

A Journey from Jewish Cult to Christian Liturgy

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Introduction

Cults have left people with ambivalent feelings, since on one hand they have been associated with malice or animus enormity and on the other hand they have brought people together to the extent people have become a unified entity with intimate relationships because of common interests. It has been alleged that there is no much of a difference between a religion and a cult since most of the religions of the world began as cults like Jansenism and Taoism. This article seeks to show how Christian liturgy as understood by the Catholic Church is rooted on Jewish cult. However, the discussion will not exhaust the liturgical facets that justify the grafting of the Catholic Christian liturgy on Jewish cult. The work commences with the definition of terms, explaining the three centres of Jewish worship that influenced Christian liturgy and then discuss the connection between the Jewish cult and the Mass, liturgical vestments, and the calendar. Thereafter, I will justify the Jewish origin of the Liturgy of Hours and Christian initiation (Baptism). This will be followed by an evaluation and a conclusion drawn that to a great extent the Catholic Christian liturgy was prompted and exacerbated from the Jewish cult.

Definition of Terms

The term cult is a controversial term that has diverse definitions in popular culture and in academia. In sociological classifications of religious movements, a cult is a religious or a social group with socially deviant or novel beliefs and practices. However, the word cult was originally used not to describe a group of religious but for the act of worship or religious ceremony (Garde 21). Hence, the purview of this essay will intend to understand the word cult in that regard. Sacred Liturgy as cemented by the Mediator Dei as well as the Sanctrosanctum Concilium can be referred to as the “celebration of an on-going process of redemption of the people of God”. It is an officially organised worship by the Church which is open to all people

and it distinguishes this from private prayers and devotions of individual Christians and even common prayers by voluntary or selected groups within the church like, societies and guilds (Dix 1). Thus the sacred liturgy is a public worship not an individual enterprise. In line with that the Vatican II Council describes the Sacred Liturgy as the “source and summit” of Christian life.

The Jewish Centres and their Influence on Christianity

There were three main centres of Jewish worship which seem to have impacted on Christianity in general and liturgy in particular. Namely, the Temple, the synagogue and the home (Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold 41). These three were key in the Jewish worship. First, the Temple was fundamentally a place of sacrifice and nowhere else was it permitted. It was also a point of meeting where the Jews would meet for their prayers as well as meeting with God (1 King 8:2ff). In addition, the religious teachings also took place in the Temple, a custom which was adhered to by Jesus and the Apostles. The sacrifices that took place in the Jewish Temple included the burnt offerings, the sin and guilty offerings, which was done by the priest and the peace offerings. Therefore, it is plausible from this background that one might assert that Christian worship and its liturgy emerged from the Jewish worship since it is characterised with such worship. In the Christian liturgy, people seem to have continued with the visiting of the “Temple” (the church) and its sacrifices though they have taken a new dimension with Christ as the sacrificial victim.

Second, the synagogue might have influenced the Christian congregation in a broad context in which the Christian teachings take place. Third, the home was important in the Jewish family worship since they used to partake the Sabbath meals in their homes. According to the Mishnah (Berakoth) “grace was said several times at meals, over each main dish, over bread and over wine; and when people were eating together. Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold, asserted that the benedictions were said by one person for all, and a responsive grace was added at the end of the meal” (43). This implies in the Jewish cult

benedictions falls in the private devotions just as it is placed in the Catholic tradition. However, the grace of meals especially the Berekah praxis on the Passover should have prompted the Eucharistic celebration in the present day Catholic Mass. A link or a relation between the prayers of the Berekah and the Eucharistic consecration in terms of structure is vivid. The Berekah commence with the Eulogy of how the Israelites were emancipated in the Egyptian slavery and how God has revealed God's self in the history of salvation in favour of them. This seem the same structure followed by the Eucharistic Consecration prayers especially Eucharistic Prayer 1, also shows that there is eulogy that praises God's self-revelation as Triune reaching its culmination in the Theopaschite namely Christ in order to save humanity from the yoke of sin. This evidently points out where the two graces said by Jesus at the Last Supper emanated from – a tradition which still prevails today in the Eucharistic celebration.

The Jewish Influence on Mass, Liturgical Vestments and Calendar

To clearly understand the Eucharistic faith and practice of Christianity one has to review the history from the New Testament back to the Old Testament and fundamentally to the Jewish practice and beliefs (Pitre 1). According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), “a better knowledge of the Jewish people's faith and religious life as professed and lived even now can help our better understanding of certain aspects of Christian liturgy” (1096). This suggests that Christian liturgy emerged from the Jewish tradition and as such, to understand the Christian liturgy fully one must first understand Jewish liturgy (1096).

The two parts of the blessings over bread and wine at Last Supper as already hinted and recorded by the evangelists are consonant with the pattern of Jewish meal (berreca meal). In the Jewish tradition the blessing prayers were as follows: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who brings forth bread from earth”. Blessed are you O Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine” (Pitre 2). This

is similarly found in the Eucharistic prayer. Nevertheless, the variance lies in Jesus' interpretative and eschatological words and the command to repeat (Mk 14: 22-25). This also became the basis from which Christ said a blessing before feeding the five thousand and the four thousand people. It is imperative to note that the Jewish Passover was basically commemorative and commemoration is the meaning of Christ's word anamnesis (Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold 49). In addition, "when the Church celebrates the Eucharist, it commemorates Christ's Passover and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once and for all on the cross remains ever present" (CCC 1364, John's gospel). Thus, the Christian Eucharist, like the Jewish Passover itself is both a sacrifice and a meal.

The priests' vestments like the chasuble, has its roots from the Old Testament when God told Moses to make for the glorious embellishment and beauty, garments for Aaron his brother and sons who were to serve God as priests (Ex 28: 2,4). The presents of the tabernacle in the Catholic Church resembles the one found in the Jewish synagogue. The ancient scrolls hold that the tabernacle was a dwelling place of the Word of God, and besides it lies a candle (Barrack 15-20). This had its foundation from the Jewish experience with God when they travelled with the tabernacle day and night and light was always present. The cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day and fire was in it by night (Ex 40: 35). This seems to be the basis of having Christian liturgy where besides the tabernacle there is a steady candle and we are cognitively aware that Jesus Christ is present in the tabernacle.

The liturgical seasons' readings (Easter, Lent, Advent, Christmas and Ordinary time) also have roots grafted on Jewish format of readings. The Torah readings began on the Sabbath post the Feast of Tabernacles and reading portion weekly for three years (Barrack 15-20). Our Sunday Gospel readings today are classified into three liturgical years, cycle A, B, and C. In the Church liturgy, homilies are only reserved for the clergy. Their task is to break the Word of God,

which has just been proclaimed to the faithful. This notion arose from the Jewish synagogue tradition where only the rabbi offered a sermon and the rabbi was the one to teach people (15-20). On a different note, according to the ancient Jewish culture as recorded in the book of Leviticus, people brought offerings to their priests for sacrifice. The priest was to carry out this mandate on the altar of God [...] (7: 29). This was adopted into the Christian liturgy and today people bring gifts of food and money as thanksgiving offering in a procession.

The Liturgy of Hours and its Jewish Origin

Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold stated that the Jewish law prescribed morning (lauds) and evening (vespers) sacrifices on a daily basis with additional sacrifices on Sabbaths (42). This can be viewed in the light of the Liturgy of Hours where the Christians are sanctified and encouraged to say the prayer of the Church during canonical hours but obliged to say lauds and vespers at all times. In lauds people praise the Lord and in the vespers they offer thanksgiving to God. The psalter is recognised as one of the most ancient and venerable part of the Breviary. It is the composition of these psalms that formed the Jewish liturgy for about twelve centuries before Christ (Barrack 15-20). These are the psalms that Jesus also used as he quoted them many times. Indisputably, the Apostles used these psalms and handed them down to Christians and presently psalms are held as the command form of Christian prayer enshrined in the Liturgy of Hours. Hence, the Liturgy of Hours has its roots grafted on the Jewish liturgy.

The Jewish Influence on Christian Initiation

According to the letter to the Hebrews, Christian Baptism seems to be classed with Jewish cleansing ceremonies (10:22). In the Jewish culture candidates were examined about their motives, thought and some of the laws they were expected to observe before consent for circumcision (Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold 46). In the celebration of Christian Baptism, catechumens are questioned with regard to their faith and consent before the profession of faith and Baptism takes place. In circumcision, the Jews were cleansed; in Baptism,

catechumens are forgiven their original sin and other sins, and so made clean of both original sin and sins of their own commission. However, the laying on of hands in Confirmation does not seem to have any antecedent in the Jewish initiation ceremonies (46). Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the anointing constituted part of proselyte baptism and the Church did not mention it. This would have emanated from the “widespread custom, shared by the Jews of using oil after taking bath” (46).

Evaluation

It is important to note that Christianity came after Judaism. As such, some similarities between these two religions presuppose that the former was grafted on the latter. In addition, considering that the early Palestinian Jews were greatly influenced by Greek thought, culture and language though their roots still immersed in the Old Testament and having Hebrew and Aramaic as their basic languages, these suggest that Jesus’ teachings must have been founded on the Jewish tradition rather than any other sources (Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold 39). However, this does not mean that it diminished Jesus’ great originality. During his ministry, Jesus and his followers conformed to the Jewish worship. Hence, the only cognitive foundation of the Christian worship is both implicitly and explicitly given in the Jewish worship. Despite the immense Jewish influence on the Christian liturgy, exceptions existed in ancient Syria and Palestine who were spared by their geographical position and language that prolonged Jewish influence. Exceptions would also be during the time when cultural dominance of Christianity in a sense influenced Jewish worship (40).

Conclusion

This article has elucidated some of the liturgical similarities between Christian liturgy and the Jewish cult that justifies the notion that the former was grafted on the latter. It highlighted that in order to understand fully the Christian liturgy one needs to review the Jewish beliefs and practices, among other things. It also discussed how the

Liturgy of Hours, Mass, and other liturgical aspects are linked to Jewish liturgy. Evidently, the article has shown that a number of Christian liturgical aspects are in commensurate or clearly shows their roots to be founded on Jewish cult. Hence, to a great extent the Christian liturgy was influenced and developed from its worship.

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