Performing pilgrimage

Walsingham and the ritual construction of irony

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INTRODUCTION: PILGRIMAGE AS PERFORMANCE

> Walsingham is like a huge icon. It's almost like a Christian theme park, in which we set out the wares and then allow people to make of it what they will. And I think there's something about that which is very therapeutic: that they'll make the stations of the cross; they'll just come and sit in the shrine; they'll sit in the gardens; they'll go and light candles; they'll sit in the Holy House and just look at the image; they'll go for a walk up to the parish church; they'll go and visit the Orthodox chapel or they'll go and buy things in the shops to take home. All of that I think is very, very significant, because it's the best kind of spiritual direction, which actually allows a pilgrim to find his or her own way in what God offers. . . . And I think we just make available these resources, and people use them as they find best.

These are the words, spoken in an interview, of a priest at the Anglican shrine of Walsingham, north Norfolk. They indicate some of the elements he considers key to the performance of a successful pilgrimage: the sense, for instance, that a pilgrim must find a spiritual direction not only on the way to a sacred shrine, but also within the environs of the sacred space; the conviction, as well, that ritualized 'browsing', far from representing an heretical evasion of fixed liturgical structures, will have divinely sanctioned and therapeutic – even performative – effects.

Such attitudes might initially seem surprising because they come from a source hardly known for its encouragement of liturgical innovation. The Anglican shrine at Walsingham has the reputation within ecclesiastical circles of being a defender of old-style, High-Church principles, indicated as much by its continuation of unashamedly 'smells and bells' styles of ritual as by its apparently firm opposition to the ordination of women. In this chapter, however, we wish to argue that the priest has nevertheless identified an important aspect of much contemporary pilgrimage to Walsingham. We propose to examine the relationship between carrying out pilgrimage rituals and the cultivation of creativity in performance by exploring the ways in

which many visitors to the site use Christian tradition and liturgy less as sources of fixed legitimacy than as flexible symbolic means or resources through which to ritualize social relations.

Some pilgrimages to both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic shrines at Walsingham can be described as 'official' and 'controlled' in the sense that they involve organized journeys, usually arranged by a given parish, to the sacred sites of a single religious tradition. Many visitors, however (including some who come on supposedly collectively co-ordinated pilgrimages), act as self-conscious spiritual bricoleurs, constructing their own paths through the numerous sacred foci of the village. The shrines of both main religious groups in the village encode implicit narrative versions of the Walsingham tradition in their spaces and liturgies, yet such narratives can be subverted by pilgrims as they cut and paste their way through the village, experimenting with a variety of religious genres without necessarily endorsing any single one of them. In practice, Walsingham – or rather 'the Walsingham experience' – offers a continuum of ritualized performances: at one end lies the potential for full and deliberate submission to liturgical order; at the other a self-conscious cultivation of pilgrimage as innovation is evident, in which ritual improvisation is invested with a form of sacramental irony.

We contend that the power of many of the more innovative examples of pilgrimage we examine lies in the self-aware transformation of traditional liturgy into performances that simultaneously genuflect towards conventional ritual forms and yet subvert those forms in the very act of genuflection. In the process, the boundaries of ritual action are shifted and expanded. People may create sacralized performances incorporating the pubs, gift-, souvenir- and tea-shops and even the nearby seaside in their pilgrimages, or draw canonical texts and liturgy into dialogue with personal, often overtly secular images and practices taken from everyday life, the imagination, literature, films and theatre. In these instances, ritual is not merely submitted to determination by history and evaluation by participants through being performed (cf. Schieffelin 1995); it is actively accommodated to personal preferences before it is even staged.

Walsingham therefore acts as a physical 'medium' for pilgrimage, offering various spaces for the enactment of rituals. However, as a holy site the village is not so much a single place as a roughly defined set of activities broadly contained within a permeable temporal and spatial frame. Such activities involve shifting fields of social relations that can move over periods of hours or days around sometimes interlocking, sometimes separate arenas of action. During a pilgrimage, a person can experience a number of sites or liturgies with varying combinations of friends, partners or kin, and then return in future years to repeat a similar process.

In some of the following, then, we shall move far from the view of ritual constructing a coercive formality that links particular events into a pre-existing order (cf. Bloch 1974). Where pilgrims become authors or

self-conscious orchestrators of their own pilgrimages, the degree to which they are forced into submission by established liturgical orders is greatly reduced. The pilgrimages described here raise complex issues regarding the relationship between constraint and creativity (cf. Hastrup and Gore, both this volume). While pilgrimage is turned into a kind of 'play' in many cases, casual tourists as well as pilgrims may also come to see themselves as engaging in activities that transcend purely self-indulgent leisure. Furthermore, even improvised performances are not usually created *de novo*, since they are defined by simultaneously echoing and altering conventional forms.

It should be clear by now that we view the performance of ritual as involving much more than the mere replication of a given liturgical script. Rather, in the case of Walsingham it can frequently be seen as a strategic deployment of symbolic resources. Performance in this sense comes close to Bell's definition of the process of ritualization as 'a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities' (1992: 74). The virtue of this definition is that it does not presume to specify universal, necessary features of sacred or secular activity, but rather stresses the idea of differentiating – by whatever means – one form of action or behaviour from another. Adapting Bell's notion of ritualization, one can argue that ritual performances carried out by pilgrims act semiotically to create a sense of 'difference' in relation to whatever other actions they wish to invoke and transcend. Many parishes do not come to Walsingham in order to engage in novel forms of ritual *per se*. Instead, their pilgrimage enables them to carry out their normal forms of worship in a particularly authoritative context. To celebrate Mass or carry out the stations of the cross at a national shrine – and moreover one where unknown others are seen to be doing the same –therefore gives such actions a significance they would not have in a local church. Their ritual action as pilgrims is defined not merely in relation to everyday life, but also in comparison to other ritual in a more 'workaday' context. For others, the playful 'misuse' of conventional liturgical forms is a form of ritualization of ritual, in the sense that it is an active transformation of Anglo-Catholic or Roman Catholic liturgy, a metacommentary on religious orthodoxy that signals association with, but also distance from, such orthodoxy.