Christian Initiation

A Brief Social History and Its Implications Today

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Socio-cultural contexts and their initiation structures shape and influence one another. In the same way, the structures of Christian Initiation are historically linked to and influenced by culture.

In *The Sacred Canopy* Peter Berger describes the complicated chicken-and-egg process of world construction and world maintenance. Every individual is born and socialized into a context which, in a real sense, determines what that person perceives about the world. In turn, the individual makes choices and performs actions which realize that world and maintain its existence. Without the social context, the concept of the individual self could not develop, since it depends on knowing oneself in relation to what is not self. Furthermore, a sense of identity includes a sense of competency which comes from encountering life tasks in a concrete social environment. Conversely, the existence of a society depends on the presence of a critical mass of individuals who literally embody its values. An illustration from a recent television series may help to illustrate this double feed-back process.

The Millennium series which appeared on Public Television in the 1990s included a segment about a forest-dwelling Brazilian Indian of the Xavante tribe, who had been initiated into manhood through the long process customary among his people. In his late teens he and a friend from his age cohort went to live in the city because an elder had named him “he who knows outsiders.” In relating his experience later he said:

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I could probably manage there but I’d be a different person. I might end up killing someone in the city just to make ends meet. I wanted to go back to the village where things are more orderly, where I know the system. And where I can live a decent life (Maybury-Lewis, 138).

The world which had shaped this young man and in which his existence made sense was the world of the forest and the river and the village. He could not carry that identity into another sort of world and know who he was or how he was to live. Neither could he change the world of the city, but he knew it could change him.

This example is an illustration of how initiation functions to create both an individual and a world. Using the perspective of Berger’s model we can also imagine the way in which a socio-cultural context shapes the very initiation structures which maintain that culture, just as the initiation process hands the culture and its values over to the next generation of initiates. Following this model, this article will examine the ways Christian initiation structures and culture have interacted, as Western Christianity has encountered new cultural realities.

The Traditional Initiation Process

Traditional initiation procedures presume a stable social paradigm, a field of meaning, which includes boundaries and clear responsibilities and duties. Normally initiates are separated from their family caregivers and put into the company of same-sex elders for the duration of their training. This training often includes events that induce heightened emotional states under the influence of isolation, fear, drugs, or pain. Elders hand on the necessary wisdom, such as binding laws, religious beliefs, work skills, and practical means of living successfully, and they guide initiates through necessary experiences.

Rituals which often contain death-rebirth imagery punctuate these processes. The rituals serve two functions: (1) they foster a consolidation of the religious, sexual-social, and practical life skills into a coherent world-view, and (2) they enable the initiates to encounter awe-full “limit situations,” thereby encountering the transcendent which lies beyond death in a new life. The effects of these ritual experiences are believed to be irreversible, just as death and birth are irreversible. When the initiates emerge from the liminal “cocoon” they are officially considered to be adults. Initiation enables them to function in new ways. They may enter into marriage, assume adult responsibilities, and enact adult roles in the social and religious aspects of their community life. Initiation also limits them, since now their identity is linked to a particular social world. Like the Xavante tribesmen who could not fit into the Brazilian town life, the initiated
adopt a point of view which permanently circumscribes their lives in specific ways.

By the time Christianity was developing in the Mediterranean basin, the Greco-Roman world had become a complex of interdependent societies each of which had appropriate initiation procedures. The Roman army trained soldiers with its version of “boot camp,” bound them with the demands of an honor-shame code, and even branded them with the identification of their leader. The upper levels of society handed on lore through what we would recognize as educational processes with a heavy emphasis on training of both body and mind. Peasants clung to the procedures and myths particular to their own lives and communities. Society, as a whole, depended on the labor of the food-producers, but in time even the mythology which had once been proper to agriculture became spiritualized, and mystery religions based on agricultural myths attracted even the elite.

Initiation into the mysteries was distinct from traditional initiation in that it no longer aimed at handing over an entire way of life. Instead its goal was spiritual enlightenment and the introduction of the individual into a community of the enlightened allowing the person to achieve a kind of “gnosis.” As Eliade explains:

. . . the particular importance of the Greco-Oriental mysteries lies in the fact that they illustrate the need for a personal religious experience engaging man’s entire existence, that is, to use Christian terminology, as including his “salvation” in eternity (Eliade, 113).

**Early Christian Initiation in its Social Setting**

The ancient Christian catechumenate developed out of Judeo-Christianity that, in the context of Greco-Roman culture, operated as a kind of incubator for what would become a world religion. The Jewish followers of Jesus were the first to experience a seismic cultural shock when they realized that God was giving faith to Gentiles. Once they accepted and began to work with these new converts, Christianity’s passage into the Greco-Roman world was fairly painless. The teachings of Jesus began to be interpreted through the philosophical and mythological lenses familiar in the new context particularly by Christian theologians schooled in Platonic and Stoic thought. Moreover, faith in the death-resurrection of Jesus and the initiatory baptism of his believers and the sacred meal they shared resembled the agricultural mythology and rites of the mystery religions, so they seemed culturally familiar to people interested in becoming Christian.

The social context also had an impact on the overall shape of Christian teaching. The body-soul duality which characterized the Platonic philosophical schools, the idealization of martyrdom during the centuries of persecution, and
the ascendency of monastic asceticism which followed the Edict of Constantine in 313 C.E. gave Christianity a world-denying and eschatological tone. As a result, Jesus’ teaching about the Reign of God began to be interpreted in terms of a better life after death. The budding faith’s fundamental rituals, mythology, social requirements, and theology were both developed within, and shaped by, the larger society even as Christianity challenged the values of that society.

When Christianity was declared a legal religion and began to be promoted by the Roman emperors, the ritual forms of the catechumenate continued. However it gradually ceased to be an initiation in the traditional sense of the term for two reasons: (1) the increase in infant baptisms and (2) the use of baptism as a political tool. Once adult society was predominantly Christian, baptism evolved, from a sociological perspective, into an infant’s rite of welcoming into both society and Church. Elements of the initiation structures designed for adult catechumens were retained in the baptismal rituals, but they had lost much of their meaning since infants could neither demonstrate conversion of life nor express personal faith. Furthermore, the emperors, and later barbarian chieftains, forced baptism on their subjects either as a means of unifying them under a single deity or as a kind of capitulation to the “stronger Christian deity” who had overcome their tribal gods.

The Christian Encounter with the Celtic and Germanic Tribes

In the Greco-Roman world Christianity had provided both a sense of cohesive community life in the midst of a diverse and highly stratified society and a mythology and ritual which served as a form of “gnosis” giving meaning to life. In this cultural clothing Christianity was ill-suited to the world of the northern tribes who ravaged the Roman empire, beginning in the fifth century. They lived in a completely different social world and presented Christianity with a new challenge:

... The predominantly world-accepting, folk-centered world-view of the Germanic peoples may be viewed as antithetical to the predominantly world-rejecting, individualist, and soteriological world-view of early Christianity (Russell, 176).

Celtic and Germanic social structures were strong and cohesive, presided over by elected chieftains who were installed and controlled by druids. The druidic lore-masters, homologous to the Indian brahmins, carried tribal wisdom in memorized stories and incantations, and the power of their words was feared because it was believed to effect what it signified.
Religious ritual met the goals of folk religion, which was intimately associated with the tribal interests including political and natural phenomena, particularly agricultural matters. Written and archaeological evidence shows that the rituals were characterized by animal sacrifices, vows, stories of mythic heroes, curses, and blessings pronounced by members of the druidic societies. Peasants provided the food for this society, and archaeology has given some glimpse into their agricultural ritual practices. It is thought that Gallic tribes performed sacrifices to Demeter and Kore. In fact, excavations of Gallic village shrines have uncovered central pits where animal remains were left to decompose. In the Greek cult of Demeter and Kore, which had similar rites, women went to withdraw from pits the decomposed remains of piglets that had been cast there four months earlier, in order to mix them with grain and scatter them in the fields. This fertility rite that links the pig, decay, grain, a pit, the fields, and women as agents, certainly had its counterpart in several regions of the Celtic world (Brunaux, 89).

The official Church took a pragmatic approach to this challenge, some of it related to baptism, but none of it involving Christian initiation, strictly speaking. Gregory I (590–604) wanted the missionary monks among the Celtic tribes of England to maintain the indigenous holy places:

[Bishop Augustine] is to destroy the idols, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up, and relics enclosed in them. For if these temples are well built, they are to be purified from devil-worship, and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that its temples are not destroyed, may abandon idolatry and resort to these places as before, and may come to know and adore the true God (Bede, 86).

In Ireland, Patrick and Colum Cille tried to work with, rather than against the druidic loremasters. In one sixth-century altercation between a royal chieftain and the druids, Colum Cille mediated a settlement. The high king strove to abolish and destroy the order of druidic bards; the saint argued for its reform and reorganization, and he was able to persuade the assembly that that was the best course (Williams and Ford, 27).

In Germany, Boniface (680?–754) seems to have been aware of Gregory I’s policies. The famous example of his chopping down the sacred oak and building a church with the wood seems at first to be nothing like pragmatic accommodation. However it showed true sensitivity to the Germanic mentality: Boniface overcame the tribal deity and made his victory complete by erecting a sacred shrine to his own god on the still-sacred spot. Moreover he made use of the Germanic association of politics and religion in his reliance on political connections with the Frankish prince Charles Martel in order to gain support for the Church in the newly-claimed territory (Russell, 196). Pope Zachary (741–752)
showed awareness of the desire of new Christians for practical results in a letter written to the Frankish clergy, nobility, and laity saying:

If your priests are pure and clean of all unchastity and blood-guiltiness . . . and if you are in all things obedient to [our brother Boniface], no people can stand before you, but all pagans shall fall before your face and you shall remain victors (Russell, 195).

The original intentions of this approach had been to baptize first and catechize later, but the Christianity which emerged over time was quite different from the Christianity that had developed several hundred years before in the Greco-Roman world. In a sense the Celtic and Germanic peoples had converted Christianity to their folk-religious ways rather than Christianity converting them to the more ascetic and "gnostic" forms of belief it brought into seventh-century Europe.

This was the Europe of Christendom. In this setting initiation, as a social structure, remained alive in the training of knights, scholars, and peasant children; and these forms of initiation included religious elements, since the sacred-secular split had not yet come. However the forms of initiation which inculcated the older, more world-denying, eschatological form of Christianity through strict training led by "elders" remained alive only in the monasteries. It no longer played a central part in shaping the religious and social world of European Christianity. Instead the values of the Celtic and German warrior culture had become the key social paradigm. The warrior ideal so revered among the German and Celtic peoples was inevitably transferred to Christ, who by the seventh century was depicted as a warrior with battle-ax and lance in Germanic religious art (Markus, 88).

The popes and bishops had personal armies, and by the end of the eleventh-century the Church promoted the Crusades. This emphasis also showed up in the new meaning attached to confirmation, a post-baptismal ritual that had become separated from the initiate’s water-bath and first Eucharist. Rabanus Maurus (776?–856) explained that the anointing with Holy Chrism confers "robur ad pugnam," strength for the fight, and so the bishops began the practice of giving a light blow to the cheek of the confirmandi to remind them of the need for soldierly bravery.

Preparation for the sacraments of confirmation and first Eucharist was perhaps the one place where ordinary Medieval Christians retained some rudimentary form of Christian initiatory practice. Parents and parish priests were expected to catechize children in preparation for these sacraments, but the methods they used lacked most of the elements of traditional initiation procedures. More importantly, over the centuries the balance between doctrinal content and instruction in the Christian way of life was lost, and teaching eventually stressed intellectual assent to theological propositions.
A New Cultural Shift:
The Renaissance and Enlightenment

The thirteenth century marked a turning point in Europe, and moved Christendom towards the Enlightenment and Modernity. Because the crusades had reopened channels of communication with Greece, there was an explosion of humanistic influence in learning and art which began in Italy and gradually moved north. The critique of the Church’s wealth and love of power had begun in the twelfth century with the rise of the mendicant orders and other reform movements, but it came to a head in Luther’s challenge to the papal indulgences which led to the Reformation. Nevertheless, the Reformation did not succeed in separating church and state, particularly in Germany, and it took the devastating Thirty Years War (1618–1648) to convince the people that a person’s religious conviction was not a matter to be dictated by princes.

The theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas gave fresh impetus to a scholasticism which moved theology further and further away from the lives of ordinary believers. By the mid-fifteenth century the printing press made books, in the vernacular, available to everyone, and finally the well-guarded province of the loremasters came under an unexpected assault. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the solipsistic philosophy of Descartes led scholarship to a kind of individualism divorced from both church and common good. New forms of science arose which claimed to uncover the secrets of the universe, and a secularization of knowledge began which helped break down a worldview that perceived the organic union between heaven and earth which had held solid throughout human history.

Christian peasants continued their work as the foundation of the social pyramid, but even they lost their long-established function as food producers for the rest of society in the eighteenth century when the industrial revolution divorced the earning of bread from land and family. The peasants became factory workers who produced wealth for a new social group, the entrepreneurial merchant class.

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Christianity was still united in 1492 when Columbus opened the gates of the Western Hemisphere. As a result, trade and European Christianity traveled around the world together. Where there were enough Europeans to maintain a Christian context, the transplanted faith remained recognizably European in emphasis, and now that Christianity had many features of folk religion, there was a better cultural fit in many places.

Reformation leaders had almost no good information about the ancient catechumenal procedures, and they were theologically opposed to connecting baptism to an intellectual or moral “work” such as an initiation process. However, they were quite interested in making sure that their young people gained a good grasp of the faith. As a result, Luther, Calvin, and others produced catechisms based on the commandments, the creed, and the Lord's Prayer which were intended for use by young people preparing for First Communion. Moreover the Lutheran, Martin Bucer, revived a form of confirmation with laying on of hands, which was to be conferred in connection with First Communion. Children were to prepare for this ritual through a sort of post-baptismal catechumenate consisting of catechetical instruction climaxed by a public examination before the ministers and the whole congregation (Mitchell, 87). The Anabaptists might have been expected to prepare candidates for believers’ baptism through a kind of initiation process. Instead they insisted on a confession not of faith but of sin. This confession was thought to put the person in the right disposition for water baptism (Mitchell, 94).

The Tridentine Reform, in response to the impetus of the Protestant Reformers, also created catechisms to use in children's preparation for confirmation and eucharist. All these catechisms, however, stated the truths of the faith in the abstract vocabulary of scholasticism, and, while memorizing them was indeed a difficult task comparable perhaps to learning druidic spells, the effort did not by itself engender a personal relationship with God or a sense of responsibility to do good works. For these things the Church relied on a still-Christian culture.

The Challenge of the Post-Modern World

Until the mid-1960s the Roman Church continued to operate out of the Tridentine theology and sacramental discipline laid down at the end of the sixteenth century. By this time the modern social synthesis itself was unraveling and the world was beginning a phase which we are calling post-modern. Post-modern deconstruction, by definition, systematically dismantles the bodies of lore on which initiation is founded. Authority is suspect, and binding laws, religious beliefs, coherent notions about social boundaries, all that constitutes the stable social paradigm which the initiation process inculcates, are in flux. In this fragmented social situation the structures of initiation have nearly disappeared.
Vestiges still remain in isolated settings: houses of religious formation, fraternal organizations, military establishments, sports teams, musical and fine arts camps, and demanding schools with good reputations. All these keep the social function of initiation alive.

In the midst of this seismic shifting of worldviews, the Second Vatican Council called for the reestablishment of the catechumenate. Encouraged by the results evident in the few European and mission churches which had experimented with a revival of the ancient initiation procedures and with the scholarly background of liturgical historical studies which had been carried on for decades, the bishops wrote:

The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored and to be put into use at the discretion of the local ordinary. By this means the period of the catechumenate, which is intended as a time of suitable instruction, may be sanctified by sacred rites to be celebrated at successive intervals (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 64).

That restoration has been completed and is in effect in most if not all regions of the world. Given the preceding brief survey of the interaction of culture and initiation as a social structure, it is imperative that catechumenal teams take time to reflect on what they are about as they proceed to implement the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Looking at our post-modern culture, catechetical teams can ask: How can we make use of the effective initiation structures present in our culture as we build our own initiation process? What are the positive values embedded in our culture that we might want to build on? What are the weaknesses that will derail our best efforts if we do not consciously attend to them? Looking at themselves and their church community they can ask: Does our local church possess clarity about its values and direction? Do we have a “critical mass” of people who identify themselves primarily by their relationship to Christ and to the Gospel? Are we as a team willing to be “elders” and “initiators” with all that these terms imply? Considering the requirements of an authentic initiation process they can ask: Are we willing to challenge interested people to enter a period of true transformation? Are we willing to give each person the time and personal attention this will demand? Are we willing to create a liminal space within which they can develop?

No matter what the answers to these questions may be, we cannot allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good. Most of all, parish communities need to move forward in using the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, in entering into dialogue with others who use it, in raising the questions it poses, and in being ready to change methods as new answers emerge. We are in a privileged time when, like the early Church, we can build a structure which will carry the faith
forward well into this new millennium. We can show our gratitude for the modern insights of social science by using them wisely to build for that future.

References


