

HUMAN SACRIFICE

The Degeneration of a Ritual

The vatican (sic) and the catholic church (sic) ignore scientific research that shows that if latex condoms are used properly they can prevent the transmission of HIV and other diseases. They make prehistoric statements such as: "Morality is the only prevention for AIDS..." and "Anyone who ignores the teachings of the catholic church (sic) and contracts AIDS has only himself to blame."... Certain religious and spiritual practices in history have involved human sacrifice... the vatican's (sic) and the church's (sic) activities... amount to the same thing.
(Wojnarowicz 132-33)

Known as an activist with ACT-UP (the "queer" rights group that popularized the slogan, "Silence = Death"), author David Wojnarowicz was himself fighting a losing battle against HIV when he penned his claim that, by repressing information and propaganda for the usage of latex condoms to fight the spread of HIV, the Catholic Church was practicing human sacrificeⁱ. It is easy to dismiss the statement as the red hot rhetoric of an AIDS activist who was desperately attempting to sway political policy. Although effective as an inflammatory metaphor, few would ever think to consider his claim in a literal fashion. Closer examination of the history of sacrifice in relation to the Church and the Church's stance on sexuality and marginalized peoples in society (i.e., gays and women) shows that there is more literal truth in Wojnarowicz's claim than, perhaps, he had intended.

Ritual of death

A review of the literature reveals many different and sometimes conflicting explanations for sacrifice. Psychoanalytic thought influences several writers: Freud linked the ritual of human sacrifice to an unresolved Oedipal conflict on the societal level.ⁱⁱ He conjectured that the sacrificial victim represented the collective father. By offering a human sacrifice, the community's men were symbolically resolving their own Oedipal desire to kill their own fathers and thus be able to bed their mothers.

There are some problems with this interpretation. Even if one accepts Freud's speculation of neurotic conflicts as primary individual motivators, one must make the leap from seeing these theoretical motivators as working on the individual level to seeing them as motivators of societal structure. This leap forces one to assume that religious ritual is based in neurotic behavior, just as Freud did. This assumption leaves one with the paradox that involvement in religion tends to reduce individual neurosis -- making involvement in neurotic behavior the cure for neurotic behavior -- a paradox that Freud admitted he could never successfully resolve (Grainger 58-59).

William Beers makes a neo-Freudian feminist argument and places the motivation for human sacrifice with male narcissism.ⁱⁱⁱ Beers argues that males revere and loathe women as the great mother and the feared other. The origin of this is placed in the infant's feeling of omnipotence and oneness with the mother's breast that is frustrated when the infant realizes that he is separate from his mother's breast and that his cries are not always responded to instantly and satisfactorily. Beers suggests that the sacrificial victim is a stand-in for the anger that men feel in the realization that they are separate from their mothers and the resentment men feel for not having the power to give birth. Aside from not addressing the paradox that Freud fails to deal with, Beers neglects to mention that many recorded versions of human sacrifice have men, not women, as the victims.

Georges Bataille in Theory of Religion and Erotism: Death & Sensuality argues that the impulse towards sacrifice is an attempt to transcend the existentialist dilemma, transgress taboo to enter the sacred, blur the distinction between subject and object through intimacy gained by identification with the victim to become “like water moving in water”. Though his thesis is compelling, his backward projection of philosophical concerns developed in response to the rise of mechanism leading to the ascendancy of Capitalism is completely anachronistic and is, therefore, not convincing when examining a ritual with pre-industrial and, indeed, pre-historical origins.^{iv}

Other explanations for sacrifice include sending an emissary to the gods, fending off the gods’ anger and jealousy (Maccoby 11), a ritualized version of hunting (Schechner 102), a ritualized enactment of man’s ability to kill for sport, and the ultimate fulfillment of the requirement in ritual for irrevocable action (Driver 101-02).

None of these explanations satisfactorily explain why sacrifice seems to have existed in almost all cultures in spite of taboos against it. There is evidence that sacrifice has existed in virtually all corners of the Earth. It is symbolically reenacted every day throughout Christendom. How can there be an explanation for this widespread ritualized killing?

Ritual for life

E. O. James suggests that we should not look to sacrifice as a death ritual but, rather, as a ritual to promote life: “human sacrifice... is essentially a transference of life to enable the gods to continue their beneficent functions on earth” (186). James looks to the act, rather than the result, of sacrifice to support his thesis:

In the ritual shedding of blood it is not the taking of life but the giving of life that really is fundamental, for blood is not death, but life. The outpouring of the vital fluid in actuality, or by substitute, is the sacred act whereby life is given to promote and preserve life. (33)

James postulates that early man, observing that the loss of blood is connected with the loss of vitality, deduced that blood was the essence of life. He further speculates that this connection is why instructions for several cultures’ sacrifice ritual are so specific as to the handling of the life’s fluid that poured out. The biblical book of Leviticus contains directions for where the blood of the sacrificial animals was to be rubbed, sprinkled and splashed; a prime example of how this vital fluid was considered sacred. The sanctity of blood is further evidenced in Leviticus by the taboos placed upon eating blood.

It seems that blood was used to sanctify and animate the place of worship. In several cultures, there are records of hanging a human sacrificial victim as a scarecrow in a field so that his blood would drain into the soil, acting as a spiritual “fertilizer,” allowing the field to once again be bountiful for the spring planting (James 94-96, 98, 102, 106). Regeneration of life is accomplished through the offering of blood, the source of life. Death and resurrection are tied together in a ritual enactment of the transition from Winter to Spring.

The so-called “Cambridge thesis” sees vestiges of the “primal vegetation ritual” in almost all surviving myths, legends, and folklore of Western civilization through the creation of Greek tragedy and Attic Comedy.^v This recurring motif features a mythic god of plenitude being captured and driven underground, torn to bits, eaten, and resurrected to emerge victorious over his captor. The earth, in empathy, suffers the same fate in its annual path through the seasons. Corresponding rituals reenacted the sacrifice, dismemberment and ingestion of the oftentimes androgynous mangod.^{vi}

Roger Grainger makes the claim that all religions are primarily focused upon death and regeneration/resurrection: "... this theme of 'life-out-of-death' actually underlies all religious thinking [and not only the religious thinking of primitive peoples, as Frazer concluded]" (79).

Christian sacrifice

The Christian myth imitates precedent faiths that revolved around the use of human sacrifice as a sin offering. Catholicism's central ritual is the sacred love feast *agape*, a daily mass symbolic of the act of cannibalism where believers ingest the flesh and blood of their fallen savior to join in *communion* with their god (Maccoby 116-17, 159).

The consecration of the bread and wine symbolizes more than the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. The consecration also symbolizes Christ's body and blood becoming food and drink... Following the fragmentation, the celebrant proclaims the words from Paul: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" [1 Cor. 5:7]. To which the people reply: "Therefore let us keep the feast" [1 Cor. 5:8]. (Beers 176-77)

This ritual and accompanying mythology is little changed from the recorded worship by followers of Baal, Osiris, Mithra, and Dionysus: "The centre (sic) in the new religion is not an idea, nor a ritual act, but a Personality. As its opponents were quick to point out... there was little new in Christian teaching" (Angus 309). There is considerable academic speculation that Paul, a Jew who lived in Greece, created a new religion by grafting the historical persona of Jesus of Nazareth upon a blend of Greek Mystery Religions and Judaism:

The Hebrew Paschal blood ritual... has its origin in a very primitive ritual... and signs are not wanting in the narratives pointing to this conclusion, since the Israelites are represented as making requests to go into the wilderness to sacrifice; the Passover being actually referred to as an established institution before the Exodus [Ex. iii. 18, v. 1; vii 16; xii 21]. In its earliest form it seems to have been connected with the offering of first-born children, and in that case the destroying angel may represent the mythological version of the earlier sacrifice, the offering of the firstlings of sheep or goats being a survival of the subsequent modification of the original practice. (Angus 187-89)

The resulting synthesis kept the ritual form of sacrifice; born out of nature religions, its primary concern had been the annual resurrection of the sun god during the Winter Solstice. These religions saw no separation of physical and spiritual; resurrection on the heavenly plane enabled regeneration on the earthly plane. The spilling of blood upon the altar ensured the resurrection of the deity; the sprinkling of blood in the field guaranteed fertility. Remnants of pagan mythology also remained: not only did Christianity usurp the Winter Solstice for the birth celebration of their Messiah, the new religion took the name of their feast of the resurrection, *Easter*, from the pagan goddess of dawn. J.C. Lawson reported of an anxious old woman he met during holy week in Euboea: "Of course I am anxious," she said, "for if Christ does not rise tomorrow, we shall have no corn this year" (qtd. in Gaster 10).

The tomb of the soul

The dualism of Greek philosophy that split mind and body, as well as heaven and earth, had a profound impact on Greek religious thought which, in turn, impacted Christian doctrine. Orphism, influenced by Plato, promoted the idea of the body being the "prison" or "tomb" of the soul (Angus 152). The Sophists contributed to the rise of individualism:

The individual became the unit, and the Mystery-Religions held out salvation for the individual soul... Men had to pay for individualism in a greater sensitiveness to suffering and loss in which the Mysteries offered consolation and comfort. With the inward direction given to life arose a consciousness of sin and need of reconciliation to meet which the Mysteries offered a cathartic and assured divine grace with the forgiveness of sins. (Angus 186)

From these roots came a religion that saw the earthly plane as evil. The dogma of original sin held sway. The ritual and myth of sacrifice transposed from the seasonal regeneration of the earth into a vehicle for the resurrection of souls through the purification of the unavoidable sins of animality.

Through substitution, the ritual became a reenactment of the sacrifice of the man-god; animal sacrifice, or bread and wine, stood in for the sacrifice of human life.

“Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac”^{vii}

Sexual activity is the necessary precursor to new life; this is the source of the sexual subtext often connected to sacrifice. This subtext is played out in the sexual licentiousness reported in Dionysian rites and the relaxing of various sexual taboos found in other cultures at the time of sacrifice rituals. This sexual undercurrent underlies all Freudian interpretations of sacrifice and is especially relevant when considering sacrifice and the Church.

The dualism incorporated from Plato led to anti-carnal religious thinking. “Every great teacher from Plato to John the Baptist, from Paul to Plotinus, axiomatically accepted asceticism as an essential of and qualification for religious life” (Angus 216-17). Angus continues:

Marriage and the procreation of children were strictly inhibited by the Essenes, Ophites, and the stricter Gnostics. Copulation in itself became a sin in revulsion from naturalism and antinomianism. Hence sexual intercourse was forbidden both within and without the marriage state. Virginité became a virtue superior to that of motherhood. Matter was looked upon as evil or as the seat of the evil principle; the whole business of life was to release the soul from the contact and pollution of matter, from the body, its bane. (222)

Traditional roots based in asceticism coupled with an increasingly anti-corporeal theology led to a Christianity that, although its “Golden Rule” is to love, seems to be oddly obsessed with the suppression of the physical expression of love. The Vatican’s repressive obsession with sexuality can be traced to other sources as well. The increasingly anti-carnal dogma of the Church functioned very effectively as a technique of power.

Michel Foucault’s analysis of the History of Sexuality suggests that the emphasis upon the discipline of sexual expressions enforced through the confessional was developed as a technique of developing and maintaining power. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in Michel Foucault:

Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, summarize the historian’s writings: Elaborate surveillance, techniques of control, innumerable traps, endless moralizing, demands for ceaseless vigilance, continual incitement

to guilt, architectural reconstruction, family honor, medical advance were all mobilized in a campaign obviously doomed to failure from the start... However, if that campaign is read as the production of power and not as restriction of sexuality, it succeeded admirably. (172)^{viii}

The sexual taboos of uncleanness found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus ensure that intercourse only occurs during the most fertile period of a woman's cycle. The rhythm method of birth control inverts the Old Testament taboos to ensure that intercourse only occurs during the woman's non-fertile periods. The rhythm method is not supported by scripture and is antiprocreative.

The Church allows married couples to practice birth control through the rhythm method; parishioners are allowed to indulge in non-procreative sex. The Church does not, however, allow the usage of condoms and other "artificial" means of birth control.

The rhythm method requires abstinence and discipline during the woman's fertile period. One possible reason that the Church does not allow other anti-procreative measures is that the discipline required with the rhythm method is being utilized by the Church as a technique of power. Allowing condom usage would reduce the Vatican's effectiveness in the generation and maintenance of power.^{ix}

Scapegoats and sacrificial lambs

Human sacrifice was first practiced as a giving of life's substance to ensure the god's abilities to continue to benefit mankind. It changed, through Greek dualism, to resurrect the believers after death to the heavenly plane. Christian belief focused upon the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary to pay for the unavoidable sins of the flesh. If, as Wojnarowicz suggested, the Vatican's policy towards latex condoms is, indeed, to be considered as human sacrifice, then it is a perverse ritual. Whereas the earlier versions of sacrifice have regeneration and resurrection as their goal, this modern version seems to only have the development and maintenance of power on the earthly plane as its objective.

The Church's emphasis shifted from transformation of the individual within the spirit of *communitas* to the creation and maintenance of power in the political arena.^x This paradigmatic shift was marked by the ruthless hunting down, exposure, and excommunication of heretical sects that had once functioned within the auspices of the Church. Paradoxically, by focusing upon the individuals' reward and transformation in the ethereal plane, the Church's power and influence in the earthly plane grew correspondingly.

The sacrificial victims, that Wojnarowicz claimed are now being selected by the Church, reflect how far the sacrificial ritual has been mutated from its origins. In rituals of regeneration and resurrection, the victims were celebrated, sharing qualities of the deity they were to be sacrificed to. The victims of this contemporary distorted ritual -- "Anyone who ignores the teachings of the catholic church (sic) and contracts AIDS" (Wojnarowicz 132-33) -- are disdained by the community they serve. There is irony in a religion, whose founder is most often pictured as an androgynous man who kept close company with a former prostitute, condemning homosexuals and promiscuous women.

Mary Douglass states that the "power which presents a danger for careless humans is very evidently in the structure of ideas, a power from which the structure is expected to protect itself" (qtd. in Beers 40). Relentless pogroms were conducted by the Church against any perceived competitors. The Inquisition, witch trials, and the continuing censorship and excommunication of heretics are well documented.

People who seem to exist in the cracks between this world and the under and upper worlds are seen in many cultures as having great personal spiritual power.^{xi} These liminal people exist inside and outside of society at the same time and are revered and/or feared in many cultures:

To move across boundaries is to move into margins; it is to move into danger and to be at a source of power... The body orifices represent transitional zones where various substances either enter (food, milk, water, wine, semen) or leave (urine, feces, spittle, milk, blood, tears, semen). These substances transverse the boundaries of the body and can be experienced as dangerous, polluting, and powerful depending on the specific culture. (Beers 40-41)

Women have more bodily orifices and have more direct commerce with bodily fluids; they are more liminal and thus apt to possess more spiritual power. The woman on her cycle is avoided as unclean, not out of disgust for her lowliness but out of fear of her power. Likewise, the homosexual man who exists between genders and takes in seminal fluid into his mouth and anus is seen as liminal.^{xii}

In his book The Sacred Executioner, Hyam Maccoby claims that in all recorded cultures, except the Aztec, there existed immense taboos and guilt around the ritual of sacrifice yet it was still practiced when deemed necessary. Various cultures developed elaborate methodologies for deflecting the reality of the killing ritual they were engaged in and utilized various techniques of exonerating their guilt (Maccoby 82). When the guilt was borne by a single individual, the “sacred executioner” was seen as both cursed and blessed. He could not be punished as a common murderer yet he was required to perform penance to remove the residual pollution of his act (21). Often times the solution was to banish the sacred executioner to a protected exile for a prescribed period of time till he was again deemed “clean”. Maccoby cites the practice found in Leviticus of sacrificing one goat and driving another (the scapegoat) into the desert to, he says, bear the guilt of the ritual (35).

Maccoby sees the entire Judaic nation as fulfilling the role of sacred executioner of Christ. He cites their long and troubled exile from the Holy Land as symptomatic of their perceived guilt as the necessary killers of Christ (157-62) and points to the Holocaust as the first breakdown of the traditional protection given to these scapegoats (163-75). His thesis does not go far enough in its analysis: the Jews in Nazi Germany weren't slaughtered in spite of their status as sacred executioners of Christ; they were sacrificed because of that status. This is not a breakdown of the ritual but, rather, the expression of a mutated version of the ritual. The ritual of human sacrifice has gone through three major permutations:

1. Actual human sacrifice for a communal based ritual of seasonal regeneration; earthly and heavenly affairs are intimately connected.
2. Symbolic reenactment of the sacrifice of the man-god who exists between the planes of heaven and earth; initiates hope to escape the earth to reach heaven.
3. Actual sacrifice of a multitude of victims for the creation of political power; heaven is not a concern.

Hitler was elaborating upon the model that the Church had provided with the Inquisition: the Church's ruthless torture and killing of Jews, heretics, and mid-wives accused of witchcraft served admirably in the Church's goal of expanding its political power. If we accept Wojnarowicz assertion, the Church continues to elaborate upon this degenerated ritual with its policy towards condoms.

The Holocaust was human sacrifice conducted on a grand scale for the creation of power; regeneration and resurrection of, not the body nor the soul, but the body politic. This type of sacrifice is not meant for the gods, but rather, the mobs. The political body could not bear the guilt of the sacrifice it demanded; the sacred victim must bear the guilt for his own death. The Jews were the perfect sacrificial victims because they already bore the guilt of killing Christ. The victims of HIV likewise bear the guilt of their own deaths: “Anyone who ignores the teachings of the catholic church (sic) and contracts AIDS has only himself to blame” (Wojnarowicz 132-33). The guilt of the sacrifice has been placed upon the victim; effectively banishing all taboos and constraints against sacrifice. The scapegoat is not banished to the land of Azazel; the scapegoat is driven to the slaughter.

ⁱ The article “African bishops reject condoms to counter AIDS” from the August 10, 2001 issue of *National Catholic Reporter* presents the Catholic Church’s mixed views of the use of condoms for HIV prevention. Some Church leaders reluctantly approve the usage of condoms based upon the principle of lesser evil but other, powerful members of the clergy have continued to actively condemn educational programs that promote the use of condoms to counter AIDS.

ⁱⁱ Freud’s work is amazingly influential; it is virtually impossible to deal with sacrifice without starting with Freud. Contending with the psychoanalytic materials that are available on this subject in an exhaustive fashion is beyond the confines of this article.

ⁱⁱⁱ See William Beers’ Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion. This work provides an excellent review of the literature related to sacrifice.

^{iv} Bataille’s work could shed light on the prevalence of pseudo sacrifice ritual as the central component of so-called Reality TV game shows. As media consumers have become more and more sophisticated in discerning the simulacra in mediated events, producers have had to become more sophisticated in their attempts to gain the largest market share by creating an affect on their audience. Simulated human sacrifice within the context of simulated reality is an attempt to transcend the flattened affect of televised images.

^v See Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory, pages 2-3 for a concise, though dismissive description of the Cambridge thesis. Theodor Gaster’s Thespis is based entirely upon this thesis.

^{vi} The ritual journey undergone by Siberian Shamans as described in Micea Eliade’s Shamanism: Techniques of Ecstasy follows the primal vegetation ritual remarkably. The biblical story of the division of the twelve tribes of Israel as well as the dispersal of the people of the world at the destruction of the Tower of Babel have interesting parallels.

^{vii} Quote attributed to Henry Kissinger in Oliver Stone’s movie, *Nixon*.

^{viii} Foucault’s research is referring specifically to campaigns dedicated towards the eradication of masturbation. I, like so many other writers utilizing Foucault’s writings, have interpolated a bit, choosing to extend his conclusion about attempted control of masturbation to the attempted control of intercourse.

^{ix} I believe the current Church crisis concerning the cover-up by the hierarchy of pedophilic priests is directly related to the Church’s longstanding teachings concerning sex that appear to be based more upon the creation of power for the clergy than on theology.

^x See pages 152-165 and 227-238 of Tom Driver’s The Magic of Ritual for an excellent and intelligible explanation of Victor Turner’s coined words: *communitas*, *liminal*, and *liminoid*.

^{xi} See Mircea Eliade's Shamanism: Techniques of Ecstasy and Rogan Taylor's The Death and Resurrection Show. Schechner, in Performance Theory, suggests that non-mainstream theatre exists in low rent districts: the cracks of society. They inhabit "liminal sites" and thus are equivalent to shamans for contemporary society.

^{xii} Piercing, tattooing and intravenous drug use all create additional bodily orifices and, thus, could be seen as sources of liminality. I avoid dealing with these "high-risk" groups because they aren't directly impacted by the Vatican's policy on condoms. Lesbians are liminal because of their inversion of sexual/gender roles. Lesbians are a relatively low risk group and not directly effected by condom use.

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