

Sacrament and Ideology

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If it's magic to believe that merely saying something can make it so, then J. L. Austin's account of the so-called 'performative utterance' is an account of a magical belief. For that, though not quite true without qualification, is what Austin maintains is the nature of a performative utterance. On the other hand Austin is not the first person one would think of as a believer in magic. And his undoubted credentials for unsuperstitiousness have given authority to the notion of the performative utterance which some theologians have thought to exploit for their own purposes. And some sociologists too. For these reasons respectively.

Theologians do not have a reputation so clear of superstition as Austin has. In particular, Roman Catholic theologians don't and even more, among Roman Catholic theologians, those who concern themselves with rituals and sacraments don't. And some of these have wanted to go along with the likes of Aquinas and the Tridentine formulae about sacraments and wish to legitimate propositions, such as that of Aquinas, that a sacrament is a sign which "effects what it signifies".¹ As this appears to mean that merely saying a thing, such as "This is my body" uttered over what is *prima facie* bread, or "I baptise you . . ." said while pouring what is on any account water, is to make what it says so, and as such theologians are sensitive to the charge that this is mere magic-making, there is an evident temptation to exploit Austin on performatives in the prospect of de-mystifying such claims. In hoping for this prospect such theologians are, I will argue, deluded.

On the other hand the Austinian analysis looks as if it might have something in it for the sociologist of ritual. For it seems as if the performative character typifies the ritual utterance which is meant not only to address a message to a group of hearers but to enact a solidarity between the participants in the ritual *in* what the ritual signifies. True enough the sociologist has generally concerned himself primarily with ritual *behaviour* and has asked of it what it signifies. In other words the sociologist has asked of performances what they utter rather than of utterances what they perform. But the notion of the performative utterance which enacts what it says is not far removed from that of the uttering performative which says what it enacts. And the analysis of the performative utterance might be thought to shed some light on the question of how rituals socially effect what they signify. Well, I think it does, but in some rather unexpected ways, as we will see.

I

But before we set about closing avenues of thought let us have a look at what might have tempted us to go up them. In general, Austin says, a performative is an utterance "in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by* saying or *in* saying something we are doing something".² Austin's well-known examples include saying "I do" in a marriage ceremony, "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow". "I name this ship Queen Elizabeth" said while smashing the bottle against the stem and so forth.

Now Austin rightly maintains that such locutions are not to be construed as the mere verbal *reports* of performances which are otherwise than verbally performed. More particularly the locution "I promise . . ." followed by the description of the thing promised is not to be construed as an outward sign of an inward *mental* act of promising. For to utter the words "I promise . . ." while of sound mind and not under coercion *is* to promise, whatever the utterer's intentions at the time. Hence, to utter the words of a promise while intending not to do what I promise is not to fail to promise, but to abuse a promise made. The offence is not that of uttering the words of promising while not actually promising and so is not analogous to the case of saying that you think something which you don't think. It is rather that the speaker intends not to do something which he has promised to do and if this is, incidentally, to mislead the promisee about the speaker's intentions, this is only because we normally expect people to be intending to do what they are promising to do. In any case we are entitled to hold people to doing what they have said they promise to do, whatever their intentions then or subsequently and this is for the reason Austin gives, namely that under certain conventional conditions of an objective sort, to say "I promise . . ." *is* to promise.

Now I suspect that all this might be of some interest to the Canon Lawyer concerned to get objective and subjective factors in the right place from the point of view of the formal validity of sacramental rituals. At least in general terms I imagine that canonists would approve because Austin's general distinction between those conditions which, not being met, result in a performative *misfiring* altogether and those conditions which, not being met, result in the *abuse* of a successful performative³ might seem to tally with the canonist's distinction between ritual failures which *invalidate* a ritual and those failures which, while not invalidating it, constitute an illegal performance of it. Unfortunately, however, the tally is inexact. For, according to the canonist, some factors which illegitimate a ritual without invalidating it are objective, such as getting married before a laicised priest; and some conditions which invalidate a ritual are subjective, such as a person's

saying "I will" in due objective conditions for a marriage ceremony while intending to deny to his or her spouse access to sexual intercourse against his or her will.

But whatever accounts the canonist may have to settle with the Austinian performative (and the matter is certainly complex), there are reasons why the sociologist might be attracted by the Austinian performatives which are rather stronger than any which might seduce the canonist. The sociologist will, perhaps, attend to the distinction between an illocution and a perlocution. To get this distinction clear it should be remembered that the pulling off of a promise by the words "I promise" is not the pulling off of an *effect* by a *cause*. A promise is not a consequence, even an intended consequence, of saying "I promise". It is *in* the saying that the doing is done, and so Austin calls performatives of this sort 'illocutions'. By contrast a 'perlocution' is a locution which, by means of its utterance, produces an effect. We can see what is involved in this distinction this way: under certain conditions, if I utter the words "I promise" then, in uttering them, I have promised. If, in addition to and by means of this promising I induce the effect of irritating you at my rashness in promising, then my locution has the perlocutionary effect of doing just that; my act is performatively irritating. Though Austin does not quite put it in these terms we could say that the illocutionary act succeeds as a performative as a result of its role within certain conventions, because it meets certain conventional conditions. But the perlocutionary force produces its effect as a result of its meeting certain causal conditions, in the case in question these being partly psychological. But of course, in the case of ritual utterances, the causal conditions under which perlocutionary effects will be produced will be, by and large, sociological.

For this reason it might be thought that the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary forces of ritual utterances could form the basis for a clear differentiation between the roles, respectively, of the canonist and the sociologist of ritual. Indeed the lack of clear role differentiation here is a cause of much confusion among liturgists. It seems to me that there are two sorts of conditions for a successful liturgy, or rather that there are two quite distinct notions of liturgical success governed by quite different sets of conditions. There are those conditions which have to do with the formal validity of the liturgical act and are analogous to those conditions under which to say "I promise" is to promise; these are the conditions under which to say, for example, "I baptise . . ." is to baptise.

By contrast with these illocutionary or canonical conditions, however, are the perlocutionary conditions which may very prop-

erly be the concern of the sociologist. He may very well want to know whether the empirical sociological effects brought about by the ritual words and actions are just those which we would hope for given what those words and actions signify. After all, a eucharistic liturgy embodies symbols of solidarity in thanksgiving, forgiveness, in death and resurrection, these symbols being carried via the ritual eating of a meal which is supposed, as it were, to enact these meanings and transact them for the participants. These are the meanings which the ritual utters and, theologically speaking, make real (for some interpretation of the word 'real'). But in addition to what it is that the ritual *says* there is the question of what it is that the saying of these things as a matter of empirical fact *does* for the participants. For example, the question whether, and if so under what conditions, the ritual event as a whole effects in and for the participants an appropriate awareness of what it signifies; or the question of whether the actual solidarities achieved by the enactment of the liturgy are such as to correspond with the formal ritual meanings of the liturgy, these are proper matters for the sociologist and are altogether different ones from the proper concerns of the canonist. The two may be connected with one another, but they are not the same.

Furthermore, neither of these concerns have anything directly to do with what Aquinas was talking about in saying that a sacrament is a "sign which effects what it signifies". What Aquinas was talking about was the theological effect of a sacrament which, as it signifies the grace of our salvation, so it is a cause of it. Except on a thoroughly reductionist account of this theological reality it is utterly perverse of the sociologist to confuse what Aquinas's formula applies to with what the sociologist is talking about, namely the empirical matter of the perlocutionary outcome of a ritual act. For Aquinas the efficacy of a sacrament is guaranteed by God, and caused, if not in an unmediated way, exclusively by God. And God does not guarantee, for any ritual whatever, that the empirical effects it gives rise to sociologically are just those which as sign, the ritual signifies. There is no way, to take an instance at the individual level, that just because of what the kiss of peace signifies, presumably peace, I can be guaranteed not to feel hostility at my neighbour's halitosis or otherwise unwashed condition. And, more pertinently, at the social level, what is to guarantee that the actual enactment of the universal, egalitarian symbolism of the eucharist will not in many parish situations be efficacious for a chummy, introverted, 'sharing' and 'caring' parochial elitism? For *qua* sacrament, the eucharist theologically signifies solidarities which are often other than those which its ritual enactment effects for the participants. Where what the sign signifies and what its ritua-

lisation effects fall apart, or worse, where they conflict, then there is something for the sociologist to have a go at. I shall have more to say about this later. In the meantime, let us merely note that, for Aquinas at least, there is all the difference in the world between the sociological effects of the ritual and the effects of the sacrament which it ritualises.

To summarise: it is sheer magic-making to believe that sacramental efficacy is illocutionary in character, as if the grace of the sacrament were the formal, ritual effect of the utterance of the required words; and it is sheer pelagianism to believe that the sacramental effect is perlocutionary in character, as if what the sacrament effects consisted merely in what the ritual's being enacted effects. Getting the ritual right, from either the canonical or from the sociological points of view, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the effecting of what the sacrament effects, at any rate in any absolute way. For while of course we cannot make any sense of the actual sacramental rituals we have except in terms of the actual ecclesial institutions we have, and even if it is, as a matter of fact, a theological truth that the sacraments are the normal causes of the grace they signify, it remains the case that anything the divine power as a matter of fact normally brings about by these means, that power could have brought about (and for all we know does bring about) by other means, the so-called 'necessity of the sacraments' notwithstanding. And as for that 'necessity of the sacraments': there is all the difference in the world between a necessity which derives from certain facts being the case and the necessity of those facts. Given the sacraments they are a normally necessary and anyway sufficient cause of grace. But it by no means follows that necessarily God had to cause, or even necessarily always does cause, the grace of the sacraments only *through* them. And I know of no orthodox account of the dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* which would require the theologian to say that it does follow.

On the other hand the fact that absolutely speaking God does not need the sacraments to effect the grace which they signify does not entail that the sacraments *do not* effect what they signify. There is, however, a view of the sacraments which I will, for the purposes, call 'occasionalism', according to which because God does not absolutely need the sacraments to effect what they signify, it follows that when he is acting in a sacrament God is not needing the sacrament he is acting in and through. According to this occasionalism, then, the sacramental ritual is but *the occasion on which* God acts but is in no way itself part of the causal agency of God. The premiss is true, for Aquinas, but the conclusion is false and certainly it does not follow from the premiss. For

Aquinas the sacraments are true causes of grace. They effect what they signify. But they do so neither by the magic of some transcendent illocution, nor by the empirical causality of some pelagian perlocution. For Aquinas the sacraments are what he calls 'instrumental' causes of the grace they signify.

I must confine myself merely to the illustration of what he means by this.⁴ I do not absolutely need a hammer to knock a nail in with, a boot or a brick might do. So a hammer is not a necessary condition of the nail's being knocked in. Nor, of course, can any hammer knock a nail in all by itself; I, or someone, needs to use it if it is going to knock the nail in. So the hammer is not a sufficient condition of the nail's being knocked in either. But just because I do not absolutely need a hammer to knock a nail in with, it does not at all follow that when I am using a hammer I am not needing it, as if, as it were, I am knocking the nail in by my own power merely doing so on the occasion of the hammer being in my hand. For the hammer is an intrinsic element, when it is used, of the causal activity of knocking the nail in: it does, genuinely, cause the nail to go in, but instrumentally. And so too, for Aquinas, with the sacraments. Merely as conventionally valid rituals they are neither necessary nor sufficient to effect what they signify. But as conventionally valid rituals which satisfy the conditions for being sacraments they are genuine causes of the grace which they signify because as such they are instruments of the divine causal activity.

II

Having distinguished, I hope to some end other than merely to inhibit, between the proper concerns of the canonist, the sociologist and the theologian I want to end with a remark about how the concerns of the sociologist and the theologian might be related to one another. I want to suggest that a somewhat modified version of Austin's distinction between the illocution and the perlocution will help us to understand a phenomenon of much interest to the sociologist and almost entirely ignored by the theologian, namely the phenomenon of ideology.

Now I have already noted that the sociologist's concern with ritual efficacy has to do with the question of whether the social effects of a ritual are just those which they should be, given what that ritual formally signifies. I argued, further, that the conditions governing the social efficacy of a ritual are different from those governing its canonical validity, and I proposed that we distinguish between them on the lines of Austin's distinction between an illocution and a perlocution. For, I said, we must distinguish between

what you are doing *in* saying something and what you are doing *by* saying it. This distinction is not hard to see, for example, in the case which R. M. Hare once invented of the sadistic schoolmaster who tells his class to shut up in such a way as to provoke the sort of behaviour which would justify his punishing them the more severely. Now one of the things which you are doing *in* saying "shut up" is telling someone to shut up. In the case of the sadistic schoolmaster one of the things he is doing *by* telling the pupils to shut up is provoking them to further noise. He says "shut up". But his saying it provokes the very behaviour his words prohibit. Let us call the schoolmaster's behaviour, and other cases like it, a 'performative contradiction', for reasons which are not hard to see.

The philosopher, however, may protest that the word 'contradiction' is misused here. For, he will say, you have a contradiction only between sentences such that the truth of either excludes the truth of the other. But in this case we have only one utterance, an utterance of telling and otherwise only an action which is not an utterance, namely an action of provocation. And to some, mainly I suspect, philosophers, it is hard to see how, on anything but what they would regard as a dubious analogy with propositional contradiction, an action can be said to 'contradict' an utterance.

But sociologists, I hope, know better than the philosophers and for a reason which I have already given. It is natural for a philosopher to take an interest in performative utterances. Equally it is natural for a sociologist to take an interest in uttering performances. Sociologists know very well that actions speak. To a sociologist, therefore, there is little paradox in the notion that because to say something is to do something, so the action *of* saying may itself say something. Moreover, this distinction, which is, perhaps, implicit in routine cases, becomes explicit in the case of the performative contradiction, because you get a performative contradiction when the two sayings come apart and contradict one another. To put it formally, you have a performative contradiction when a person, by saying something, *p*, does something to do which is to say the contradictory of *p*. Arguing at tedious length in favour of maximum participation in the seminar, reading the Riot Act and thereby provoking the very behaviour which it prohibits, creating racial conflict by means of lurid warnings against its dangers, these are all cases in which people refute what they are saying by the act of saying it. Now my argument is that, though by no means definitional of an ideology, it is a characteristic of one that it involves performatively contradictory behaviour. And I think that ritual actions are especially prone to the ideological in this sense.

Let me give a somewhat stereotyped if not entirely fanciful example. Let us suppose a preacher delivering his sermon, as it

were, from the height of his authoritarian pulpit, on the equality of all the people of God, the universal priesthood of all the faithful, and so on. Now we should not, on the strength of the distinction which I have made between the formal message of a speech act and the perlocutionary message of its being said, analyse these elements into separate, unrelated factors, the egalitarian communication and the fact that, as it happens, it is delivered from an authoritarian pulpit. For the point about authoritarian pulpits is that they are already sermons. If you have one you do not need to preach authoritarian sermons, for the authoritarianism of the pulpit will preach well enough within the word of the egalitarian sermon. The pulpit itself is part of the materiality of the preacher's act of saying – it both internalises and exhibits the character of his relationship with his congregation. But for all that this material lies outside the realm of the conscious, intended communications of the preacher, it is not for that reason external to the gross total of meaning achieved and communicated. For that materiality not only has its own significance – it *says* something – that significance practises its own hermeneutic upon the explicit meanings of the preacher's words. Hence those words become the bearer of a condensation of conflicting meanings which, precisely insofar as it lies outside the intentions of the preacher, is uncontrolled by those intentions, exists independently of them and at the same time subverts them. The total result is a social reality constructed upon the contradiction.

But it is in the facts of this contradiction that the members of the worshipping community are socialised. They perceive their relationship to the act of worship via the condensation of contradictory meanings, for at one level they attend, perhaps with approval, to what the preacher says and *in so doing* they reciprocate the authoritarianism of his act of saying it. Consequently the preacher and the congregation engage in a mutual relationship via the contradiction in which they are jointly socialised. They socially live an enacted contradiction which is internal to their form of life.

Now it seems to me that our liturgies abound with such instances to the point that it is worth asking, as David Morland does in a recent pamphlet⁵ whether there may not be something systemic and functional for the Churches in such bastard, self-defeating rituals. Let me give just one more, relatively trivial instance. Listening, on a recent occasion, to the 'bidding prayers' at a eucharistic service, the prayers said 'for the unemployed' seemed to me to inhabit a twilight world somewhere between the feeling that "we ought to be doing something about it" and the belief that to pray thus was to be doing what the Christian should do about it. It was as if this ambiguity was the very form of the Christian relationship

with the unemployed, as if the ritual itself was the device for socialising the Christian into this ambiguity, which at once made the material results of a particular economic policy present within the act of worship only ritually to dematerialise them on arrival.

Now it seems to me that there is something in the liturgical reproduction of this ambiguity between the merely ritual and the concretely 'real' which some Christians positively welcome and worse, on occasions, misidentify with the ritual's witnessing to the 'transcendent'. But it is not surprising to the Marxist bit of me that Christians should frequently call by the name of mystery that which is nothing but mystification or that their liturgies should routinise this misidentification and socialise its participants in it. But if one were making the case for the socially functional character of this ideological effect, one would have to ask what it achieves for the participants which they consciously or unconsciously welcome. The answer, I think, is that what such ideological, performative contradictions achieve for a ritual is primarily a rupture in the relationship between the significance of the utterances and the bearing of those utterances on practice. For this is what my illustrations illustrate: that in such cases the participants in the ritual live out the normativeness of the ritual via the disengagement of that normativeness from any but purely internal, *ritual* consequences; that just when the participants believe themselves to be bringing their liturgies into relationship with the actual unemployed, just then they are relating to them only as they exist *in and for the ritual itself*. Likewise, as they live out their relationships with the egalitarianism of the preacher's message through the authoritarian structures of its communication, so they live out their relationships with the authoritarianism of those structures through mystified categories of egalitarianism. In short what such rituals effect is the rupture itself between what the ritual signifies and what it effects. And when a ritual effects this rupture as a routine, when, in other words, it socialises the participants in this rupturing, then we can say that such rituals are ideological. We can also say that they parodise the sacramental character which they are supposed to exhibit. For they are rituals whose effects contradict what they signify and which pacify the contradiction by routinising it.

It is useless for the canonist to protest that such rituals are formally valid enactments of the necessary conditions for sacramental efficacy. Equally it is useless for the theologian to protest that God can bring about the sacramental effects which such rituals performatively subvert. For of course, God can do this, as I have conceded. The point is that a bastard ritual in which God has to effect directly that which he cannot bring about through the ritual

would not be a sacrament. For such a ritual would not effect what it signifies, even instrumentally.

In conclusion it can be said that the sociologist does have a role in determining what those conditions are under which a sacrament can effect what it signifies. Purely *qua* theologian, the theologian does not know the sacraments in respect of the conditions which determine their material, social effects. In principle, sociology can (though this is to beg no questions about the adequacy to the task of many sociologists). And it is in respect of those material conditions that the question of the ideological character or otherwise of a ritual is settled. This is something which must matter to the theologian, even if, *qua* theologian he can know nothing of it. For, in the end, whatever it is that makes a ritual to be a form of ideology, just that is what makes it to be a form of idolatry.

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- 1 "... sacramenta . . . efficiunt quod figurant", *Summa Theologiae*, 3, q. 62 a.1, ad 1
- 2 *How to Do things with Words*, Oxford, 1957, p 12.
- 3 *Op. cit.* p 16.
- 4 Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 3, q.62 a1, corp.
- 5 *The Eucharist and Justice*, Commission for International Justice and Peace, London, 1981.

The Liberating Eucharist

Nicholas Paxton

In his 1977 book *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*, Tissa Balasuriya reminds us that "the Eucharist has an extraordinary potential for being an agent of personal and global transformation. Every week about two hundred million persons meet all over the world in Christian communities".¹ Yet, while the worldwide eucharistic congregations every Sunday probably make up the largest global assembly for any shared purpose, the influence of the Eucharist on the creation of a more just, more loving and (in fine) more Christian world is almost minimal. The paradox, in Balasuriya's words, "is that while the example of Jesus should make the eucharistic community a champion of social justice and a contestant of social