

# The Cross of Christ, Sacrifice and Sacred Violence

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A witness to the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus on a hill outside Jerusalem in the early first century would not have been able to identify any aspect of what was going on as sacrifice. Here was merely a judicial murder performed with some cynicism by the Roman administration of a difficult province. For the Temple administration Jesus's death was understood as a matter of an expediency pointedly ironised by the author of John's Gospel: 'You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (John 11.50). There seems little doubt, on the other hand, that the gospels, as well as Paul, place the death of Jesus firmly within a hermeneutical framework provided by the sacrifice of Passover; this, in turn, leads to the early claim that Christ's death is to be understood in relation to the forgiveness of sins. This theme is already present in the primitive credal statement preserved in I Cor. 15.3, which Paul seems to have inherited from Palestinian Christians and most probably from the Jerusalem church itself.<sup>1</sup>

Such a reading of the New Testament material has been challenged by René Girard in a body of work which represents one of the most profound of recent attempts to explore the meaning of sacrifice in the roots of human society. At the danger of oversimplifying the complexity of Girard's argument, he suggests, in a series of powerful studies, that human society is born in violence.<sup>2</sup> An early scene from Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, offers a striking and densely packed symbol of this understanding of human nature: an animal bone, used as a neolithic instrument of murder, thrown spinning into the air transforms into a space station. From the proverbial blunt instrument to the extravagances of the star wars programme, violence and technology are inextricably linked. The dark side of the creative drive which shapes culture is a destructiveness which has constantly to be repressed and kept under control. One of the mechanisms to achieve this is a necessity for scapegoats: violence is focused on a victim, an outsider, which gives a group a sense of identity and a temporary relief from the violence seething within.<sup>3</sup> The human cost is the setting up of a pattern from which we

cannot escape; we are condemned to constant reiteration. Our experience both as persons and as communities is of colluding in the obscene contradiction of fighting to keep fighting at bay, making war to establish a little peace. Sacrifice, sacred violence, structures and allows us to deal with the inchoate violence which is our condition. Girard goes as far as saying that we can point to an original act of violence of which the Biblical account of the murder of Abel by Cain, the builder of the first city (Gen. 4. 2–22), contains a powerful reminiscence.

For Girard, Christ's death exposes the scapegoat mechanisms which lie at the heart of society and, in bringing them out into the open, annul them once and for all, and offer a new basis for society, namely, the kingdom of God. Christ's death, then, for Girard cannot be described as a sacrifice. That would be the absolute blasphemy. Girard argues that the Gospels speak of sacrifice only to reject it and to subvert it (*Things Hidden*, p 180), but he goes on to assert suggestively:

the preaching of the Kingdom of God reveals that there is an element of violence even in the most apparently holy of institutions, like the Church hierarchy, the rites of the Temple, and even the family. Faithful to the logic of sacrifice, those who have refused the invitation to the Kingdom are obliged to turn against Jesus. (*Things Hidden*, p 208)

More recently Girard has been prepared to acknowledge that a more positive, metaphorical use of the word sacrifice might be legitimate. We can talk of giving our lives for the sake of others and even Christ's death might be called a sacrifice in this sense. What he is adamant about is a refusal to understand Christ's death in terms of God making a secret pact with his Son that calls for his murder in order to satisfy God's wrath (*Things Hidden*, p 184). This is precisely the point with which Edward Schillebeeckx was concerned a few years earlier, and which underlies Schillebeeckx's abhorrence of the language of propitiation:

the life and death of Jesus must be seen as a single whole. Furthermore it was not God 'who abominates human sacrifices', who brought Jesus to the cross. That was done by human beings, who removed Jesus from the scene because they felt he was a threat to their status.<sup>4</sup>

This is not a place to offer a detailed critique of Girard.<sup>5</sup> There is much in his work that is thought-provoking and profound. I make just three points. Disturbingly tempting though it might be to accept violence as the defining power behind human culture, I wonder whether recourse to a primordial state of violence is not far too limited a foundation on which to establish the complex and interrelated patterns which form our cultural creations. I have reason to hope there might be rather more to what we mean by humanity. Similarly, Girard's work seems to be based on an

equally narrow understanding of sacrifice which focuses almost absolutely on the act of violence.<sup>6</sup> Sacrifice he identifies as 'sacred violence' (*Things Hidden*, p 226). Finally, I would wish to ask whether Girard's model of imitation can bear the weight of the 'vast mysterious solidarities'<sup>7</sup> we name as sin and grace. With imitation, we are in the world of Pelagius and the exemplarism often, and possibly incorrectly, associated with Abelard, and that is often deemed to be unsatisfactory. Such reservations suggest that we should look again at whether it might yet be appropriate to retain the language of sacrifice in interpreting the death of Jesus on the cross.

Sacrifice is an extremely complex and multi-textured phenomenon. With little thought, we presume an understanding of the word and its use. We are familiar with the horrific rituals of human sacrifice to be found in Maya and Aztec culture. It is all too easy to interpret such rituals according to our own perspective; to read into them horrors we just do not know were there. We do not know how the Aztec and Mayan peoples approached such events, nor even how the victims themselves viewed their approaching death. We are in worlds alien and strange, and we are repulsed by things other societies would understand differently. The actions and symbols being invoked are opaque, sometimes fashioned over a long period of time, and including many levels of meaning. No sacrifice can be interpreted rightly in isolation from its symbolic and social context. Problems of interpretation abound, as we attempt to tease out the meanings associated with the complex symbolism invoked in ritual.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic work on deciphering the rituals of the Nilotic communities of the Nuer, or Victor Turner's studies on Ndembu ritual, reveal some of the complexities of trying to understand what is there. An observer does not always see what a participant sees, or interpret what she sees in the same way. How would we decipher a fragment of the film of major heart surgery if we knew nothing of the context? We could hardly guess that at least temporarily removing a heart was something going on for the person's better health! Even in the accounts provided by the Hebrew Scriptures, for which we have more information, interpretation remains far from easy. In the Passover and Covenant rituals, for example, the blood of the victim is not offered to God but is used as a sign of God's deliverance and liberation of his people. At times we have to admit, as Douglas Davies reminds us, that 'there can be no final answer to some of these questions involving blood, since powerful symbols of this kind often operate on several levels of meaning some of which may no longer be available to us'.<sup>8</sup>

Girard's background is that of literary criticism but he is well aware of the insights of structural anthropologists. This is an approach pioneered by

nineteenth century scholars such as William Robertson Smith in his Burnett lectures of 1888–1889, *The Religion of the Semites*, (1889) and H. Hubert and M. Mauss, members of the *Année Sociologique*, who published their ground-breaking essay ‘Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function’ in 1898. Emile Durkheim followed in their steps with the publication in 1912 of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Though marred by an evolutionary perspective, such views regard religion as integral to the organised life of society into which each of us is born and which is preserved and renewed by a vast mesh of symbol, a network of systems which any group needs for its survival. Durkheim understands ritual as one of the central ways in which our world-view is reinforced, providing ‘not simply a system of signs by which the faith is outwardly translated [but] a collection of the means by which this is created and recreated periodically’.<sup>9</sup>

Girard accepts Durkheim’s insight as providing the fundamental framework for his own account of the violence and scapegoating that lie in the heart of society. He seems less willing, however, to endorse the approaches of anthropologists who have developed the insights of Durkheim in rather different directions, being particularly critical of scholars who fail to appreciate the central role he accords to violence in the shaping of society. The Cambridge anthropologist, Sir Edmund Leach reminds us that the theological literature relating to the sacrifice of the cross is ‘vast but anthropologically naive’.<sup>10</sup> It is to the work of some of these anthropologists—that of Mary Douglas and E. E. Evans-Pritchard in particular—that I would like to turn in order to hazard a rather different reading of sacrifice than that offered by Girard and one which, I suggest, allows us better to engage with the traditional language of sacrifice as it is used in relation to Jesus’ death on the cross.

The field-work of twentieth century anthropologists has both challenged some of the earlier speculation as well as focusing its underlying insight. E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s field-work amongst the Nuer, a cattle-herding people living in the southern Sudan, laid a foundation for his detailed ethnographic account of the subtleties of this twentieth century neolithic people.<sup>11</sup> Evans-Pritchard’s field-work has reinforced the view of Hubert and Mauss that the sacrificial system should be understood as providing ‘a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim’.<sup>12</sup> It is, as Evans-Pritchard comments, the way of humans ‘to approach God by sacrifice and ask for aid’ (*Nuer Religion*, p 283). The idea of gift is thus central but, as Evans-Pritchard makes clear, ‘a gift is a far from simple idea. It is a symbol which may have many different meanings and shades of meaning’ (p 276). Gifts are given to get rid of danger, sickness, or misfortune; they are signs of love, of care, of an acknowledged relationship. Sometimes

they are about manipulation, sometimes not; we buy flowers because we want something in return: we buy flowers simply because it is a nice spring day and we feel good: we buy flowers simply because we want to celebrate the other person and give joy.

The giving of gifts invariably involves some sort of notion of substitution. At the risk of trivialising, we give a box of chocolates, or a bunch of flowers as a sign of offering ourselves. At the same time, we don't want the gift to be a substitute for ourselves in such a way that the recipient is so content with the gift that he or she ignores the giver, enjoying the beauty of the flowers, or the taste of the chocolates. If the gift is immediately thrown back in our face or thrown into the rubbish bin, we can assume we have been rejected, not just that the recipient is allergic to chocolates or suffers from hay fever, though this might be the case. We are understandably hurt by the rejection of our gift because we understand it as a rejection of ourselves.

In the same way the giving of a life, or something which stands for a life (and this might be for the Nuer an insignificant, wild cucumber, rather than an ox) is offered as representative of the one who sacrifices. The cow (and the victim is always called a cow, even if it is only a cucumber) 'is not punished in the place of the man but as a substitute for him in the sense of representing him' (*Nuer Religion*, p 283). Evans-Pritchard seems very hesitant to allow talk of *vicarious* substitution (p 281). Occasionally in a thunderstorm a Nuer might throw away a bead, or wad of tobacco, with the intention that it might stand in as a substitute for themselves (p 281). In the more formal sacrifice this does not seem to be the case. The gesture of laying a hand on the sacrificial cow highlights the identity between the sacrifice and the sacrificer (p 261–262)—it is a matter of 'this is me', not 'this is instead of me'. After all God does not benefit from sacrifice: God owns all the cattle anyway and 'needs nothing and does not ask for anything' (p 283). God merely receives the life, the Nuer retain the meat. Nuer rarely kill wild animals and sacrifice is generally the only time that meat is eaten, yet the feasting following a sacrifice, celebratory though it might be, and possessing considerable social significance, cannot be thought of as a communion meal integral to the sacrifice (p 215). It is not unknown for a Nuer tribesman to criticise his fellow for sacrificing too often merely for the chance to eat meat (p 263).

Evans-Pritchard sees the key to this in the notion of abnegation. Humans deprive themselves of something, but such is the identification between the sacrificer and sacrificial victim that the sacrifice becomes a drama playing out the inner life and intentions of the one who sacrifices. As Paul Ricoeur comments in a slightly different context, 'if it is true that poetry gives no information in terms of empirical knowledge, it may

change our way of looking at things, a change which is no less real than empirical knowledge. What is changed by poetic language is our way of dwelling in the world'.<sup>13</sup> What is true of poetry is true of sacrifice: the act of sacrifice reconceives our way of dwelling in the world. Gifts are symbols of inner states and in this sense one can only give oneself. Yet the act of sacrifice allows a complex play of the symbolism of identification worked out in a set of ideas focused by representative, rather than vicarious, substitution. In sacrifice some part of the sacrificer dies with the victim (cow or cucumber): we part with a state of sinfulness, with an old state of existence. What occurs can be regarded as an absolution, re-birth to new life, or self-immolation.

In sacrifice there is a reciprocal donation but this cannot in any way be defined symmetrically. The one who offers is at one and the same time the one who receives, a position forcefully argued by Catherine Pickstock in her remarkable study of the mediaeval Roman Rite: sacrifice is 'a reciprocal exchange which shatters all ordinary positions of agency and reception' at the same time suggesting, 'an entanglement of anteriority and posteriority which is redemptive'.<sup>14</sup> In sacrifice, for a fleeting moment time stands still. While Pickstock is reflecting on a very specific cultural explication of the notion of sacrifice, that of the sacrifice of the Mass, it could be argued that what she says is not unlike that process which underlies any ritual of sacrifice. She offers a profound meditation on what is entailed in talking of the exchange which is entailed in the offering of a sacrificial gift:

The complex overlaying of repeated gifts which I have just described reveals the ambiguity of the gift-relation which exists between the worshipper and God... In reality, this is all one gift, forever repeated differently, whose lineaments cannot be disentangled without seeming to be laid out in stages: we receive our capacity to receive in receiving that which we are to receive; to receive out humanity, we must already receive the gratuitous excess of divinity, and to receive the *gift* of humanity and divinity, we must already have begun to *transmit* this gift.<sup>15</sup>

For this reason it is not helpful to separate out the complementary notions of expiation and propitiation, even when it comes to talking of the sacrifice of the Cross, which is a feature of much recent exegesis.<sup>16</sup> A jarring tension between expiation and propitiation hints at an inevitable dark motivation which somehow belongs to the human condition reaching out before the mystery of the divine. It tells us something about the costliness of love in the face of human sinfulness.

The act of sacrifice and the complex play of metaphor which surrounds it cannot be easily separated out. We articulate our thoughts by a vast array of verbal and non-verbal metaphors, a play of metaphor and

metonymy. Mary Douglas, following Suzanne Langer, suggests that in discussing sacrifice we are invoking a style of thought which might appropriately be named 'presentational' rather than 'discursive'. While the latter reflects a mode of rational discourse which attempts to transcend a particular context, the former, depending on logical rules of equal legitimacy, is mapped out by our social experience.<sup>17</sup> It relies on patterns of modelling rather than the linearity of discursive thought. The interplay of symbol and the roles played in the rite by the participants contribute to the construction of a microcosm.<sup>18</sup> For the author of Leviticus, for example, the Temple in Jerusalem models the cosmos and the right ordering of relationships within it, so too does the layout of the sacrifice on the altar. This, in turn, is reinforced by the dietary requirements which determine the shape of every Jewish meal:

The animal ... taken into the body by eating corresponds to that which is offered on the altar by fire; what is disallowed for the one is disallowed for the other; what harms the one harms the other.<sup>19</sup>

We see a series of concentric patterns emerging. God's loving relationship to creation and to his chosen people within creation is modelled first by the Temple in Jerusalem, with its different courts, and by the sacrifices which are performed there. This has its echo in the codes which determine what the chosen of God eat and how they conduct themselves in everyday life. Religion is not to be reduced to society (this is perhaps where we part company with Durkheim) but is played out in the way society is structured and conceives itself. Liberation theologians assert the priority of orthopraxis over orthodoxy in so far as actions give flesh to our profession of faith. So it was also for the people who gave shape to the Hebrew Scriptures. Just as Leviticus understands the complexities of dietary laws as a way of modelling the perfection of God's holiness, it was the particular response of the community of Israel to express its encounter with God not only in a set of coherent ritual expressions but also in a set of ethical prescriptions. Such a modelling of the Temple ritual so impressed itself on the everyday life of the community that it survived the destruction of the Temple and its ritual, and it continues to contribute to the self-understanding of the Jewish community to this day.

Already in the period of the final shaping of the Hebrew Scriptures we find evidence of the idea that the death of a martyr (4 Macc 17.22), or even Moses' willingness to stand in the breach and make atonement for his people's sin (Ex 39.30) taking on the shape of sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> At about the same time Jesus was prepared to talk of his body in terms of the Temple (Matt 26.61; 27.40 and parallels, a theme pointedly developed in John

2.19–21). His death was interpreted as breaking down that which separated the Holy Place from the Inner Court (Matt 27.52 and parallels). For a time the early followers of Jesus continued to perform the Temple ritual and model its ordinances by a pattern of life. But soon there was an inevitable parting of the ways for Jesus' own body and his death were understood to mark a reconfiguration and focus of God's loving covenant with creation. The disciples were very soon to present his death as an image of the ritual which was performed before the holy place in the heart of the Temple. His body becomes both the place of sacrifice and the context in which the priestly community of the baptised could read their own lives as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God ( see *Lumen gentium* 10, following Rom 12.1).

- 1 See Martin Hengel, *The Atonement*, SCM, London, 1981, pp 37–39.
- 2 Notably *La Violence et le sacré*, 1972, trans. by Patrick Gregory as *Violence and the Sacred*, Athlone Press, London, 1995; *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, (1978) trans. by Stephen Bann & Michael Metteer as *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Athlone Press, 1987; *Le Bouc émissaire*, (1982) trans. by Yvonne Freccero as *The Scapegoat*, Athlone Press, 1986. The major texts are usefully presented in *The Girard Reader*, ed. J G Williams, Crossroad Press, New York, 1996.
- 3 Mary Douglas offers a very different, and considerably more benign, interpretation of the Biblical ritual of the scapegoat in *Leviticus as Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999, pp 247–151.
- 4 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Book Jesus and Christ*, SCM, London, 1980, p 133.
- 5 See Richard Kearney, 'Myths and Scapegoats: the case of René Girard', *Theory Culture and Society*, vol. 12, 4, (1995) pp 1–14; Fergus Kerr, 'Revealing the Scapegoat Mechanism: Christianity after Girard', in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 32), ed. M. McGhee, 1992, pp 161–175; John Milbank, 'Stories of Sacrifice: Wellhausen to Girard', in *Theory Culture and Society*, vol. 12, 4, (1995) pp 15–46.
- 6 But it is important to give weight to John Bossy's suggestion that there is 'a good deal to be said for envisaging the mass of the closing middle ages as a locus for the extrapolation of social violence, whether we see it from the point of view of the people sacrificing, or, as would be fairly conventional, from that of Christ the expiatory victim' ('The Mass as a Social Institution 1200–1700', *Past and Present*, 100, Aug 1983, pp 29–61).
- 7 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Faber, London, 1969, p 365.
- 8 Douglas Davies, 'An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 89,3, (1977), p 395.
- 9 Emil Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1976, p. 417.
- 10 Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976, p. 93.
- 11 See especially, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1940; *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer*, Oxford, 1951; *Nuer Religion*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956, reprinted 1977.
- 12 H. Hubert and M. Mauss 'Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function', *L'Année Sociologique*, 1898. Reprinted 1964.
- 13 Paul Ricoeur, 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor', in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J Valdes. Harvester Wheatsheaf. Hemel Hempstead, 1991, p 85. I was alerted to this reference by Dr Tina Beattie.



- 14 Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consumption of Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1999, pp 176–7 and p 218.
- 15 *ibid.*, pp.242–243.
- 16 This was a position I accepted all too readily in my article, ‘Schillebeeckx’s Soteriological Agnosticism’, *New Blackfriars*, February 1997, p 81.
- 17 Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999, pp 18–25.
- 18 Mary Douglas comments, ‘microcosmic thinking uses analogies as a logical basis for a total metaphysical framework’ (*Leviticus as Literature*, p 25).
- 19 *Leviticus as Literature*, p 134. See also Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1970, pp 54–77, where Professor Douglas spells out in some detail what seems to be going on in Leviticus 11 and concludes, ‘If the proposed interpretation of the forbidden animals is correct, the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance, holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice of the Temple (p 72).
- 20 See my development of this theme in ‘Schillebeeckx’s Soteriological Agnosticism’, *New Blackfriars*, February 1998, pp 82–83.

## The Use of “Night Prayer” at the Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church

Joseph Sullivan

Around ten years ago the *Order for Christian Funerals* (henceforth *OCF*) was published.<sup>1</sup> Given personal extended pastoral and liturgical use, I would like to make one suggestion which may prove equally useful to others involved in preparing the Funeral Liturgy. I have found the use of “Night Prayer” of *The Divine Office*<sup>2</sup> a real boon in celebrating the Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church.

### Legitimacy

The *OCF* states that prior to the Funeral Liturgy “the vigil is the principal celebration of the Christian community” and then mentions that such a vigil may, as one alternative, take the form of “some part of the office for the dead” (n. 45). The *OCF* offers “Morning Prayer” and “Evening Prayer” without denying the use of other parts (or combination of parts) of the Office for the Dead. In *The Divine Office* itself, the Office for the Dead indicates that its Night Prayer be taken from the version for Sunday,