

RITUAL RIGIDITY

At least $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago I heard/read the phrase--analogized from arterio/atherio-sclerosis (from the Gk.wd. for "hard")--**hardening of the categories**. Unless they are open & flexible, life(-blood) cannot flow through blood-vessels: you die. (The opposite: if you have no exo- or endo-skeleton [from the same Gk.wd.], you are a jellyfish.) A hospice chaplain (I saw in a hospice film) expressed only one conviction, viz. that the patients "die in peace": he was a cognitive jellyfish, as-it-were overreading Jesus' stricture against sabbatarian rigidity. The "body" of religious thought/practice should be both firm (but not rigid) & flexible (but not omni-permissive). This Thinksheet is about rigidity as the pathology of firmness.

THIS WINDOW: While words are verbal actions & actions are wordless statements, set aside those metaphors for our present purpose. "Meanings" here = what's said to signify; significances expressed as **sounds** (Wallace Stevens: "Words are, above all, sounds"); liturgically, the sounds-words are "ritual." "Actions" here = what's done & therefore **sights**; liturgically, "ceremonial." Do

"actions speak louder than words," sights than sounds? This morning of Thanksgiving Day, while reading Ps.27 in Hebrew, I noticed that "inquiring" of God (a verbal action, vs.4d), follows, does not precede "The LORD is my light" (the visual metaphor of vs.1; the light that lets me see [vs.4c] "the beauty [Heb.vb. "be pleasant, delightful, lovely"] of the LORD" visible in the temple & its furnishings [CEV: "to see how wonderful you are and to pray in your temple"])). But clearly, biblical religion gives the priority to the ears, not the eyes.

OCCASION: My irritation at the minister of the American Church of Paris, over his refusal to baptize Albert Camus (by then, $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago, famous for his essays & novels [especially THE PLAGUE and THE STRANGER] even though he [Methodist Howard Mumma] was thoroughly convinced of AC's conversion)(the story, 6.7-14.00 CHRISTIAN CENTURY, 644-7). That clergyman was guilty of (on the window) **D**: he had the rigid notion that baptism should never be private, without a congregation (despite Ac.8.36-38); but AC didn't want the publicity (he came to worship regularly but, he said, "I leave before the service is over to get away from them all"--so he refused confirmation & membership, yet "it seems right that I should be baptized"--he quoted Jn.3 & "with tears in his eyes said, 'Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to'").

But that clergyman's ritual (in the sense of doctrinal-liturgical) rigidity was even more profound. In AC's case, he interrupted the natural flow of faith-baptism-membership on both hyphens. AC rejected his pedobaptism as meaningless, but HM insisted it was valid, so "there is no reason for rebaptism." "Albert needed the experience [of baptism]. My compromise was to bring up the matter of joining a church and experiencing the rule of confirmation. That proved to be a mistake." End of relationship.

1 AC wanted **personal** baptism; what he had as an infant was **patriarchal** baptism (cuius regio, eius religion: the father-ruler determines the religion of all under his rule [e.g., Ac.16.33: the jailer's wife, among others, didn't have the right to choose her religion]). The socio-foundation of pedobaptism is patriarchal: the infant-child-adult must be of the father's religion. For us, that foundation no longer exists; indeed, is viewed as oppressive. Ergo, baptizing infants is oppressive, but a fossil in that father-dominance has leaked out of it.

2 What is the church to do when a convert rejects, as AC did, that social fossil but accepts the basic meanings adhering to the fossil (situation **A** minus **B**)? For HM, form was inseparable from function (situation **DA**): he insisted that AC "confirm" the validity of his pedobaptism, confirm something he explicitly denied & could not with integrity submit to: for him that would have been a **CD** fraud. (His pedobaptism "meant nothing to me. It was something done to me, no more meaningful than a handshake.") HM countered: The baby is baptized "because God loves the child and wel-

	meanings	actions
firm	A	B
rigid	C	D

comes him into the family of God. The baptism begins a process in which you continue to grow...into a new life." AC presented HM with his having been "born again" not by pedobaptismal regeneration but by personal commitment. To AC, HM's telling him he'd previously (as an infant!) been born again (when just born!) seemed nonsensical, & he went away sorrowful after being offered church-joining as a substitute for rebaptism ("there is no reason for rebaptism," said HM face-to-face with a reason Karl Barth & a host of other Christian thinkers before & after him consider valid).

3 Adult confessors are the normative, unchallenged candidates for baptism & its basic meanings (**AB**). In the USA, less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of Protestant churches continue to practice pedobaptism; many substitute infant "dedication" looking toward baptismal confirmation (i.e., baptism, upon personal commitment, confirming the prior dedication.) Increasingly, pedobaptism is seen as an appurtenance of Christendom & impediment to Christianity. (At a conference on baptism in a Roman Catholic seminary in 1979, some of us--including prominent British Congregationalist Robt. Paul & I [who were both "baptized" twice] so argued.)

4 My window looks static, but a dynamic analysis of the history of meanings/actions would reveal the fact of vertical/horizontal **migration**. **AC** is the migration of a meaning toward rigidity, & **CA** toward flexible firmness. **BD** moves from a way of doing something to the *only* way of doing it; & **DB** is a loosening up, providing behavioral options. **AB** & **BA** are migrations between meanings & actions, e.g. rituals & ceremonials. In **CD**, a rigid idea rigidifies an action; **DC** is the reverse. In **DA**, a firm-flexible meaning gets imprisoned in a rigid action (e.g., in the Eucharist, fraction [the breaking of the bread] corrupts the NT text, which nowhere says Jesus' body was "broken for you"); in **AD**, a meaning becomes strong enough to relax the rightness of an action.

5 In the early history of Christian doctrine, meanings migrated from believer's baptism to pedobaptism, which with the Constantinian age became normative: whatever efficacy was attributed to the former was, by this process, attributed also to the latter (so that Luther, against the anabaptists ["ana" being Gk. for the Lat. "re"] could shout "*Prove* that the baby does not believe!"). At high intellectual cost, any rigid orthodoxy freezes the migration (the **CD** situation); but at high intellectual gain, any open orthodoxy (such as mine) affirms both basic meanings/actions interlocks (e.g., the trinitarian formula in baptism) & the continuing possibility of immigrant critical/appreciative enrichment (i.e., supplemental meanings/actions migrating into Christian thinking & liturgical/ethical behavior) (the **AB** situation).

6 What bearing does all this have on a Christian's **participation** in a particular Christian community's noema/pragma (thought/action)? Me, e.g.: if I were a rigid, D-type antipedobaptist, I could not be in the UCC; but I'm a B-type, so I can put up with (though unenthusiastically) our baptizing babies. No only is no church perfect: no church perfectly matches my mind. And I cannot believe that the God who gave me freedom to think would be pleased with my matching my mind to that of any church/state/movement: I'm a poor prospect for totalitarians. But I am an evangelical Christian, with (Billy Graham publicly said of me) "his own way of being evangelical." (He could have added "and liberal." And even "and catholic": everywhere among any Christians I feel myself to be both insider & outsider.)

7 While I see values in high sacramental theology, I see also dangers, including the easy slide into thaumaturgy (e.g., AC's notion of pedobaptism as "a religious miracle of sorts, so that if the child should die, it would not go to hell"; & HM's doctrine that "the infant" receives "eternal life,...the gift which is given through baptism," & [this I do believe, as is recognized in the rite of infant dedication] "the infant has been initiated into the fellowship of Christ's church." In (waterless) dedication, the infant participates in the miracle that is Christ's church, but without the magic of ontological transformation (i.e., sacramental regeneration).

8 I'm resisting the temptation to say what I see, through this ABCD window, of the Eucharist (which, said Hans Lietzmann, was at first bread only) & the Sabbath-Sunday (which was a two-day Christian observance till the meanings of the former partially migrated into the latter, giving us the present Lord's Day).