

BAPTISM AND CHANGE  
IN THE  
EARLY MIDDLE AGES,  
*c. 200 – c. 1150*

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## INTRODUCTION

Very soon after beginning work on the history of baptism in the Middle Ages, I found myself going backwards. Struck with the difficulties encountered by Berengar of Tours and Lanfranc of Bec over what happened in sacrament – they were concerned with the eucharist first, but with baptism too – I started out by studying the history of sacrament and ideas about sacrament in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But the habit, so typical of this period, of ‘standing like dwarves on the shoulders of giants’ – in other words grounding all opinion on a thorough knowledge of ancient authorities – made it necessary to know at least something about the authorities themselves. Trying to see what Hugh of St Victor or Peter the Lombard, or Berengar himself, had in mind, without some familiarity with Ambrose and Augustine, felt like walking across an attic floor with faulty floor-boards.<sup>1</sup> It was important to see not just what they said, but how they had shaped their material.

Equally, I felt that the debate carried on in the twelfth century, although it might seem to have sprung out of nowhere with the strained, perhaps slightly eccentric, account of sacrament in Berengar in the mid-eleventh century, would be better understood as a debate which had begun among the Carolingians, in the ninth century, not only with the controversy over the eucharist between the two monks of the Abbey of Corbie, Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus, but perhaps even with the attempt by Benedict of Aniane, Alcuin and others to give the liturgy a semblance of intellectual consistency, to make it answerable to reason. From this time, sacrament, and liturgy generally, had come under scrutiny; questions had begun to be asked about what we would call its apparent irrationality. What did it mean to say that the bread and wine turned into the body and blood of Christ?

<sup>1</sup> Or like going for a walk with a giant carrying a dwarf on his shoulders, and only talking to the dwarf, which might be just as risky.

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How did baptism save a child too young to have any conception of what he or she was undergoing?

Periods in history are epistemological skittles, made to be bowled over; and no period is in reality shut off from the period before and the period after. But the twelfth century began to take on a curious aspect. It seemed both more and less divided from what preceded it: more divided because with great self-consciousness, it questioned the tradition it inherited, and doing this it took its distance from the tradition: and it seemed less divided, because to understand this questioning, the material questioned – the nature of liturgy and sacrament – had also to be understood.

It was for these reasons that I went backwards, to the Carolingians, and to the time of Augustine, Ambrose and – perhaps overdoing it a bit in a book about ‘the early Middle Ages’ – Tertullian and Hippolytus of Rome. My idea was to find out something not only about the interrogation of sacrament which grew from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, but about the genesis and nature of sacrament itself. Since the period dealt with thus turned out to be a long one – about a thousand years – and since the problem of what sacrament really is, what its effect is, is something of a quagmire, the book has, at times, a deliberately tentative quality.

Over this long period of the growth and decline of sacrament – for the interrogation of sacrament by theology is in a sense its decline – I found that liturgy itself, to an important degree, resisted time and change and period. It remained relatively unchanged over very long periods.<sup>2</sup> It remained unchanged in itself but, perhaps more significantly, in that it was always *thought* to have been instituted by Christ, and so to be essentially a repeat performance if not of the events of Christ’s life in the Gospels, at least of their significance and saving effect. More obviously than any other activity in early medieval life, liturgy was subject to the power of memory to forget change, or to ignore it, and so to make all time appear to stand still. Baptism was not a recollection *that* Christ once died and returned to life; it was a death and

<sup>2</sup> The very fact that the liturgy was in Latin, the language associated with the time of Christ, gave it a character of permanence against the background of the vernaculars: Mohrmann 1957, p. 87 and *passim*. I am not saying here that there is *no* change in the liturgy: it has been one of the accomplishments of Père Pierre-Marie Gy to show, with great art, how the texts of the liturgies can be made to yield evidence of changes in religious sensibility. In Gy 1987, for example, he shows how the Roman rite expresses developments in Christology.

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resurrection. The history of liturgy is in this sense the history of a *permanence*, of a phenomenon from which change is absent. Thus one of the great questions raised by the history of baptism is how it was that even after the habit of infant baptism had become widespread in the churches of Latin Christendom, the *form* of adult baptism – of a rite of conversion celebrated either at Easter or Pentecost, and not just of passive or magical exorcism – continued largely to prevail. On the other hand, this example shows how ambiguous is the permanence of liturgy. For if the forms of liturgy remained much the same, its sense, the meaning it had in a particular place at a particular time, or refracted in different minds, or subject to different moods, could never be the same. So, infant baptism puts the dramatic stress of the old rite of conversion in a quite different place, and would have drawn under the umbrella of the little-changed forms the manifold associations carried by the child. Indeed, the child, and the small body of the child with its vulnerable nakedness and its suggestions of uncertainties and precariousness, perhaps replaced water as the central symbol of baptism. Can we detect the same shift in the ivory relief of the Baptism of Christ, carved in the late tenth century in Winchester? It shows a childish Christ – not the Immanuel youth, the God-with-us, but a plump child – awe-struck by the bigger, over-arching figure of the Baptist.<sup>3</sup> There is an infinite number of possible senses of baptism, even at a given time, let alone over a thousand years, and we have been warned about the chances of being sure what *any* of them was. How can we know? But I have tried, in a series of essays – I have thought of each chapter as an essay – to give an impression of possible senses, or rather to translate into words the immediate impression of sense that came to me in each case. Tertullian's sacrament is not Ambrose's; Ambrose's or Cyprian's is not Augustine's, and so on. If I think of Ambrose's urgent addresses to those baptized a few days before, I remember what he says about the fish, struggling through the stormy sea, buried in water and yet alive, a humble image which carries effortlessly the whole weight of the theology of death and resurrection and of rebirth. Tertullian's baptism conjures up a quite different picture, the Spirit at the beginning of Creation, not plunging into the water as it did elsewhere – and in the later baptismal *epiclesis* – but carried over it, and imparting to

<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, *De sac.* 3.1, p. 69; Tertullian, *De baptismo* 4.1, p. 279; Beckwith 1972, no. 14, pl. 35.

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it its quality, a scene held in place by the habitual restraint of Tertullian's mind. Thinking of the rite of the eleventh or twelfth centuries, one might be reminded of many things – perhaps, for example, one of the Exultet Rolls from south Italy, a twelfth-century manuscript now in the John Rylands Library in Manchester. These rolls contained the text of the Exultet prayer, which was part of the blessing of the Easter candle on the vigil of Easter Saturday, shortly before baptism; but they also give depictions of the images used by the prayer. The rolls were unfurled from a pulpit by a deacon, in such a way that he could read the blessing, while the congregation could see the pictures of what he was saying. The prayer itself makes of the bees, who were thought to give birth without sexual contact, a metaphor of the Virgin Birth of Christ; and this roll follows the spoken blessing by juxtaposing, in two interlinear drawings only three lines apart, the two scenes of the Nativity above and bees in their hive below. But in the artist's contemplation of the liturgical image, the hive has become the stable of the Nativity, and the stable is a hive. The apparent oddness of the metaphor is effaced, as all the figures take on a bee-like aspect: the diminutive mother and child, both the same size, lying down, and the animals above them; to the left of the Nativity an enigmatic onlooker, sitting on the ground with his hand over his cheek; and the small Christ-child crammed into a basin in a Purification scene to the right; all are bees. There is no difficulty now in seeing the Nativity as a bee-hive.<sup>4</sup>

To some extent, the essays are independent of one another. I have let the bucket down into the river as it flows past, to see what might come up; it would in any case have been impossible to dredge the river systematically. Each chapter, or essay, is an attempt to make sense of a bucketful, to say how its contents got there. Lying between the chapters, there remain, consequently, some important unanswered questions. I have tried to give some explanation of the relation of the thinking of Augustine to the liturgical practice, and the unarticulated thought behind it, of the Middle Ages. But I have left dangling the question of how Augustine's tendency to see liturgy, or the *cultus dei* as he called it, as principally a return to the understanding of God by man through language and memory, becomes – or perhaps gives way to – the liturgical preference for the understanding which is

<sup>4</sup> John Rylands Library, MS 2; Avery 1936, pl. LV, 6–7.

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awakened by and which passes through Nature: through the brute matter of salt, water, oil, ashes and body. For the medieval liturgy is a transfiguration of the physical from which Augustine shied away. Again, I have not put together the various representations of time in the liturgy: I have let the 'instant' which seems to be depicted in the wall-paintings of the baptistery of Concordia Sagittaria, and the notions of history and repetition which emerge from the poetic reconstruction of the benediction of the waters by Leidrad of Lyon (c. 812), and which are so important in the liturgical concept of time, remain separate (see pp. 291ff; 167ff).

In leaving these themes a little in suspense, I am following in the steps of liturgy itself, which, however much it aspires to the perfection of clear, regular, repetitious forms, often achieves its effect by juxtapositions where the relation between the parts is only implicit, and where each part is open to the impact of the others, so that the congregation is constantly invited to make its own connections. In this way, liturgical celebration is like the performance of a mime-artist, who does not *copy*, but suggests all the more forcibly the personality he mimes by picking out one or two typical gestures or habits of speech or dress. When this is done, the audience – or congregation – is not passive; it must make the mime true to its object.<sup>5</sup> The series of readings for Holy Saturday, one of the preludes to baptism, in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* is a fine example of how this happens in the Roman liturgy: one after the other, the stories of Creation, Noah's Flood, the sacrifice of Abraham, the crossing of the Red Sea, the three boys in the fiery furnace, the thirsting deer of Psalm 41 (42), and other stories, are read out from the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Biblical history has thus become a group of juxtaposed scenes rather than a succession over time.

But I have also tried to give a narrative account of baptism in the early middle Ages; to show the development of symbol in baptism, through the early Western Church and into the time after Augustine, until its questioning by theology in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The centre of this account is the attempt I have made, in chapter 4, to describe the working of sacrament in the period, roughly, from the death of Augustine to the eleventh century. Since there is little theological commentary on liturgy in these centuries, it is only possible, on the whole, to work from the

<sup>5</sup> See Warnock 1976, pp. 169ff, for an analysis of what goes on in a mime of this kind.

<sup>6</sup> *Gelasian*, nos. 431ff, pp. 70–2.

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documents of the liturgies themselves – the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, the different versions of the Gregorian rite, the Gallican, Mozarabic and Italian rites, the Irish and so on<sup>7</sup> – and from texts which do not (usually) talk directly about liturgy, but, running parallel with the liturgy, throw an oblique light on it. The capitularies of the Carolingians are an example (they also sometimes speak directly); then the saints' lives; and vernacular literature when it echoes liturgical themes (*Beowulf*, perhaps, and *Andreas*, an account in Anglo-Saxon of the life of the apostle Andrew, more definitely); Bede's commentary on the Song of Songs, whose rhythms, and whose theme of aspiration to beauty, I have taken to be those of the liturgy; and, sometimes more illuminating than any other source, painting, both miniature painting in manuscripts and wall-paintings, like the ones in Concordia Sagittaria in north-east Italy. The problem of how liturgy stands to what lies outside it is a rich one which could never be exhausted. This will always be true because liturgy is a concentration of society, and in that sense contains society itself. This is eminently so in the early Middle Ages, from Augustine to the eleventh century, say, when almost everything was made to keep time with the pulse of liturgy; the idea of the past (in Gregory of Tours, for example, who took the history of the Franks back not only to Adam and Eve but to the Creation, with an intense remembering akin to that of baptism or the eucharist); the judgement of guilt or innocence in the ritual of ordeal; illness, death, birth, the possession of land and the tilling of it; eating, fighting, sex, going on journeys (of which the apotheosis is pilgrimage), and so on.<sup>8</sup> It would never be possible to give a full account of this reflex of benediction in medieval society, because there was nothing which was not potentially included in it. The pictures of St George and the dragon and Mary Magdalene in the baptistery of Concordia raise, tantalizingly, the question of the relation between the cult of the saint; the life of the saint by which the cult is carried; the representation, or even 'real presence', of the saint in a painting; and liturgy. I have said very little about this, but the question might be put here: how far is the saint himself a sacrament, a kind of ambulant conjunction of heaven and earth, a perfect union of spirit and body which overflows in the expressionism of miracle?

<sup>7</sup> For brief notes on these rites, see Vogel 1983.

<sup>8</sup> See Marett 1933 for an account of ritual and sacrament along these lines. Dupront 1987 evokes the relation between pilgrimage and liturgy.

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Sources such as the saint's life throw an oblique light. Their connection with liturgy is partly, or sometimes wholly, beneath the conscious level. In chapter 4, using the indirect sources as well as the documents of the liturgies, I have tried to describe what liturgy does, against the historical background of the increasing prevalence of infant baptism. I have considered both the formal aspect of the rite – its regularity, its fixedness, its repetitions, and, especially in the Roman rite, its austerity – and its symbolic aspect, by which I mean the power it has to make the physical world open to the infinite, and even to show that if looked at with the right kind of eye, it contains the infinite. Symbol, as I have used it here, is just this: the endless expressiveness of things in the world, despite their limitedness in themselves; so that it is also the *tension* between the sense that something in the world – water, say – is all the possible meanings it suggests (and these have no end); and the sense that it is 'really' only water. With symbol, we are making the crossing of the Red Sea with the Israelites, from captivity to the Promised Land. But in the symbol, the tension of trying to get to the Promised Land is never relieved. Unable to enter it once and for all, we must always, and repeatedly, aspire to it; always be in a state of 'crossing over' to it. This is the *transitus* (crossing over) within symbol, which is also the *transitus* of conversion and repentance, which Ambrose was so keenly aware of, and which is the rhythm of medieval liturgy. It is never just a spectacle, a priestly act observed by a detached congregation; but only happens at all because the congregation recognizes in the tension of symbol its own aspiration to be saved. It sees there the same mixture of the difficulty of attaining to truth, and the possibility of doing so. The story I have told is how, in baptism, this perception of symbol grows out of the background of the conversion to Christianity of the Greek, Latin and Hebrew worlds, how it rises to a pitch in the Middle Ages with the remarkable imagery of the baptism of infants, and then how, from the ninth century (but with real effect from the mid-eleventh) the tension in symbol is, in a sense, betrayed, or misunderstood, and lost sight of, by the theologies of sacrament. It is retrieved momentarily, perhaps, by the introversion of symbol which is one of the things that can happen when it is transposed into commentary (thus Rupert of Deutz), and which can also be an effect of visionary theology, as in Hildegard of Bingen. But I have ended with the perception by Abelard that to see symbol in

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the light of intention, as though intention were something outside it and not generated by it, is to see above all – and with all the anxiousness and playfulness characteristic of Abelard – the difficulty of symbol, and in this sense to lose confidence in it.

Although I have been interested in the social context of liturgy, I have been concerned not to reduce liturgy to the poverty of social theory. I have wished to understand something about what liturgy itself was, not how effective it was as a means of social control, nor how exactly it manifested systems of classification; and the attempt to see something of what it was has convinced me that the explanation of liturgy as mere ideology – besides suggesting a very low opinion both of the priest who used it and the peasant or knight who was (supposedly) subjected to it – is indeed impoverished. To be persuaded that the social in the early Middle Ages was ever an end in itself, and thus to speak of authority without understanding its relation to belief, is, I think, to do the job of a theoretician rather than that of an historian, and instead of looking at the Middle Ages, to look through them at the present. To guard against this, we might keep in mind Augustine's observation, that everything short of God is a sign or symbol.<sup>9</sup> Seen like this, everything demands a search for meaning, rather than dictating meaning; and the search for meaning far better characterizes medieval liturgy than the view that it was just the instrument of authority.

<sup>9</sup> *De doctrina christiana* 1.2ff, pp. 7ff.