

INTRODUCTION

At the centre of the whole religious system of the later Middle Ages lay a ritual which turned bread into flesh – a fragile, small, wheaten disc into God.¹ This was the eucharist: host, ritual, God among mortals. In the name of the eucharist some of the most humbling, and the most audacious, claims have been made: that God and humans could meet and unite, mix and merge, that a disc of baked wheaten dough could embody the saving body of Christ, that the lives of men and women, of cities and nations, could be encompassed, redeemed, transformed or forsaken through it. The eucharistic wafer was constructed as a symbol for which over hundreds of years, and all over Europe, people lived and died, armies marched, bodies were tormented or controlled by a self-imposed asceticism. Lives of scholarship were dedicated to fathoming its mysteries, or censored when their findings threatened to denude the eucharist of its essential secrets.² The drama of the eucharist is the drama of human creativity and of human frailty: its force deriving from the tension inherent in human action, between the capacity to construct meaning-laden symbols, and the consequent imperatives of living by them, adhering to them and maintaining their meanings when they become susceptible to the vagaries and vicissitudes of human interpretation. The eucharist provided an idiom through which life-worlds, interests, experiences and needs came to be articulated, in positions taken, and the claims made, for and against and about it.³ In the Middle Ages the language of religion provided a language of social relations, and of a cosmic order; it described and explained the interweaving of natural and supernatural with human action, in a paradigm which from about 1100 was one of sacramentality, with the eucharist at its heart. An ethical world was constructed through this language, with the final sanction that reception of the eucharist could be experienced beneficially only by those who lived in a certain type of virtue, or who made amends for trespasses through the penitential system of the church.

¹ This paraphrases Geertz (1960), p. 11.

² For the case of Galileo, see Redondi (1987).

³ On the eucharist as symbol, see Firth (1973), pp. 415–26.

In his now classic article, 'The mass as a social institution', John Bossy interpreted the medieval mass as a catalyst which helped to create social fusion among its participants. In the mutual prayers for the dead and the living, the kissing of the *pax*, the sharing of Christ's body, he sees experiences of *communitas*,⁴ a state of pre-political, undifferentiated human affinity, which dissolved tensions and bound people together despite the differences between them in the non-ritual space and time. The notion of community which underpins this interpretation is a problematical one,⁵ but Bossy evades it by assigning to the ritual the efficacy which liturgical texts designed and ascribed to it. In expositions on the mass, which provide much of the material for Bossy's study, medieval liturgists and theologians interpreted every word and gesture in the ritual as part of an edifice of meaning about sacramentality and sacerdotal efficacy. Every gesture, vestment, vessel of the ritual was explained to reinforce a harmonious image of the central Christian story, a story which was thus conveyed for the guidance of the ritual practitioner, the priest.⁶ The normative texts tell us about the ideal-types which were taught from the centres of power as representations of principles of hierarchy and authority. But the masses which they described, such perfect rituals, were never celebrated. Nor do people ever experience ritual from a unitary position, in a homogeneous way, and whatever its effect, *communitas* is dissolved as soon as the sweat evaporates off the brow of the ritual performer.

A wide range of material relating to the eucharist has been used in this book: the theology of the eucharist formulated in the schools, the ritual and liturgy designed for it, legislation on access to it, teaching and preaching of its meanings, legislation and correction of its liturgical practices at the provincial, diocesan, parochial levels, the imagery which surrounded it in paintings, and eucharistic artifacts. What was taught and what was done are both examined and compared: how the mass was celebrated in reality not only in the recommendations of manuals for the clergy. The mass will also be seen through *exempla*, the didactic tales aimed at correction and edification, which conjure up aspects of a world of practice, and convey utterances about the eucharist reported in order to be corrected through miraculous intervention.⁷ This material was produced by churchmen, often disapprovingly, and

⁴ On the term *communitas* in the analysis of ritual, see Turner (1969), chapters 3 and 4, pp. 94–165. See also Turner (1974).

⁵ On the use of 'community' by historians, see Calhoun (1980), and on the medieval community, see Rosser (1988) and Rubin (1991b).

⁶ For a critique of Bossy, see Reinburg (1985), pp. 201–90.

⁷ On the miraculous mood of medieval culture, see Platelle (1979), pp. 475–7.

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with corrective aims in mind. Yet they none the less leave traces of the eucharistic symbolic world in action. On careful reading, an ethnography of practices which were sometimes deemed by the clergy to be aberrant and in need of correction can be teased out of these sources, which were discursively constructed within a nexus of power relations. In their self-conscious, even self-parodic, attempts to curb and correct manifestations of the symbolic creativity which the eucharist engendered, the friar, the itinerant preacher, and the parish priest offer an entry into the ethnography which is local and personal. They allow us to play the role of ethnographer, of an informed interpreter attempting to validate the continuous and the changing, one who is always mindful of the power relations in the midst of which these texts were created.

Such an approach forces us to identify, understand and organise diversity into meaningful patterns, not to seek the replication of uniformity.⁸ It examines the struggle for consensus at work, a picture of ritual as variously used and understood. It is the scrutiny of religious practices which construct as well as question hierarchies like processions,⁹ or an iconoclastic orgy,¹⁰ or the mass,¹¹ emphasising the interplay of the spoken and the unspoken. Because we never encounter an utterance in isolation, be it picture, ritual, or word; the range of uses is inscribed before the use actually takes place. It is therefore necessary in critical practice to capture and differentiate the meanings of uses within the range of possibilities, to make sense of action within the sphere of possibilities, rather than to ascribe preordained meanings to them.

To one working with such an approach a practical joke of the past is not a neutral record of an event, but one which must be seen from the victim's point of view, and which challenges us to ask why we do not share the mirth.¹² Taking religion seriously in this way can dignify our subjects and yet differentiate them, so that the emaciated bodies of female saints who lived on nothing but the host will raise problems rather than pieties. The medieval language of religion posited so many of its claims on, invested so much power in, and was able to silence so many views about the eucharist, that those utterances which we do encounter must disturb and be made to account for those absent.

Thinking, thus, of the abundance rather than of the scarcity we can explore the rhetoric, the idioms of the language of religion developed

⁸ Wilson (1970), chapter 1; Fernandez (1988), pp. 117–18

⁹ James (1983); Phythian-Adams (1972); Davis (1983); Darnton (1984), pp. 106–41.

¹⁰ Scribner (1987).

¹¹ Bossy (1983).

¹² La Capra (1988), pp. 95–6, 103–5.

by the subjects of our study. This will not, therefore, be an exhaustive study of every type of eucharistic practice or attitude, but rather an unravelling of many such uses in their interrelationships, and of the rules which they followed. This approach will particularly seek to interpret the richness of practice, through ‘thick description’ of such expressions. Through appreciation of the eucharistic symbolic world one can make sense of the heroine of Chaucer’s Prioress’ Tale, that genteel lady who proceeds to tell a chilling tale of ritual murder after protestations of worthlessness;¹³ within the eucharistic world we can make sense of the tropes of sanctity used by those women who pinned desire onto the eucharistic flesh of the crucified Christ.

Discussions of the eucharist have usually taken place within studies of theology and canon law, in works of ecclesiastical history.¹⁴ In recent years, as social historians have turned to the study of popular religion, pageantry and ritual practice, a number of attempts have been made to integrate eucharistic processions, and even the mass, into a broader and more complex picture of medieval culture. John Bossy has analysed the works of liturgists and theologians on the mass in the late medieval and early modern period and tried to derive from them a sense of the changing ritual experience;¹⁵ Mervyn James has studied Corpus Christi processions and their contribution to civic life in late medieval English towns;¹⁶ and Charles Zika has looked at eucharistic processions in fifteenth-century Germany and demonstrated their importance as a ground for struggle between secular and ecclesiastical authority, between normative and popular culture.¹⁷ In these studies the eucharist, the mass, or the eucharistic processions were treated as symptoms which reflect some more basic and on-going political or social process. Their insights are bound, therefore, to highlight a single strand of the socio-political world, and to impute a determining power to it in the realm of religious culture. For Bossy this strand is the tension between the institutional church and the church of believers, within the social miracle of the mass; for James, the variety of interests of the urban craft-gilds, and the political unity demanded by patriciates and civic prerogative; for Zika, the drama of clerical–secular struggles for control of pilgrimage sites and processional ritual. These are fruitful studies of single expressions within a wider language of religion. Claims, hopes, dissent and strife are articulated in all these cases through a eucharistic

¹³ Hahn (1988).

¹⁴ See, for example, de Lubac (1949); Magivern (1963); Jungmann (1951–5); Macy (1984).

¹⁵ Bossy (1983).

¹⁶ James (1983).

¹⁷ Zika (1988).

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symbol of mass, procession, eucharistic miracles and Corpus Christi drama. But they are utterances which alone cannot fix the meaning, nor unfold the nature of the language which endowed them with meaning, of the cultural system which made the eucharist a potent symbol in collective and individual life endeavours. Inspired by the diversity of such utterances and the ubiquity of eucharistic symbols within the medieval culture, we must attempt to expound the language of religion in order to understand the variety of its expression. This book aims to penetrate that language, the system of meanings within which the eucharist possessed so central a position.¹⁸

This book began as another kind of enterprise. I conceived it as a study of the feast of Corpus Christi, a new eucharistic feast founded in the mid thirteenth century and disseminated from the early years of the next century. It was meant to be an examination of ritual practice, of how a feast is founded and celebrated – an exercise in social history following the inspiration of Bakhtin, Le Roy Ladurie, Carlo Ginzburg and Robert Scribner. But as the work developed more fundamental questions suggested themselves. Why a new *eucharistic* feast, and why just then?¹⁹ And when founded, why did the eucharistic feast prompt so lively a response, so much activity and creativity? I was moving from the study of the *utterance* to the study of the *language* which gave that utterance meaning; from a particular text – procession, liturgy – to a framework of meaning within which it was constructed. This approach will seek a higher order of structure in the culture, and yet trace the lines of association which produce its unique features. Corpus Christi is still the theme of this book, but treated as part of a system of meaning, of a chain of associations, in which the eucharist possessed a central signifying power.²⁰

A concept of language has informed my approach to the religious culture of the Middle Ages.²¹ Inasmuch as we communicate through

¹⁸ On the need of any religion to possess the attributes of a language and, by consequence, to be seen as such, see Rhees (1969), esp. p. 121.

¹⁹ Glynn Wickham has commented that before drama scholars argue about the impact of Corpus Christi on vernacular drama, they ought to ask why Corpus Christi was founded, Wickham (1959), 1, p. 9. This has never really been done; Devlin (1976) brings together some of the liturgical and theological material related to the foundation of the feast, and a number of Belgian scholars have explored the immediate context of its foundation in Liège. For bibliographies of studies related to the feast see Gallet (1946); Hässling (1986).

²⁰ On 'key symbols' and formulations about them, see first Ortner (1975), p. 134. On contingency in associations induced by symbols, see Fernandez (1977), p. 130.

²¹ I suggest the following as a working definition of culture: 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited concepts expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [and women] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life', Geertz (1973b), p. 89 (my brackets).

language, we apprehend the world through linguistic categories; thus, all culture, all meaning can be usefully studied as a language and through its salient symbols.²² It is through the symbolic that our own lives come to have meaning to ourselves, and the lives of those, present or past, with whom we interact, become comprehensible. And this realm of the symbolic, the signifying system within which meaning is constructed, can be encountered in two compatible ways: by seeking its structure and by unravelling difference and the variety of voices within it. Only by studying both, the unity and the diversity, can we develop a critical interpretive approach to language/culture. The linguistic paradigm cannot capture the totality of mental and creative processes which constitute the human experience,²³ but insofar as so much of our social behaviour is acquired through language, it is apt and turns our minds helpfully to interpretation,²⁴ to hermeneutic rather than limited causal understanding. Only thus can we hope to encompass the variety of expression which invariably exists around us, and within which we none the less manage, albeit partially, to communicate with others.²⁵ When a child is born it encounters symbols in the words and expressions, gestures and noises surrounding it, and in its local culture: stories about the world, about God, good and evil, virtue, the reasons for suffering, reward and punishment. These life-worlds are expressed and lived through local knowledge – that combination of common-sense and experience – in metaphors embodied in rituals and tales and in the universalising narratives of law, religion and kinship.²⁶ Knowledge is continually culled from ritual moments packed and rich with symbols, which convey meanings embedded in the particular structure of the local idiom, and knowledge is used to mediate order and disorder. Any symbols learned through experience and participation in turn are continually articulated through personal growth and action, through imagination, in the play of fantasy upon symbols and their referents, in the on-going process of self-understanding. So symbols convey knowledge,²⁷ they are emotionally packed,²⁸ they communicate infor-

²² Symbols can be artifacts or acts, they are 'historically created vehicles of reasoning, perception, feeling and understanding', Geertz (1968), p. 95.

²³ Luhmann (1989), pp. 91–5 on use of visualisation rather than language.

²⁴ Clifford (1983), pp. 130–1.

²⁵ Geertz (1979–80), pp. 175–7.

²⁶ Geertz (1973b), p. 94; on the work of metaphors in culture, see Fernandez (1974) and Fernandez (1977) esp. p. 105, and at p. 126: 'Religious metaphors recast the inchoate (and ineffable) whole of primary experience into various manageable perspectives . . . by taking experience from more manageable domains, into which some aspects of the experience can be extended, to represent it.'

²⁷ Sperber (1975), (1982).

²⁸ Turner (1967), pp. 28–9.

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mation,²⁹ and induce moods which cannot always be expressed in words.³⁰ Inasmuch as people communicate and interact, they reckon to understand each other, through the use of shared symbols, through the metaphors whose use is recognised even if their meanings are diametrically opposed.

This book is written in the conviction that religion can be best understood if it is not set apart from the social, not seen as an entity *sui generis* but rather as a culture, a system of meaning which represents and constructs experience and imagination. And in treating it as such we will also find that approaches which fix culture as a neat expression of other determinants – economic, environmental, gender-linked – fail to interpret and explain the ways in which culture not only communicates difference but also negotiates it. The model of elite/popular culture which has informed so many of the fruitful studies of religion in the last two decades,³¹ fails to account for sufficient phenomena, since it vouchsafed the primacy of determining power to extremely undifferentiated and static social categories. Neither have attempts to replace that primacy with one of gender,³² or environment,³³ provided an overarching framework for analysis, even when they highlighted a certain cultural context. We should try to turn our optic on its head, starting with the culture and its many voices as the privileged entity – it is, after all, always with us. We will then be able to look at a religious culture as a language, not as something fixed but as a variety of coexisting idioms, whose configurations and evolution produce cultural change.

Let us, then, give language privilege but not determination. At the end of the exercise of analysis and decoding, after teasing out the rules and locating the ambiguous gaps within a symbolic system, we should be better equipped to examine them in motion, in context. Roger Chartier has developed some useful historical approaches to the symbolic in the social by drawing our attention to variety in access to symbols within any society, showing that the books of the *Bibliothèque bleue*, once thought to have been read by artisans and servants and thus taken as a useful source for the study of popular culture, were read in seventeenth-century France by a variety of classes, notably by the bourgeoisie.³⁴ The question thus raised shifts the emphasis in the understanding of culture from the cultural product to the user, with the

²⁹ Leach (1976), chapter 1.

³⁰ Fernandez (1982), p. 554.

³¹ Clark (1983), p. 63.

³² Bynum (1987); see also the collection *Gender and religion* and in it Bynum (1986b).

³³ Underdown (1985).

³⁴ Mandrou (1975).

implication that a single artifact can be used, read, understood very differently by different types of users.³⁵ Chartier thus brings us back to the importance of *context*:³⁶ any symbol or artifact – a book, a procession, a prayer – will have ‘receptions’ amongst different groups and individuals which may be vastly different, or surprisingly similar. This difference will be the product of the context into which the symbol is inserted, the pre-existing ideas against which its use will take place. The experience of the mass will, thus, differ according to cultural milieu, local history and personal experience, through its incorporation into horizons of ideas and attitudes about the sacred, about the world, about physics, about clerical efficacy. Once we have made sense of the inscriptions on the text, we will be better positioned to appreciate the specific historical meaning of the use of the symbol in a given context. The users of the language will become more comprehensible, no longer muttering in a quaint dialect but speaking in meaningful and rich sentences. And we will find that in the language of sacramental religion the most disparate experiences were articulated: experiences of religious women in hermitages, powerful patricians in their towns, kings at coronations, defiant factions of villagers rising against others, Christians against Jews, all acting and enacted through its use.

Looking at medieval religion as a cultural system does not mean, then, that we need go no further. It does not induce neglect of the study of relations of power, oppression, coercion, and the experiences they entailed. On the contrary, equipped with an understanding of it we can go on to trace its operation in localities, in context. So acknowledging the essential indeterminacy of symbols is a concomitant of an investigation of the working, and the unmaking, of power, since it is through power that attempts to fix meaning are made. Power, invested in institutions, operates to supply, suggest and reinforce certain narratives and their symbolic make-up, to allow access to certain rituals and artifacts rather than others, to suggest as strongly as possible the aptness of certain metaphors.³⁷ Those who sought divergent modes of expression, those who questioned the aptness of dominant metaphors, could pay with their lives, or their freedom. Evidently, those who could influence representation could influence the construction of legitimacy, or the order of things material, social and spiritual. The whole structure of the church, the approval of secular authorities, the very naturalness of the only place of worship and of a comprehensive world-

³⁵ Chartier (1984).

³⁶ Chartier (1988).

³⁷ Fernandez (1974).

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view preached and taught frequently, was empowered in the claim of sacramentality and in the practice of an exclusive right of mediation. A Christian narrative of sacramentality was the dominant tale which embraced man, the supernatural, order and hierarchy, sin and forgiveness; it punctuated life, marriage, birth and death.³⁸ Yet although power at a variety of levels – local, provincial, national, urban and rural – raised some views over others, the story was always vulnerable to criticism. In the making of a unitary sacramental system, the language of religion was also made to possess gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions; its unmaking and questioning were dialectically inscribed in the very assertions which it made. So sacerdotal religion suggested anti-clericalism, and transubstantiation – its ridicule in claims against the material nature of the host. Even so, power defined the centre of discussion: the sacrament was a central symbol or test of orthodoxy and dissent throughout the later Middle Ages. Christ's presence in the sacrament, the need for sacerdotal mediation, the practice of gazing at the sacrament, the notion of certain inherent magical properties of the host, the body of Christ: all these could be crucial tests. And we find them conducted by people across the social spectrum, just as we now know that Lollard criticism and dissent were alive not only among the poor.³⁹ And although a gendered understanding of religious experience has proven fruitful, it is only one of the numerous analytical categories which we must apply. The eucharistic language belonged to everyone – Christocentric devotions did not attract women exclusively, and women were attracted to it in a variety of ways.⁴⁰ The ethnography of eucharistic understanding and practices will reveal many surprising voices.

But can an ethnography of sufficient density, variety and precision be produced from our sources, to match the aim of thick interpretation, of a contextualised reading? Doubts about the feasibility of any historical ethnography have recently been voiced by James Fernandez, a master ethnographer.⁴¹ It is the absence of an interactive element of personal contact between ethnographer and informant which allows the former to ask pointed questions – to 'interrogate' as some would have it⁴² – to smell and hear and touch and capture a moment, which challenges the historian's attempt to penetrate her subject.⁴³ This is

³⁸ But this is of course not the only narrative, Chartier (1985), p. 690.

³⁹ As shown for the late Middle Ages in Plumb (1987) and Hudson (1988b).

⁴⁰ Bynum (1987) would tend to essentialise the female religious experience.

⁴¹ Fernandez (1988).

⁴² Rosaldo (1986).

⁴³ On these problems in ethnographic practice, see Clifford (1983); Clifford and Marcus (1986); and for a critique, see Sangren (1988).

undoubtedly true, and just as ethnographers are currently questioning their own ethnographic authority,⁴⁴ historians have traditionally possessed an awareness of the distance between them and their subjects. This consciousness has been turned by the best historians into an intuitive 'dialogic' engagement,⁴⁵ which appreciates the opaque nature of the sources and the alterity of the past, but which also creates an intimacy of inquiry through a critical awareness of the rhetoric and discursive formulation of actions and pronouncements, as well as the traces they have left in the sources. For a medievalist there is a particular problem of the fragmentary nature of evidence, and that much of it is in the alien construction of the written word.⁴⁶ The fruitfulness of this investigation of the language of religion will hinge largely on the nature of available evidence, and on the ability to match a broad concept of culture with a diverse body of material to be contrasted and compared.⁴⁷

This book will follow the eucharistic world as it was designed and constructed in new ways by theologians, canonists and ecclesiastical administrators in the schools of Christendom, in monasteries and episcopal palaces from the eleventh, but mainly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. We will observe how the claim that God could be brought into the presence of men and women through repeated sacramental action, and that Christ could be received into their bodies, was planted in the eucharist and the mass (chapter 1). We will look at this symbolic system as it was disseminated through ecclesiastical institutions, taught in vernaculars, and elaborated in images which interpreted and applied it to existing knowledge and to evolving questions and understanding of it (chapter 2). Where the potent symbol entered a context of heightened religious activity, as in the thirteenth-century diocese of Liège, with its religious lay women, the beguines, with Dominicans, and ecclesiastics intent on reform, it emerged in the form of a new eucharistic feast, Corpus Christi. The new ritual spread in the area around Liège, to Rome, and ultimately became a universal observance by dissemination from Avignon in the early fourteenth century (chapter 3). The eucharistic feast became an occasion for concentrated creative use of the symbol and provided new contexts of meaning for the eucharist in the feast's evolving iconography, sermons, processions, liturgy, and ritual drama. We will see the eucharist used, tested and

⁴⁴ Clifford and Marcus (1986).

⁴⁵ LaCapra (1988), pp. 135–42.

⁴⁶ On the awkwardness of text as ethnographic vehicle, see Chartier (1985), p. 685.

⁴⁷ On the importance of variety of types of sources in the study of 'popular religion', see Lauwers (1987), p. 224.