

MARRIAGE AND THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES

Introduction

Whatever may be said of Oriental Christian theology in general, and whatever the historical record of the Oriental Christian Churches, Oriental liturgical formularies do not appear to have suffered to quite the same extent, or in quite the same way, from the unhealthy dissociations to which we have grown accustomed from a very early stage in Western theology.

The Oriental liturgical formularies, which have remained unchanged for centuries, do not show any marked tendency to dissociate the space of the world at large from the space in which the Western Churches have tended to enclose themselves. There is in them no apparent dissociation of the temporal from the eternal, the sacred from the secular, religious values and abstract ethical values from social values, salvation from earthly and temporal values, the natural from the divine, Incarnation from Redemption, the bodily from the spiritual, or God from man.

The marriage rituals in the Western Churches are characterized by such 'soberness' of expression that the nuptial mystery of Christ and his Church and all the other relevant scriptural data are barely mentioned. At times our rituals of marriage are so laconic as not to mention at all any of these riches. On the contrary, the sparkling profusion with which the Oriental liturgies – still so little known to us – have elaborated on this point the data of the Scriptures constitutes a major and incontrovertible argument for the thesis according to which the theological explanation of the reality of marriage is to be found not only in the symbolism of the wedding between Christ and his Church, but also, and much more so, in the very core of the Gospel: the doctrine of our salvation.

The Oriental Christian rituals of marriage are so steeped in the Bible that it should come as no surprise to anyone that Oriental Christianity has always understood marriage as a sacrament along the lines of a large strand of modern Western theology: to the writers of the Oriental formularies marriage is a saving mystery in earthly guise; a visible, physical and historical bestowal of salvation; a call of God to salvation and to the proclamation of salvation which both enables and requires of man, as a way of life, a response of total commitment. To the Oriental Christian, marriage is both a gift and a calling; a mission, a way of proclamation and a way of salvation; a means whereby God, man and the universe are made

one through the earthly couple's participation in God's saving and life-giving activity.

In his article entitled 'The Sacrament of Marriage in Eastern Christianity',¹ A. M. Allchin writes: 'It may be well . . . to reflect that the existence over hundreds of years of Churches which have upheld Our Lord's teachings about marriage in a great variety of social and cultural contexts, while employing a theology and discipline of marriage somewhat different from our own, should lead us to a certain humility which has not always characterized Western theologians.' The purpose of this article is to show that the study of Oriental liturgical documents on marriage can truly help us to recover and re-phrase a theology of marriage which the Church could usefully adopt in her proclamation of the Gospel to the pluralist world of today. It is also hoped that this article may – indirectly – afford us a possible answer to another question the Western Christian world is asking today: words and gestures steeped in living symbolic power are perhaps more efficient tools for creative liturgy than endless modifications of accepted texts, extravagant novel approaches or self-indulgent academic exercises of a purely antiquarian character.

From the enormous wealth of Oriental rituals we will discuss only three points: marriage as a matter of grace, calling and election; marriage as fulfilment; and marriage as the microcosm of the mystical union between Christ and his Church.

Marriage as a matter of Grace, Calling and Election

To the Oriental Christian, marriage is first and foremost a matter of grace, calling and election.

The liturgical climax of all Oriental rites of marriage is to be found in the coronation of the bridegroom and bride and in the blessing that follows it. This is how the formula for the coronation in the Coptic rite reads:

The Father blesses, the Son crowns,
the Holy Spirit sanctifies and makes perfect.
They are worthy, they are worthy,
the bridegroom and his bride.²

In a very expressive way, the Syrian ritual of marriage prescribes that the officiant should hold the crowns high above the head of the bridegroom and bride, and then lower them with a gently waving motion until they rest firmly on their heads, saying:

This crown, through the hands of our Lord,
comes down from heaven and rests:
this bridegroom (bride) the crown befits
which the priest places on his (her) head.³

The theme of the transforming grace of God in the context of cosmic salvation is very common in all Oriental rites, in which the bridegroom and bride are often compared to the humble water Christ turned into noble wine in Cana of Galilee.⁴ The point is made very clearly in the initial hymn of the Armenian rite:

Today the creatures of heaven rejoice
in the renewal of the creatures of the earth,
for he who renews all beings, the Spirit,
has descended from his holy high chamber
and through him the phalanx of the apostles is renewed.
Today the earthly nature starts with joy,
for he who took away the Spirit from human flesh
has once more made a gift of it to all men.⁵

Marriage as Fulfilment

Through God's election and call and by God's transforming grace, the bridegroom and bride become one undivided being, the 'pleroma' of one another. The fulfilment which they find in each other is the pledge and sacrament of their fulfilment in the life to come, when the crowns of their marriage will become for them the crowns of their eternal glory, and their earthly marriage the eternal wedding banquet of the Lamb.

The idea of the crown as the symbol of the perfection and fulfilment of an earthly reality is not unknown to the Scriptures.⁶ According to the book of Genesis, God causes a man to leave his father and mother and two become one being. It is not good for man to be alone: in each other, husband and wife find a fulfilment which can only come from God.⁷ To her husband, a good wife is a glorious crown (i.e. perfection and fulfilment⁸) just as the whole People of God is a royal crown in the hands of God.⁹ Salvation, the ultimate fulfilment, is represented in the NT as the marriage between Christ and his Church: in their earthly marriage the husband reflects the glory of God and the wife reflects the glory of her husband. Yet, in Christ's fellowship, woman is as essential to man as man is to woman: man and woman are as essential to each other in terms of their fulfilment as Christ is necessary to the fulfilment of humankind.¹⁰

This type of reasoning is present throughout the marriage formularies of all Oriental rites. The formula for the coronation in the Byzantine rite reads as follows:

The servant of God N. N.
is crowned by the servant of God N. N.,
in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹¹

The formula clearly implies that the bridegroom and bride are one another's crown and perfection. By comparison with other similar Byzantine formulae we also learn that it is God who gives their mutual fulfilment as a gift through the priest as Christ's representative and therefore God's intermediary.

The life of mutual fulfilment which God has given them as a gift is the only way for the bridegroom and bride to attain to the promised crown of heavenly glory.

The Syriac Maronite rite expressly says that the love the bridegroom and bride have for each other is a gift from God. At the very beginning of the marriage rite, the officiant is to ask the couple the following question:

N. N. and you N. N.: is it of your own accord
that you exchange with each other
the promise of *divine* love?¹²

Immediately after the exchange of the marriage vows in the Armenian rite, the priest says to the couple:

If you behave to each other in this fashion,
in the love of God,
the providence of God will guard you
in everything that you do,
bless the work of your hands
and make you abound in material and spiritual goods,
in order that,
living on earth in peace and piety,
you may be found worthy
to obtain the future goods which have been promised.¹³

The Byzantine rite also makes this point in a suggestive ceremony. The bridegroom and bride are made to drink of a common cup, filled with water and wine, which is the symbol of their future life together and, according to the Persian rite, also of the spiritual drink which Christ won for her bride the Church through his sacrifice on Calvary.¹⁴ After the couple have drunk from the common cup, the cup is placed on a table already prepared in front of them. Then the priest – the symbol of Christ in all Oriental rites – holds the hands of the couple and takes them together for three times around the table.¹⁵ At the same time, the best man and the bridesmaid follow the couple holding their crowns above their heads while the choir sings three troparia: two referring to Christ, and one comparing the matrimonial crown of the human couple to the incorruptible crown of glory the ancient Christian Martyrs won through the faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ.¹⁶

Marriage as the microcosm of the union between Christ and his Church

Christ is the true Bridegroom, and the Church the true Bride. The human couple are only the microcosm of the salvific marriage between Christ and his Church. As R. Laurentin says: 'Salvation is not a return to the past, but a flight forward. God is not yet the God who is "all in all things". Mankind must become the "place" where God is fulfilled in the world.'¹⁷ We, the Church, are 'betrothed to Christ, and have been presented to him as a chaste virgin to her true and only husband'.¹⁸ We are 'a chosen race . . . , a people claimed by God . . . to proclaim the triumph of him who has called us out of darkness into a marvellous light'.¹⁹ The crown of high and powerful glory the earthly couple receive from God is to be an instrument of proclamation.

This type of reasoning too is present throughout the formularies of all Oriental rites. Immediately after the coronation, the Coptic rite has the following prayer:

O Lord, place upon your servants
 a crown of invincible grace;
 a crown of high and powerful glory;
 a crown of correct and unshakable faith;
 and bless all their actions.
 For it is from you, O Christ Our God,
 that all good comes,
 and to you it is that glory and honour return,
 and to your good Father,
 and to the lifegiving Spirit
 who is consubstantial with you.²⁰

The Persian rite makes this point equally clear in a prayer between the coronation and the blessing:

Your blessing, O Lord, bursts over the earth,
 and your glory mounts up to heaven.
 Your blessing places crowns over the head of your servants
 and makes perfect their actions.
 Make your servants perfect.
 Bless them in your goodness,
 that they may render you glory and honour,
 praise and adoration, at all times, O Lord of all things,
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²¹

The Coptic rite has its own expressive way to prove this point. The people's response after the reading of the Gospel compares the

bridegroom and bride to musical instruments whom the Holy Spirit himself has tuned to sing God's praises:

Those whom the Holy Spirit has tuned like a zither
 bless God at all times:
 with psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles,
 day and night,
 they join their voices together without ceasing.²²

The crowns which the bridegroom and bride receive from God are to be for them the invincible armour God gives to the warriors who proclaim his Gospel.²³ This is the sequel to the prayer from the Syrian rite already quoted above:

May the Lord crown you with the crown of righteousness;
 may he adorn you with incorruptible garments;
 may he clothe you, in face of all power of the Enemy,
 with an invincible armour.²⁴

In some Western rites, we are accustomed to the idea that God 'consecrated the state of matrimony to such an excellent mystery, that in it is signified the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church',²⁵ but the Western rites seldom make much of this vague allusion. This is not so in the Oriental rites, in which the whole theology of marriage is based precisely on the idea that the human marriage is only the microcosm of the marriage between Christ and his Church. From the many possible texts, we choose the litany before the blessing of the couple in the Persian rite:

O heavenly Bridegroom: by the mediation of John, a priest and son of a priest, your paranymp and ambassador, you married the Church. We pray you, have mercy upon us.

O heavenly Bridegroom, by way of a dowry and wedding gift you gave your precious blood to your Bride. We pray you, etc.

O heavenly Bridegroom, you have invited to your wedding banquet, that is to the proclamation of your kingdom, every being in heaven and on earth. We pray you, etc.

O heavenly Bridegroom, you have mixed your heavenly wine, your blood, to quench the thirst of your Church, and made living water spring forth for the refreshment of the Bride you took for yourself. We pray you, etc.

O heavenly Bridegroom, you have called all nations and made them sit at the table of the delights of your wedding, that they may rejoice. We pray you, etc.

O heavenly Bridegroom, on the last day of your coming you will introduce into your spiritual and heavenly nuptial chamber all those whom you invited. We pray you, etc.

O heavenly Bridegroom, whose banquet lasts for all eternity, grant your peace to your servants. Trusting in you, they have married according to the Law. Grant that they may find joy in the undertaking they have just made. We pray you, etc.²⁶

In the same rite, the crowns are placed on the heads of the bridegroom and bride during the singing of a poetical composition dedicated to the marriage between Christ and his Church. We can easily gather the reason for this by referring to another poetical composition sung soon afterwards:

Through your great power, O Redeemer,
 you have completed your holy temple,
 and through your grace you have put down the foundations
 of the Church you chose for your honour.
 Today the phalanxes of heaven and of earth
 rejoice in the feast of your consecration.
 They pray and beseech you
 that your peace may reign amongst her children
 and that she may be a refuge
 throughout all ages for all peoples,
 that, in her, they may glorify you, and say:
 'Glory be to you, O Saviour'.²⁷

The composition is taken straight from the Office of the first Sunday of the liturgical season of the Dedication of the Church.²⁸ The reason for this is simple: the marriage between Christ and his Church is the symbol and sacrament of the salvation of humankind: salvation which the Church, and its microcosm, the Christian family nucleus, must proclaim to the world. In this way, the formation of a Christian family is compared to the consecration of the Church of living stones as the temple from which the proclamation of the Gospel is to come forth.

Conclusion

The Coptic rite has a unique ceremony which recapitulates everything we have said so far on the Oriental understanding of Christian marriage. Immediately before they are crowned, the bridegroom and bride are anointed with oil in the manner of Old Testament kings, priests and prophets. The ceremony, which can be understood only in the light of Isa. 61 and 62, is strongly reminiscent of the unctions in the Coptic baptismal rite:²⁹ in baptism the individual Christian is anointed into the royal priesthood of the People of God; in marriage the human couple are anointed into a microcosm of the same priesthood, which is both royal and prophetic.

Here is the text of the prayer for the blessing of the oil:

Lord, God and Master of all things,
 God and Father of Our Saviour Jesus Christ:
 with the product of the olive-tree
 you have anointed priests, kings and prophets.
 Lord, Friend of Man and Fountain of Goodness,
 we pray and beseech you to bless this oil,
 that it may be an oil of sanctification for your servants,
 a weapon of truth,
 a weapon of justice,
 an unction of purity and incorruptibility,
 unsullied light and beauty,
 in view of happiness and true comfort,
 in view of strength and health
 and of the triumph over all power of the Adversary
 in view of the salvation and renewal of their being
 – their body and spirit –
 for the abundant production of good works
 for the glory and honour of your holy name
 and of the name of your only Son
 and of the lifegiving and holy Spirit,
 who is consubstantial with you
 now and forever.³⁰

God, the Lord and Master of creation, has saved us in Jesus Christ. In ancient times God chose and anointed priests, kings and prophets to serve his purpose of salvation. God is now choosing, electing and anointing the bridegroom and bride, that they may be his priests in the proclamation of the Gospel, his prophets and mouthpieces, and, as King and Queen, the intermediaries of his lifegiving power.³¹ Sinful and yet holy, whatever they do, wherever they are, the bridegroom and bride, robed in the purity and incorruptibility of the grace of God, will cause the unsullied light and beauty of God's good news to creation to shine everywhere. The grace of God will make them find in each other true happiness and comfort. The same grace will make them fight for the Gospel as warriors protected as by an armour against all power of the Adversary. By God's grace they will be renewed and transformed into a new creature. The whole of their being will be transformed: their body as well as their soul, and they shall be one as God and his creation are meant to be. In their newly found identity, they will be enabled to show the fruits of the Spirit to the honour and glory of God who uses them and the whole of their existence to call men to unity with him and, at one and the same time, to show them how fulfilling this unity is and how men are meant to answer God's

call with the worship of their whole lives. Through the physical, visible and historical reality of their marriage, God bestows salvation, shows what it is, and calls men to it. A secular reality is transformed – through God's grace – into a saving mystery: marriage is a sacrament of salvation in the fullest sense of the word.

NOTES

1. 'Marriage, Divorce and the Church': the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on the Christian Doctrine of Marriage, Appendix 3 (London, 1971), p. 113.
2. A. Raes, *Le Mariage dans les Églises d'Orient* (Chevetogne, 1958), p. 41. Note that the Greek for worthy was used in the ancient rites of Ordination.
3. A. Raes, op. cit., p. 128.
4. Cf. A. Raes, op. cit., p. 35.
5. Ibid., p. 78. See also Rom. 8:19-23.
6. See, e.g., Prov. 14:24; 16:31; 17:6; Eccles. 1:22; 25:8; Ps. 65:12; Phil. 4:1.
7. See Gen. 2:18-24.
8. Prov. 12:4.
9. Isa. 62:3.
10. I Cor. 11:7, 11.
11. A. Raes, op. cit., p. 63 and notes 1 and 2.
12. Ibid., p. 139.
13. Ibid., pp. 88-9.
14. See ibid., p. 164. Cf. also the ancient baptismal rite of the three cups in G. Dix, *The Apostolic Tradition* (London, 1968), p. 40.
15. In the ancient Jewish rites of marriage, the bride goes once round the bridegroom, and then they go together for three times around the tent which represents their common life. Cf. *Jüdisches Lexicon* (Berlin, 1927), vol. 1, col. 1407-08; *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (London, 1901-07), vol. 8, p. 341 and vol. 6, pp. 304-05. See also Jer. 31:22 in the original Hebrew.
16. A. Raes, op. cit., p. 67.
17. R. Laurentin, *Liberation, Development and Salvation* (New York, 1972), p. xv.
18. 2 Cor. 11:2.
19. I Pet. 2:9.
20. A. Raes, op. cit., p. 41.
21. Ibid., p. 182.
22. Ibid., p. 33.
23. See Eph. 6:10-17.
24. A. Raes, op. cit., p. 128.
25. Cf., e.g., *The Scottish Episcopal Prayer Book* (pocket edition), (Edinburgh, 1929), p. 412.
26. A. Raes, op. cit., pp. 183-4.
27. Ibid., pp. 174ff.
28. *Breviarium juxta Ritus Syrorum Orientalium, id est Chaldaeorum* (Rome, 1938), vol. 3, p. 431.
29. Cf. H. Denzinger, *Ritus Orientalium* (Graz, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 199-200.
30. A. Raes, op. cit., pp. 38-9.
31. The power to give life can come only from God the King of the Universe. Even today in the villages of Egypt the bridegroom is acclaimed as 'Ya-Emir'-'O Prince', and made to sit on thrones with his bride. Cf. R. Patai, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East* (New York, 1959), pp. 65-6.

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