

Mutations in France's "Liturgies of State": From the Coronation of Napoleon to the Funeral(s) of Mitterrand

by

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I. Introduction

By "liturgies of state" is meant large and important ceremonies in which political and religious dimensions intermingle. Three partners are involved: the public body—here called the "state" as a generic term; the Church; and the individual who is directly concerned in the event. The connections and emphases among these three components are particularly significant for the status of religion in a precise context. These liturgies bring into play a complex rituality, in which collective and individual interests are allied. They have a twofold interest for scholarship in practical theology: on the one hand, they are the reflection of a society; on the other, they serve as a model for the members of that society, who are all the more attracted to mimic these forms when their impact has been broad and deep. Thus these liturgies have important consequences for the ritual life of a society.

The hypothesis of this essay is that the coronation of Napoleon opened a new era. This celebration was a kind of fundamental form of a "liturgy of state" in modernity.¹ The reign of Napoleon constitutes a major turning point in the history of Europe in general and in the evolution of Christendom in particular. That is well known and documented in numerous works. It was also a turning point for "state rituality" in the public space.

But we are no longer in modernity. French sociologists of religion like to employ the neologism "ultramodernity" to designate the contemporary situation as a radicalization of modernity, as a cluster of modes of life and existential markers that are the fruit of the internal logic of modernity pushed to extremes.² I am going to try to prove that the obsequies of President François Mitterrand in 1996 are for "ultramodernity" the equivalent of Napoleon's coronation for modernity. Moreover, this funeral constitutes also a turning point for French secularism (*laïcité*), and perhaps even the end of classic secularism, at least in the domain of public rituality.

In the third stage, I should like to sketch the place of Catholic ritual in ultramodernity as a sort of alternative both to subjectivism and to ritual pluralism. For all theological reflection we must today take seriously the social passage from Christendom to post-Christendom, which implies a redefinition of the shape and content of all pastoral action of the churches in all areas.

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¹It might be better to speak of "public liturgy," but that is a pleonasm because by etymology liturgy means "public work."

²The notion of "ultramodernité" was established in sociology by Jean-Paul Willaime, "La sécularisation contemporaine du croire," in *Les nouvelles manières de croire. Judaïsme, christianisme, islam, nouvelles religiosités*, ed. Leïla Babès (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 1996) 47-62. Other francophone sociologists of religion prefer to speak of "late modernity," "postmodernity," "advanced modernity," or even, recently, "hypermodernity." These expressions clearly indicate entry into a new era.

II. The Coronation of Napoleon (1804)

1. Description

(1) Context

Napoleon himself wrote in his memoirs: “When I came into power, people wanted me to be a Washington. . . . As for myself, I could only be a crowned Washington.”³ That proves the importance that Napoleon attached to his coronation. It was at the same time entrance upon a new era and the definitive end of the monarchy in France. The place and time were the subject of bitter discussions as to the choice of the symbolism to be used and the implication of that for legitimation. Should it be revolutionary and democratic or should it rather follow an imperial lineage different from the Capetian monarchy? The second option would involve the participation of the Catholic Church. The date was without any particular meaning, XI Frimaire in the year XIII (December 2, 1804), and the place was that proper to former days, that is to say the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. The debates in the Council of State clearly prove that no religious concern animated the participants or entered into the realization of the project.⁴

This twofold dimension—republican and secular on the one hand, traditional and religious on the other—was the principal characteristic of this celebration.⁵ That was already obvious in the way in which the cathedral was arranged. It was almost divided into two: the choir with the papal throne, the seats and prayer desks of Napoleon and his wife; the nave arranged around a monumental staircase at the top of which stood the emperor’s throne. If there were already two thrones in Reims Cathedral at the consecrations of the kings of France, here the bipolarity becomes radical. This double dimension was also visible among the 6,000 invited guests. Thus there were present numerous revolutionaries of whom some such as Fouché had persecuted the Catholic Church and inspired the violent death of numerous clerics and religious. That also explains why the commentators wrote that the atmosphere was neither pious nor meditative, but solemn at most. This is also to be seen in the engravings and paintings of the event.

(2) The coronation

We possess valuable sources of information about this liturgy. The best known is the gigantic painting (6 by 10 meters) by Jacques David—himself violently anti-clerical⁶—which he completed in the three years following 1805. But it represents the scene in a re-reading that is both Romantic and political.⁷ It is well known that Napoleon himself watched over its composition, especially in adding the figure of his mother, who had not wished to be present at the celebration. He also ordered the addition of a gesture of blessing by the Pope during the coronation of the empress, which has no meaning from the liturgical point of view, but much meaning from the political.⁸

³From the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, quoted by Gérard Gengembre in *Napoléon* (Paris: Larousse, 2001) 41.

⁴Record was kept of the debates with Napoleon in the Council of State. They have been edited and published by Alfred Marquiset, *Napoléon sténographié au Conseil d’État* (Paris: H. Champion, 1913).

⁵A good article in German brings out well this double dimension: Günter Oesterle, “Die Kaiserkrönung Napoleons. Eine ästhetische und ideologische Instrumentalisierung,” in *Zeremoniell als höfische Ästhetik in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Jörg Jochen Berns and Thomas Rahn, *Frühe Neuzeit* 25 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995) 632-49.

⁶For example, the addition of Julius Caesar among the clergy just behind the Pope illustrates well David’s opinion.

⁷On David and his work, see Antoine Schnapper, *David témoin de son temps* (Fribourg [Switzerland]: Office du livre, 1980).

⁸Cf. Hervé Gransart, “Le sacre de Napoléon de David,” in *Connaissance des Arts* 621 (2004) 104-109. See also Sergio Bertelli, “Rex et sacerdos: The Holiness of the King in European Civilization,” in *Iconography, Propaganda and Legitimation*, ed. Allan Ellenius (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 123-33.

Much less known is the souvenir book of Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, who had planned the disposition of space in Notre Dame. In 1807 they published twelve watercolored engravings. These are particularly valuable for our knowledge of the decoration and its symbolism.⁹

The “souvenir” engravings that Napoleon himself caused to be published are better known. They illustrate the very ambitious project that was called the *Livre du Sacre*.¹⁰ This work does not simply describe with great precision the event of the coronation itself, but also all the elements of the liturgy: gestures, placements, movements, prayers, and chants. In order to appreciate the importance of the pictures, we must go back a few days before the ceremony when Napoleon summoned the painter Jean-Baptiste Isabey. The future emperor wished to have seven watercolors depicting the different phases of the coronation in order to fix definitively the arrangement of the space and the assigning of everyone’s place. As Isabey did not have sufficient time to do otherwise, he bought 100 dolls which he dressed in copies of the clothing that the participants would wear. An exhibition at the Louvre in 2004 presented a reconstruction of these dolls. Helped by a plan of Notre Dame, it reproduced the coronation in the presence of Napoleon, of his wife Josephine, of the Pope Pius VII, and of the three persons responsible for the ceremony (Cardinal Joseph Fesch,¹¹ Cardinal Gustavo Antonelli,¹² and Governor Jean-Andoche Junot¹³).

With the aid of these dolls costumed by Isabey and following the sketches of the original décor of Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, the book containing some forty engravings was created by Louis-Philippe de Ségur, grand master of ceremonies, and finished in March 1814. Isabey executed the seven historic paintings that lay behind the engravings. These are for us almost like photographs and are in any case more faithful to reality than the grandiose painting of David.¹⁴ Four engravings representing the liturgy are included in this little book. The text recounting the celebration is an almost complete reproduction of the detailed account composed by Louis-Philippe de Ségur and published in 1805.¹⁵ If what history has remembered from this event is the coronation as such, the emphasis immediately after the ceremony was placed as much on the anointing, as is unambiguously shown by the commemorative medal, and on the

⁹*Recueil de décorations exécutées dans l’église de Notre-Dame de Paris et au Champs-de-Mars, d’après les desseins et sous la conduite des architectes de l’Empereur* (Paris: 1807). The engravings have been republished in Hervé Pinoteau, *Le sacre de S. M. l’Empereur Napoléon* (Paris: Éditions du Palais-Royal, 1969).

¹⁰The *Livre du Sacre* (composed between 1805 and 1815) has recently been published in two editions. The more important, which includes a commentary and the addition of numerous illustrations, is the work of Jean Tulard, *Le sacre de l’empereur Napoléon. Histoire et légende* (Paris: Fayard, 2004). The second includes all the illustrations and the text with a few comments: Philippe Lamarque, ed., *Le sacre de S. M. l’Empereur Napoléon dans l’église métropolitaine de Paris le XI frimaire an XIII. Dimanche 2 décembre 1804* (Sommières: R. Pages, 2004).

¹¹Cardinal of Lyons and the uncle of Napoleon. We recall that Cardinal Fesch in the night before the coronation celebrated the religious marriage of Napoleon and Josephine in the chapel of the Tuileries, with just two witnesses. The Pope had indeed refused to crown Napoleon and Josephine unless they had been married religiously.

¹²Cardinal and Secretary of State.

¹³Governor of Paris.

¹⁴Sixteen engravers, including the best of the time, worked at this; cf. Tulard, 69. Tulard published the prints enhanced by color, whereas Lamarque published a normal printing.

¹⁵[L. P. Ségur] *Procès-verbal de la cérémonie du sacre et du couronnement de LL. MM. l’Empereur Napoléon et l’Impératrice Joséphine* (Paris: de l’Imprimerie impériale, XIII=1805). The text was edited with commentary by Jean Tulard in 1993.

constitutional oath. Thus it was possible to reconcile the irreconcilable revolutionary and religious inheritances.

The celebration lasted about three hours. After the anointing of the emperor and the empress by Pope Pius VII, mass was celebrated. After the gradual, the Pope blessed the imperial insignia that were on the altar. These were then delivered by the Pope in the following order: to the emperor the ring, the sword, the cloak, the imperial orb, the hand of justice, and the scepter; to the empress the ring and the cloak. Then Napoleon crowned himself by taking the crown from the altar as was foreseen in an ancient Carolingian rite, which was in fact Byzantine, that is to say a rite dating from before the Capetian monarchy. The new emperor thus presented himself as the successor of the Carolingians, and above all of Charlemagne.¹⁶ Then Napoleon crowned the kneeling empress. After that the Pope resumed the mass with the proclamation of the Gospel.

Throughout the whole celebration there were numerous movements of all kinds, all very precisely regulated, of which the souvenir booklet gives a detailed description. The offertory procession is particularly interesting for liturgists: the items were brought forward by participants [participants – do you mean female or is this a typographical error? Yes only women brought items], then given to the Pope by the emperor and the empress. Another feature: at the Agnus Dei, the Grand-Aumônier, accompanied by the first chaplain of the emperor and the first chaplain of the empress, went to receive the kiss of peace from the Pope, and transmitted it to the sovereign pair with the aid of the *instrumentum pacis*. The booklet says nothing about a possible communion by the participants.

2. Analysis

With Napoleon's coronation, we are exactly between the time of Christendom and that of modernity.¹⁷ The liturgy is respected. The triple anointing (forehead and hands) of the emperor and the empress by the Pope is indeed the constitutive rite of the consecration, quasi sacramental. And yet the accent falls upon two other parts of the rite, namely the coronation of the emperor and empress and the oath.

The purpose of the rite is clearly and solely political. Moreover, the Church had no choice. The secular power of the Pope had become greatly dependent on Napoleon. He had no freedom of action. Moreover, the situation of the Church in France had never been so good after thirteen years of chaos, blood, and misery. Pius VII would always be grateful to Napoleon for having restored civil and religious peace in France. If the purpose was political, nevertheless it was a liturgy in due and proper form, and furthermore presided over by the Pope. The arrangement of Notre Dame into two distinct parts allowed the prerogatives of each party to be preserved and avoided the Pope having to engage with the constitutional oath, which had caused so much blood to be shed only ten years earlier. At the end of the mass, in fact, the Pope withdrew to the sacristy. The only religious symbol during the oath was the book on which it was pronounced (a Gospel Book borne by a bishop). ~~is to say, the gospel ambo~~¹⁸ [it is the liber evangeliarum or Evangelary, a bishop bore it faced with Napoleon during the oath. What is the best way to

¹⁶ Napoleon had a little previously undertaken a "pilgrimage" to Aix-la-Chapelle and the tomb of Charlemagne.

¹⁷ However, we must make clear that the revolutionaries had already affected a first turning point in the history of the ritual of state by seeking to impose a cult of Reason, but this without any real popular success.

¹⁸ Let us note the central symbolic role attributed to the gospel book [???]: during the profession of faith before the anointing and during the taking of the constitutional oath. Although the use of a gospel book rite [which rite?? the use – whatever it was of the "évangélaire"??] has no sense in this context, it is to be noticed. On the question of the symbolism of the gospel book [???], see Arnaud Join-Lambert, "L'évangélaire pour une mystagogie de la présidence du Christ dans l'assemblée," in *Présence et rôle de la Bible dans la liturgie*, ed. Martin Klöckener, Bruno Bürki, and Arnaud Join-Lambert, with Mireille Fornerod (Fribourg [Switzerland]: Academic Press, 2006) 345-65.

translate “évangélaire”? Ambo suggests something fixed. Could it perhaps mean a portable “frame” on which the gospel-book is held in front of the reader by an assistant? Please help us here.]

Modernity is in general defined according to several components, as listed by Danièle [Danielle is what you have listed, but I have found it with this spelling. Which is correct? Exactly, sorry for my mistake] Hervieu-Léger: the generalization of scientific and technical rationality, the affirmation of the autonomy of the subject, and the differentiation of institutions,¹⁹ to which is often added pluralization. If the first of those features does not explicitly enter into the situation we are describing, the other three certainly affect Napoleon’s coronation.

As to the affirmation of the autonomy of the subject, the ceremony was certainly a “liturgy of state,” but the importance and understanding of the event were modified: from the anointing to the coronation. One could speak here of a personalization of the liturgy, not in the liturgy itself, but in the use made afterwards of the symbolism for propaganda purposes.²⁰ It is almost impossible to know what the participants made of the event. One may, however, guess that the meaning of the anointing escaped the great majority. The distraction of the participants shown on the engravings is a sign of that. Subsequently, it is certain that the two crownings became the most important gestures in this celebration. This was so strong that the legend of the self-crowning of Napoleon against the will of the Pope, inaugurated by Adolphe Thiers in the middle of the 19th century,²¹ found no difficulty in spreading. Not only can one still read this being affirmed in badly-informed articles or books, as in an article still accessible on the internet site of the French channel France 2 or of other self-styled sites specializing in Napoleonic history,²² but it would probably be the opinion of the great majority of people asked about it today. The distortions of history did not begin with Dan Brown and his *Da Vinci Code*.

As to the differentiation of institutions, Napoleon’s liturgy establishes an explicit separation between Church and State, principally through the help of the division of space in Notre Dame into two distinct areas. On the surface it seems that the State is submitting to the Church and its rites. But in fact, the State has become autonomous and more powerful than the Church. The symbolism of the liturgy of state no longer belongs to the Church. It is thus that this liturgy of coronation can be considered as the liturgical and symbolic entrance into modernity.

Pluralization is here very clear, first, through the coexistence of the symbolisms at work: the French monarchical symbolism, the imperial symbolism, the republican and revolutionary inheritance, and the Masonic symbolism that so impregnated the governing circles. This pluralization applies also to the persons themselves, to the various diverse political and religious motivations, which are united in a ritual system in which all find what suits them.

¹⁹Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Rites politiques et religieux des sociétés modernes,” in *La modernité rituelle. Rites politiques et religieux des sociétés modernes*, ed. Erwan Dianteill, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, and Isabelle Saint-Martin (Paris: Harmattan, 2004) 17.

²⁰See Bertelli, “Rex et sacerdos” and Oesterle, “Die Kaiserkrönung Napoleons.”

²¹“The Pope applied the usual anointings to the emperor’s forehead, arms, and hands, and then blessed the sword with which he girded him, the scepter that he placed in his hand, and then he approached in order to take the crown. Napoleon seized the crown from the hands of the pontiff, not roughly, but decisively, and placed it on his own head. This action, which all those present understood, produced an effect beyond all words to describe” (Adolphe Thiers, *Histoire du Consulat et de l’Empire*, vol. 5 [Leipzig: J. P. Meline, 1845] 203). There are other gross errors in this account, for example, the sequence of events in the ceremony: according to Thiers, the coronation was followed by the oath and then high mass (p. 204), whereas in fact the taking of the oath followed mass and in the Pope’s absence.

²²See, for example, www.napoleon.org.

As to the generalization of scientific and technical rationality, it is an element at work even in the coronation, although only implicitly and in an initial form. Almost all the invited guests could be placed in the line of Napoleon's agnosticism, fruit of the Enlightenment and of the "Encyclopédie."²³

III. The Double Funeral of President Mitterrand (1996)

Napoleon and Mitterrand had in common their declared agnosticism and their attachment to the religion of their fathers—though for different reasons. A great liturgy of state centered on their person was decisive in the domain of public ritual, and indeed in the same emblematic place, that is the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. The funeral of President Mitterrand in January 1996 is a similar phenomenon to Napoleon's coronation in the sense that it marks a rupture, a change of epoch. Numerous articles—both by scholars and by journalists—have established that this funeral offered many clues for understanding the new situation of religion, both in the public space and in the private domain.²⁴ Surprisingly, the theologians have not paid much attention to this event except for a few comments at the time.

A very good article of 2004 offers a sociological analysis of the different funerals of the presidents of the French Republic.²⁵ The main question is this: How far does the liturgy symbolize the convictions and beliefs of the deceased? Depending upon which president, the Church, politics, and the personal faith played different roles. The funerals of the last three French presidents were all closely tied to their personal convictions (de Gaulle, Pompidou, and Mitterrand). Reference to the political functions that they had exercised was played down.²⁶ A new threshold was crossed with Mitterrand, who presented himself for a large part of his life as an agnostic.

1. Description

The final years of Mitterrand were marked by profound questionings and several declarations about his view of the world, particularly its transcendent dimension.²⁷ All this without doubt contributed ahead of time to giving a certain orientation to the funeral and offered a kind of anticipatory and strongly ambiguous interpretation. His last will and testament was in the same tone. According to Danièle Hervieu-Léger: "The whole mystery of François Mitterrand's funeral—the mystery of the meaning that he himself gave to this final surrender to the power of

²³To Napoleon is attributed this word: "There are so many different religions or varieties of religion that it is very difficult to decide which is the best. If there were a religion that had existed from the beginning of the world, I would think that that one would be the true one. But things being what they are, I think that everyone should remain in the religion in which he was brought up, in the religion of his fathers" (Tulard, 14).

²⁴See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Les doubles funérailles du Président," in *La Mort du Roi. Autour de François Mitterrand. Essai d'ethnographie politique comparée*, ed. Jacques Julliard, La suite des temps (Paris: Gallimard, 1999) 89-109.

²⁵Pierre-Yves Baudot, "In manus tuas . . .". Les funérailles religieuses des présidents de la République en France (1877-1996)," in *La modernité rituelle*, 55-70. See also the comparison between the funeral of Mitterrand and that of de Gaulle, in particular on the role of the media: Évelyne Cohen and André Rauch, "Le corps souverain sous la cinquième République. Les funérailles télévisées du Général de Gaulle et de François Mitterrand," in *Vingtième Siècle—Revue d'histoire* 88 (2005) 77-93.

²⁶Cf. Baudot, 65-66.

²⁷See the books that record these last conversations of his on the matter: Pierre Péan, *Une jeunesse française* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); François Mitterrand and Élie Wiesel, *Mémoire à deux voix* (Paris: O. Jacob, 1995); Jean Guittou, *L'absurde et le mystère. Ce que j'ai dit à François Mitterrand* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer; Flammarion, 1997). To which must be added the preface—very personal—that he wrote for the book of Marie de Hennezel: *La mort intime. Ceux qui vont mourir nous apprennent à vivre* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1995) 9-13.

the Church, and the mystery of the multiple reactions that this event provoked—is contained in the formula ‘Une messe est possible.’”²⁸ After his death on January 8, there took place not only this “possible mass,” but two simultaneous celebrations.

(1) A double eucharist in simultaneous celebration, both on television [“En duplex”: How might you translate this into English? Could one say “on split screen” if that is what is meant?]

On Thursday, January 11, at 11 a.m., two funeral masses were celebrated simultaneously: the one at Notre Dame in Paris by Cardinal Lustiger and nine bishops; the other at Jarnac in Charente by the bishop of Angoulême Claude Dagens.²⁹ Such a double and simultaneous liturgy of state had never taken place before.

As all the phases in the two places were on television, sometimes on split screen furent retransmises en duplex à la télévision [split screen, ? yes, but not all the time], the visible role of the media took on an unprecedented level of importance in this kind of circumstance. The broadcast lasted almost two hours from the beginning of the mass at Notre Dame until the entrance into the cemetery at Jarnac. To that must be added the preceding stages that were the gathering at the Bastille, the removal of the body from Paris and its transfer to Jarnac, stages that also were the focus of the media. Some have claimed that the true funeral rite took place at the Bastille, but it is inappropriate to speak of a rite [???] in that case because it was a unique event that has not been duplicated since. [Why do you consider it inappropriate to speak of a “rite” in the case of an unrepeated event? According to your definition of “rite,” must a “rite” fit into a system of “rituality”? English usage would allow “rite” to be used in the mentioned case, even if the act was not repeated. OK]

The commentaries by journalists and their consultants would themselves merit study. An almost mystical profile of Mitterrand was drawn, but it was a mysticism with very fluid contours and peculiar to Mitterrand himself. A priest who was a guest in the broadcast studio elaborated above all on the public dimension of this liturgy, in a modest way, far removed from the hoopla of the journalists who made of it a celebration for everybody, allowing all to be in communion with an event experienced live in the whole of France.

At Jarnac, the celebration in the church was private, away from the cameras. The invisible liturgy created a sort of mysterious halo, the opposite of the great visible liturgy in Paris. So one saw only a single mass and heard a single homily that day. The journalists, however, added their own explanations (for example, about the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer!) and their own scattered comments. The public part of the ritual at Jarnac was the funeral procession to the cemetery.

All this raises the question of the growing role of television in ritual³⁰ and the construction of a new ritual by the constitution of a new collective memory. Jacques Julliard puts it well: “When television is so contemporaneous with the event that its rhythm matches each movement, one may suspect that it shapes the movements rather than reflects them. . . . This phenomenon underlies what Guy Debord has called ‘a society of spectacle,’ in which the information ends up

²⁸Hervieu-Léger, “Les doubles funérailles du Président,” 89. In point of fact, the will indicates more precisely: “a mass in the church at Jarnac is possible” (“Une messe dans l’église de Jarnac est possible”). The mention of the place is not neutral and signifies perhaps his attachment to his home ground, at least as much as a religious dimension.

²⁹There was indeed a third such mass, but no one mentions it. It was celebrated at the cathedral of Angoulême. It was presided over by the vicar general of the diocese. This was at the initiative of the association of former pupils and the administration of the Saint Paul Lycée that Mitterrand had attended.

³⁰See particularly Cohen and Rauch, 86-88 and 91-92.

preceding the event itself.”³¹ In other words, am I a spectator or a participant, or even a spectator under the illusion of being a participant? This society of the omnipresent media is moreover a characteristic of ultramodernity.

After the ceremony, people wondered whether Mitterrand had desired this parallelism between Paris and Jarnac for a precise purpose. Could it have been, as it were, the symbolic and explicit manifestation of the double nature of a president—mortal and immortal? In this perspective, the mortal dimension appeared at Jarnac with the family gathered around the remains; the immortal dimension would then, of course, have been in the liturgy of Notre Dame where there was no coffin but the powerful of this world were present. As Jacques Juilliard wrote:

In planning a double funeral, one public at Notre Dame in Paris, the other private in the church at Jarnac, was François Mitterrand explicitly wanting, in imitation of General de Gaulle himself, was he wanting to celebrate the double nature, mortal and immortal, of the President, the true successor to the king of France? Are we witnessing the attempt to found a veritable civic and civil religion, borrowing from the Christian and royal imagery the sacramental prestige of days gone by?³²

What could and should the Church do in such circumstances? Were its leaders letting themselves in some way be manipulated as by Napoleon? It is, by the way, striking to note how many of the words just quoted could be applied to the coronation of Napoleon!

(2) The homilies in Paris and Jarnac

The liturgies themselves can help us to frame an answer. The readings were the same in the two masses. As the funeral ordo proposes, the readings were chosen in relation to the personality of the departed. The first reading, 1 John 3:14, 20, expresses God’s knowledge of the heart of every sinner and the mercy of God that is greater than all sin. The Gospel reading from John 14:1-7 offered a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, in which Thomas asks Jesus to show him the way that he is to follow. These two texts gave pointers to the personal questions that Mitterrand asked in the course of his final years.

In such circumstances, the homily constitutes an essential part that the Church has to play. It allows its message to be put into words, a message that had become difficult for people distant from religious practice to grasp in the symbolic rites. Profiting from this kind of public tribune, the homily of Cardinal Lustiger is particularly remarkable in this respect.³³ He constantly mingled into his reflections both biblical quotations and quotations from François Mitterrand—to such an extent that some passages require close attention in order to understand who is the author of what is being said. Thus it appeared to be a kind of meditation by Mitterrand himself on his own end and on the last things in general. For example, the end of the homily on the communion of saints, which is an article of faith in the Christian Creed, makes reference to the “faith” of Mitterrand: “François Mitterrand implied that he believed in the communion of saints. This love is God himself. May François Mitterrand find help, pardon, and courage among the saints.” These sentences show the precision with which Cardinal Lustiger prepared his text. This faith of Mitterrand is, to say the least, fluid: he “implied that he believed” (“laissé entendre qu’il croyait”). This homily is all the more important for having been the only speech given on the

³¹ Jacques Juilliard, “Introduction,” in *La Mort du Roi*, 9.

³² Jacques Juilliard, “La mort du roi. De de Gaulle à Mitterrand et retour,” in *La Mort du Roi*, 34-35.

³³ Jean-Marie Lustiger, “Homélie,” *La Croix* (January 10, 1996) [pages? unknown](#). Recently, Cardinal Lustiger was called a “media star” by Ralph Sauer, “Die französische Kirche im Zeichen des Laizismus,” in *Theologie der Gegenwart* 49 (2006) 216.

occasion of the obsequies—*qui plus est en mondovision???* [not sure how to translate *mondovision*, not necessary, = on television all around the world]—according to the wishes of Mitterrand, who stated in his will, “No speeches at my funeral.”

The homily of Monsignor Dagens is more “classical.” Moreover, it was only heard by the intimate acquaintances authorized to entry into the church at Jarnac, and by the people who stood outside. The bishop made a link above all between certain aspects of Mitterrand’s life and those who were gathered. The local dimension figured strongly, much more than in Paris. The connection with his home ground and the dimension of belonging were underlined. It is not clear what relates directly to Mitterrand. Monsignor Dagens evoked a search, an internal dialogue between shade and light: “It is also and above all the internal dialogue, this debate with himself that he conducted to the end, through shadows and light.”

According to Dagens, Mitterrand’s faith was a faith in the interiority of the human being, affirming that everyone bears within an intimate mystery: “We cannot fail to recognize in him this faith in the interiority of man, this certainty according to which a man can never be reduced to his external struggles, because every human being carries an intimate mystery.” These very prudent and, in the final reckoning, generous remarks are far from a clear reference to the Christian faith, at least in its specificity. The only truly Christian exception was the mention of Mitterrand’s baptism (in the church of Jarnac), but that might remain a merely external manifestation of belonging of a sociological kind. The conclusion of the homily addressed the persons present, in the same ambiguous tone, inviting everyone to enter into the same interior dialogue: “We pray for him, with respect, with gratitude, with the desire also, that each one of us may follow the same interior dialogue that he himself so much practiced, this dialogue which includes our doubts and our groping, but that nothing can interrupt since God himself engages with us in it.” If one thinks of the gospel that had just been proclaimed, that would give to Mitterrand an almost messianic dimension—which is surely not what the bishop intended.

2. Analysis

(1) The adaptation of the Church

Thus these funeral celebrations were ambiguous at various points. How could the Catholic Church have responded otherwise to Mitterrand’s wish “a mass is possible”? Viewing Mitterrand strictly as a person, the Church could not refuse a liturgical celebration, which is what is given for any Catholic who asks for it. That would have been religion performing a public service in a way that was typical of a Christendom society, as has been well explicated by the *Parisian* theologian Laurent Villemain.³⁴ The difficulty resides rather in the fact that in general—at least in France—the eucharist is no longer celebrated for people who have distanced themselves from the Church. In that case, funerals are a liturgy of the word with rites specific to the deceased. To the end of his life, Mitterrand remained a declared agnostic, even if he lived an agnosticism marked by a search for meaning with the help of the vocabulary of his Catholic education. Many of his last remarks show the depth of that Catholic education and its influence on his final years. But that remained at the level of publishing his intimate thoughts and was not a public profession of faith.³⁵ To that must be added the well-known “bigamy” of the deceased President. Thus the decision to celebrate this double eucharist could shock not only certain strict supporters of

³⁴For example, in “Formation chrétienne et socialisation ecclésiale. Essai d’approche ecclésiologique,” in *La Maison-Dieu* 223 (2000) 45-58.

³⁵Jacques Julliard, *La mort du roi. De de Gaulle à Mitterrand et retour*,” 31-38.

secularism—who, in fact, were quite few to react in this way—but also convinced Catholics, who voiced vehement protests.³⁶

The two bishops, who were here the official representatives of the Catholic Church, reacted in different ways. Cardinal Lustiger offered little in the way of reproach to Mitterrand. For example, he asked why human beings put to themselves questions about the meaning of life only when they are at death's door. How should one interpret the mixed homily of the Cardinal? On the one hand, it was indubitably an expression of respect towards the deceased. On the other hand, the Cardinal seemed to “use” Mitterrand's reflections in order to proclaim in Notre Dame the message of the Church about life and death. This second perspective explains in part those few controversies which followed. Some people saw in it almost a manipulation, which was probably not the case if one looks at the matter closely. Rather, it was a case of including Mitterrand in his own way among the faithful, even while allowing to him that place which was his very own and to which he was so firmly attached. In this sense, Cardinal Lustiger's homily can be considered as a masterpiece of the genre. This is all the more important in that such a public celebration is not only a reflection of existing practices, but also a kind of model for parish life, allowing for certain obvious differences.

Monsignor Dagens focused rather on the attention that the Church pays to someone's last wishes. He implied that an explicit Christian faith was not required.³⁷ The ambiguous conclusion could also hint that we are all a little bit agnostic, just like Mitterrand. That would justify both prayer in the church and the eucharistic celebration.

(2) The turn towards ultramodernity

Ultramodernity is characterized by Hervieu-Léger as the psychological arrival of the individual (the primacy accorded to self-realization), the contractualization of social relations, the removal of boundaries, and development of instant communications.³⁸ The first point affects particularly Mitterrand's funeral. Through the books he published before his death, the homily in Notre Dame, and the articles written around and after his death, everybody in France could enter into Mitterrand's intimate psychology and spirituality.³⁹ But one must not forget that this double funeral was also a liturgy of state. As one sociologist nicely formulated it: “We must reconsider the death of François Mitterrand, which is by no means the publicization of a private person, but, on the contrary, the privatization of a public personage.”⁴⁰

The third component of ultramodernity underlines even more the relation that is at best paradoxical established here between intimacy and one's public character. Everybody in France could follow the two celebrations simultaneously. At that point, two eras definitively came to an end: Christendom, in which the faith of the individual did not come into question because it was supposed to be identical with the faith of the group; and modernity, in which the faith of the individual was a matter for him or her alone, independently of the group.

³⁶“It is moreover noteworthy, that is, from the Catholic side, that the most vehement protests were raised against what was perceived as a sham, or even a provocation: apart from the proclaimed agnosticism of the deceased, was not the Church induced into ratifying the public display of his double family?” (ibid., 34). See also Hervieu-Léger “Les doubles funérailles du Président,” 92-93.

³⁷Cf. Baudot, 62.

³⁸Hervieu-Léger, “Rites politiques et religieux des sociétés modernes,” 17.

³⁹Furthermore, by reason of his illness and of the way in which it was surrounded by the media, his death was already, as it were, known before it happened; cf. Anne Rasmussen, “La mort annoncée de François Mitterrand,” in *La Mort du Roi*, 61-80.

⁴⁰Julliard, “La mort du roi. De de Gaulle à Mitterrand et retour,” 55.

These days a close connection is required between substance and form in the ritual domain, which means there must be coherence between the performance of the liturgy and personal religious convictions. If the faith of the individual is not quite that of the Church that celebrates, either one adapts the liturgy or one nevertheless celebrates as though the gap were not so serious. A sociological approach allows one to arrive at the following kind of claim: "The question posed by the religious burial of François Mitterrand is then no longer that of its threat to the secularity of the Republic, but that of the conditions which have made the last wishes of the deceased all powerful."⁴¹ As Hervieu-Léger summarized it perfectly in 1999: "The symbolic force of the double funeral, in Notre Dame and at Jarnac, was that it crystallized, at a very particular moment, the double process of, on the one hand, the fracturing of the dimension of the original confessional identity and, on the other hand, the recomposition of a personal religiosity bringing to expression in a different register the reference to a metaconfessional line of belief."⁴²

A week later, a commentary in *Le Monde* claimed that the separation between Church and State was buried along with Mitterrand.⁴³ That is nicely said, but there is an error of perspective. What was buried that day was the liturgy of state, both that of Christendom and that of modernity. The extreme and paradoxical "intimization"⁴⁴ of Mitterrand's funeral opened up a new road. Neither the Church nor the State is any longer the owners of the liturgies. The individual has become their absolute master. The whole performance of a rituality from that moment on is but a compromise between sometimes contradictory desires and convictions. Mitterrand's funeral represents for liturgies of state, so to speak, their entrance into ultramodernity.

IV. The Catholic Rituality of Ultramodernity between Subjectivism and Pluralism

1. The Year 1996 as a New Point of Departure

Considered as a whole, the event of Mitterrand's funerals shows that the Catholic Church occupies an important place in French society, without having a dominant role. It no longer owns the keys of rituality and the spiritual life. This was not a novelty, but it has become in some way definitive, with no way back. Henceforth the Church must adapt itself to this ultramodern society, even in its own domain of the pastoral practice of the sacraments.

Two coincidental events are significant. The year 1996 was marked with festivities for the 1500th anniversary of the baptism of Clovis, the occasion for several polemics and the much-noticed journey of Pope John Paul II to Reims. The year also saw the completion of the process of reflection on the situation of the Catholic Church in France with the publication of the French bishops' letter to the Catholics of France, "Setting Forth the Faith in Contemporary Society."⁴⁵ Monsignor Dagens, who presided over Mitterrand's funeral in Jarnac, was responsible for the group of theologians who composed this report and included in it the reflections coming from

⁴¹Cf. Baudot, 56.

⁴²Hervieu-Léger, "Les doubles funérailles du Président," 108.

⁴³Danielle Sallenave, "L'autre enterrement," *Le Monde* (January 19, 1996) [pages?? unknown](#).

⁴⁴This is an expression of Jean-Hugues Déchaux to characterize funerals in ultramodernity; cf. "Un nouvel âge du mourir: 'La mort en soi,'" [in](#) *Recherches Sociologiques* 32.2 (2001) 79-100.

⁴⁵Les Évêques de France, *Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle. Lettre aux catholiques de France* (Paris: [Cerf](#), 1996).

various consultations.⁴⁶ The aim was a radical rethinking of the relation between the Church and men and women in contemporary French society.⁴⁷

Among the most decisive reflections in the letter *Proposer la foi*, the most remarkable concerns the lucid acknowledgement—without nostalgia—of the shocks and changes affecting the religious questions in French society. The aim of the project was to express in a clear way the meaning of these changes and to draw conclusions from them for a new way of Christian being in the world, one that allowed the pursuit of the original mission of the Church to announce the Gospel.⁴⁸ It was a matter of taking seriously the transition from a Christian society to a post-Christian situation, in order to redefine the shape and content of all the Church's pastoral action.

All that has to do with rituality is the first thing to be affected by these changes. At the time of Mitterrand's funeral, the participation of persons distanced from the Church and from any sacramental practice, the adaptation to the specific situation made by those pastorally responsible, and the loss of minimal cultural markers for the understanding of a liturgy are so many significant elements and are in harmony with the concerns of the writers of the "Letter to the Catholics of France." The Church's way of acting is all the more important when it receives wide public exposure through the media, especially television. Mitterrand's funerals in fact denote a crossroads. In part they still belong to modernity with the affirmation of individual autonomy; but their display of the intimate already belongs to ultramodernity. The action of the Church also belongs to modernity in so far as it is an institution separated from the state yet rendering a public service. Yet the Church belongs to ultramodernity in its liberation from conventional forms and its proclamation of its own message in a way that is far from panegyric and in-house vocabulary [what is the best way to translate "langue de bois"?: I mean: clichés ; or among my Chambers dictionary: hacknayed phrases]. One is at the same time in the official liturgy in which the state dictates a part of the interpretation of the event (modernity) and in ultrapersonalized liturgy (ultramodernity).

2. The Liturgy between Subjectivism and Pluralism

Mitterrand's funeral proved to the whole world the importance of subjectivism in the public space, which had given it but little room in the rites of the preceding decades. Mitterrand's funeral is, however, an exception because it concerns the President of the Republic. There are other "liturgies of state."⁴⁹ However, all liturgies in the public space are affected by the tensions characteristic of ultramodernity, which one can summarize by the binome of subjectivism and pluralism, to which one would have to add the official affirmation of secularity. Here we shall limit ourselves to the case of two areas in which change in rituality is in full swing.

(1) Liturgies and rites of state for individuals

⁴⁶*Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle*, Assembly of bishops at Lourdes, November 1994 (Paris: Cerf, 1994).

⁴⁷One may read a very good presentation of the process by the person principally responsible: Claude Dagens, "Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle. Un projet pour l'Église au seuil du XXI^e siècle," in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 121 (1999) 372-85.

⁴⁸Cf. Arnaud Join-Lambert, "Évangélisation et liberté de conscience. Mutation des paradigmes dans l'Église catholique en France," in *Un nœud de libertés. Les seuils de la liberté de conscience dans le domaine religieux*, ed. Jean-Bernard Marie and Patrice Meyer-Bisch, Interdisciplinaire 30 (Brussels: Bruylant, 2005; Zurich: Schulthess, 2005) 179-92.

⁴⁹Cf. Alexander Saberschinsky, "'Staatsgottesdienste'—staatliches Gedenken oder Feier des Glaubens? Ein Grenzgang zwischen Sozialethik und Liturgiewissenschaft," in *Liturgie und Lebenswelt. Studien zur Gottesdienst- und Frömmigkeitsgeschichte zwischen Tridentinum und Vatikanum II*, ed. Andreas Heinz, Jürgen Bärsch, and Bernhard Schneider, Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen 95 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2006) 121-40.

The Catholic Church must henceforth continue to adapt when a liturgy of state is requested of it. Minor modifications of its rites can have a surprising after-effect, like the white garment regularly worn in Belgium after the funeral King Baudouin, where the Queen dressed in white as a sign of her hope in the resurrection but also as the ancient privilege of the queens of Spain.

Cela ne prête pas à conséquence [translation? Here is the comment from G Wainwright on this sentence: I would normally take that as meaning "That does not lend itself to being followed / repeated / imitated". But doesn't that clash with what the author has said at the start of the previous sentence I agree ("Des modifications mineures de ses rites peuvent avoir UNE POSTERITE SURPRENANTE" == CAN HAVE A SURPRISING AFTER-EFFECT)?]. The situation is more complicated in the case of tragic events. Only a few persons are directly affected, but the echo in the media considerably modifies the rituality performed. Again in Belgium, one may think of the girls assassinated by pedophiles ten years ago near Dutroux,⁵⁰ and a similar case in Liège in 2006.

This last example is a dramatic one but also significant. Nathalie (age ten) and Stacy (age seven) were assassinated and their remains were found only ten days after their disappearance. The funeral of the first girl was celebrated in strict seclusion in the parish church. For the second girl, the liturgy was televised in its entirety as far as the entrance into the cemetery. Why? Although the decision of the parents escapes our analysis, one must note that the Belgian media had transformed this sordid and tragic local story into a national event. Closure had to be achieved. But is liturgy intended for that purpose? This liturgy was heavily personalized. But the public and *de facto* national character of the liturgy gave to this personalization a new meaning to the rites, to the speeches, and to the prayers [[French sentence structure not clear – are some words missing?]]. Everything received a commentary, either live or in later reports, including certain details such as the flowers or the teddy bears placed by her classmates on the coffin. This can be a good example of the danger of the deconstruction or the reorientation of the rite and of the reduction of the liturgy principally to its emotional dimension.

(2) Liturgies and rites of state for groups

A liturgy of state is all the more complex when it involves groups. The consequences of religious pluralism are then explicit. In August 2005, a large interreligious liturgy (involving seven religions or Christian confessions) was celebrated in memory of an air crash in the presence of 20,000 people including the highest authorities of State. What can be done in such a case if not to reduce the intervention of each person responsible to a few words and to perform very brief rites that can be common to all? However, preceding the rite there was an almost spontaneous torchlight procession through the streets. One can clearly see from the photographs and films how this popular and seemingly simplistic rituality was carried out, with depth, dignity, and emotion, by the participants. That at least raises the question of the performativity of a liturgy of state that would be so plural that it could no longer speak to any of the participants.

This type of pluralism in a pluralistic liturgy of state, however, permits the Catholic Church to refrain from playing a role of public service to religion and allows it instead to concentrate on its own gift, its mission, and its particular rites with those men and women who call upon it. The Catholic Church has the duty to accompany such rites insofar as certain of its members are directly concerned. But the current period of transition of the status and place of Church in society does not make the task easy for those responsible for pastoral practice. Those responsible

⁵⁰Jean-Marie Lacrosse, "La Marche Blanche des Belges: une communion rituelle," in *La modernité rituelle*, 111-20.

must continually confront new situations. Then liturgies of state are an opportunity to announce the message of the Gospel by means of a true and well-conceived mystagogy.⁵¹

3. The Risks of Ultrapersonalization in the Liturgy

In the area of liturgy, the consequences of ultramodernity can be observed in all the French-speaking countries of the West. They could be characterized as ultrapersonalization. In the case of Mitterrand's obsequies, it would even be suitable to speak of "metapersonalization," in the sense that a quasi-iconic presidential figure comes into the matter at least as much as the real personality of the deceased. If ultrapersonalization is recurrently an implicit or explicit desire in requests for the sacraments and other liturgies, one must be able to measure its results.⁵² It is granted today that excessive creativity—the corollary of ultrapersonalization—kills the rite. This, in fact, is then no longer a common non-verbal language capable of constituting an assembly, of inscribing the present event into a pre-established interpretative framework; in short, of ascribing meaning—a meaning free of any too strong subjectivity which would prevent a person from constructing a future on a firm foundation. The risks of ultrapersonalization are greatest in the area of funerals: they sometimes obstruct the grieving process, and traumatize for many years the affective memory instead liberating it into a confident release that the rite would allow.

The main purpose of this short digression is to call attention to the power of the rite. If ritualism is deleterious—as we have known for many years—the denial of ritual is just as much so. The great religious institutions—which in France and in Belgium means in the first place the Roman Catholic Church—must take up their ritual mission, even in the public space. They must from now on invest in ritual and symbolic education, which has been profoundly affected by the "exculturation" of Catholicism.⁵³ Ultramodernity, in fact, sees the ritual balance wobble, even collapse. Most frequently, the official representative of the Church is located in "a different world" than the person asking for the sacraments or the rites: another world of faith, of beliefs, of religious images, of vocabulary, of perception of symbols, etc. When such a request enters into the public space, how can and must a State or a collectivity deal with it? In this regard, the manner in which the Catholic Church handled the ritual request of Mitterrand can be instructive.

V. Conclusion

In the area of liturgies of state, the coronation of Napoleon signals entrance into modernity, and the funeral of Mitterrand, entry into ultramodernity. The two events are, as it were, beacons in the history of rituality. These liturgies offer clues for analyzing the questions that arise today in the domain of rituality.⁵⁴ I will add one final hypothesis closely linked to these conclusions. These two liturgies are just as important for "secularism in the French style." Secularism was truly born in the public ritual space on the occasion of Napoleon's coronation. One might say that it disappeared as a homogeneous and coherent system with the funerals of Mitterrand.

A new world is opening up to us, around us and in us. What rituality is going to build and shape the society of tomorrow? What will be the role of the Catholic Church, which up to now has been the biggest purveyor of rites and liturgies even in the public space? It is very difficult to

⁵¹See Saberschinsky, 136-38.

⁵²I have already addressed this problem of the ultrapersonalization of liturgies in the case of priestly ordinations; cf. Arnaud Join-Lambert, "The Personalization of the Litany of the Saints at Ordinations: An Ecclesiological and Pastoral Issue," in *Studia Liturgica* 34 (2004) 216-30.

⁵³According to the terminology of Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme, la fin d'un monde* (Paris: Bayard, 2003) 91-131. One could probably broaden the expression to an "exculturation of Christianity."

⁵⁴Researches into rituality are quite new among liturgists, and yet they are urgent and useful; see Arnaud Join-Lambert, "Les recherches en liturgie confrontées aux *Ritual Studies*," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 82 (2006) 542-44.

reply. But one thing remains certain, for whoever knows how to read the history of the Church in the liturgical domain: the capacity of the Catholic Church to accompany people of every age and culture on this ritual road.

Translated from the French by Geoffrey Wainwright

“Liturgies of state” are major ceremonies where political and religious dimensions are combined. These liturgies make use of complex rituality which all collective and individual interests. These liturgies have a twofold interest for research in practical theology: on the one hand as a reflexion of society and on the other as a model for the members of this society. 1) Napoleon’s crowning (1804) opened a new era in the domain of public rituality, an entrance, so to speak, into modernity. 2) The end of this epoch corresponds to the two funerals of President Mitterrand (1996). These funerals are significant for the rituality proper to ultra-modernity, marked by the primacy given to self-realization and decompartmentalization. 3) Catholic rituality is henceforth in a state of tension between its own objectivity and this subjectivity and plurality proper to ultra-modernity. This tension makes itself manifest in the liturgy through the phenomenon of ultra-personalization.