation are the godparents, and the baptism service can only be held in the context of a regular congregational worship service, not separately with only family present. The child is viewed as having been born into a covenant community and the celebration of baptism seals the new person as a “child of the covenant” and as a member of the congregation itself.

The celebration aspect of baptism is an important one. It is in this celebration that the network of ties connecting this infant to the world is extended outward from the individual to a social fabric of concerned coparticipants in a human community. In a world in which we search for supportive structures for our common life, and in which human cooperation often breaks down in the face of conflicting interests and goals, these occasions of celebration become pivotal in the perpetuation of the life of the species.

VI. CEREMONIES, CELEBRATIONS, AND COMMUNITY

One of the singular possessions of our species in comparison to all other animal life is the ability to arrange meaningless sounds and behaviors into elaborate symbol systems and to enact these over and over through rituals and ceremonial times. Throughout the history of the evolution of humanity, these ritual celebrations of cultural meanings and beliefs have served as a kind of social glue to weld together diverse elements of a group. The human community is a rich and beautiful kaleidoscope of life cycles and seasonal changes translated into rites and rituals, enacted with strictest form, and containing the most intricate set of rules for structural regularity. As bearers of a particular culture, we carry these rules around in our heads and put them to work when the occasion arises. We become teachers of our faith when we act out the rules together with others—infants, children, young, and old—in the ceremonies surrounding our common life as humans. At the same time, while we are teaching and learning, we are sharing in the creation of webs of people and of meanings that hold together the faith community of which we are apart.

Baptism is one of these socially crucial ceremonies. It cannot be understood alone or out of its context. It fits into the unfolding process of rites of passage that interlock throughout the life cycle, in which individuals are successively incorporated and initiated into, and ushered out of, each successive stage of human social experience. It takes its place in the succession of celebrations that mark the ongoing of individual lives within culture and within the context of the believing, celebrating, scattered-and-gathered fabric of life that we know as the human community.

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