

“Who More Than Self Their Country Loved . . .”: Biblical Sacrifice in the American Perspective

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O beautiful for heroes proved In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved, And mercy more than life!
America! America! May God their gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness And every gain divine!

I

The most mysterious of all religious rituals is the act of sacrifice. It is also, in most respects, the most remote from our modern experience. Except for occasional experiments or calamities, we tend to look upon worship as a fairly stainless and antiseptic business. Certainly we do not come together expecting sacral slaughter; the gore and the flames and the strong aromas of animal offering are not a part of our usual memories or expectations.

But the fact that we believe ourselves to have come beyond—or at least to have abandoned—the use of literal sacrifice as an act of worship does not necessarily indicate that we have ever been able to understand it. Students of comparative religion have done their best, and some of their conclusions are quite revealing. They tell us, for example, that one key element, almost universally, is the role or function of blood. The blood is always the equivalent of life, and however it may fit into the performance of the individual ritual, it is presumed to possess a special potency and holiness which is not to be found in the more ordinary substances of our material world.

It seems clear, further, that we can isolate some typical motivations for sacrifice: to appropriate the vitality or life force of the victim; to give the deity food, or induce its aid or blessing; even to move through the offering to communion or union with the god or gods. The intention, in many religions, is openly stated in the ritual itself, so that we need have little uncertainty about the objective motivation. But to say all of these things is not finally to say that we can understand. Sacrifice is still a mystery, and objective intention and subjective motivation are two quite different things. Sacrifice is a mystery, and even in its biblical setting—both Old Testament and New—it should give use cause for wonder.

The children of Israel were nothing if not attentive to the rituals of sacrifice; and despite the prophets' warning, regular and redundant, that their sacramental system had its shortcomings and its liabilities, they clearly believed

that God had ordained the practice as one of the ways in which they might maintain a continuous relationship with him. They made sacrificial offerings in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons—gratitude, communion, the quest for forgiveness of their sins known and unknown—and they did so, essentially, because it was their conviction that Yahweh had not restricted himself to treating with his people “in historical deeds and in the gracious guidance of individual lives,” but that in the institution of sacrifice he had opened a “hot-line” for the people’s correspondence. “Here,” as it has been summarized by Gerhard von Rad, “Jahweh was within reach of Israel’s gratitude, here Israel was granted fellowship with him in the sacred meal. Above all, here Israel could be reached by his will for forgiveness.”¹

Indeed, their sacrifice was always more significant in terms of what it said about the God of Israel than it was for its testimony to Israel’s faith. The attitude of the worshiper, when all is said and done, was always the unknown quantity in the transaction. So perhaps it should not surprise that by the end of the Old Testament era, despite the multifarious forms and details of the Jewish ritual, most sacrifice focused in one way or another upon atonement. The evil that we do, it was said, is never short-lived or self-destructive. On the contrary, the evil in an act spreads until it implicates not only the doer, but the whole community of which he or she is a part. Whereupon sacrifice becomes the means through which God acts to intervene in the inevitable chain of sin and calamity which proceeds from our willful imperfection. Thus God uses the act as a means through which he can bring redemption to his faithful people.²

But the New Testament casts the whole practice in an entirely different light. Indeed, there are aspects of the New Testament’s use of sacrificial theology which surely confound the sanctity of the Old Testament system, and thrust the whole idea into the depths of mystery. For the New Testament speaks clearly about the offering of a *person* for the sins of God’s people. And it does not take much familiarity with the people of Israel to recollect the horror with which they viewed the act of human sacrifice. Life in the bloodthirsty neighborhood of Canaan made such behavior a scandal and an abomination.

Then the New Testament word: “When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come . . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:11). Once for all, it says. “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22). The perfect sacrifice of the perfect offering by the perfect priest will suffice once for all. That is the New Testament vantage on the ancient mystery. The horror of horrors is transformed into the Holy of Holies.

Then add one more footnote: the sacrifice of Jesus, according to the New Testament, is example as well as atonement for the believer. “For this you have been called,” says the writer of 1 Peter, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). Thus, potentially at least, the scandal of human sacrifice goes on within the community of the faithful. The *imitatio Christi* is a model for the Chris-

tian life which has attracted—better say demanded—the attention of believers in every generation from then to now. It is a mode, as we shall presently see, which has had a powerful impact upon the life of faith in America, the Beautiful.

II.

It should be clear without lengthy comment that the interpretation of the Christian life in terms of the imitation of Christ is not an idea on which Americans can claim either a patent or a monopoly. The history of the church is punctuated by the lives of faithful men and women who looked upon self-sacrifice—even martyrdom—after the style of Jesus as one of the conditions of faithfulness. To be a Christian, over the long centuries, meant to be willing to suffer.

And in the early days of the American nation, there were episodes which required the recollection of that heritage. It was assumed, for example, that those devoted men and women who, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, offered themselves for missionary service in the foreign field, were in fact offering up their lives to a martyr's death; and in many instances, the assumption was entirely accurate. But even in the popular piety of the new nation, the presumption was abroad that Christian life—even for those in the rank-and-file who never ventured more than a dozen miles from home in an entire lifetime—was an enterprise which was premised upon sacrifice. The revivalist theology of the Second Great Awakening emphasized the idea that Christ's death was a sacrificial act, providing the believer with the motivation and the power to make a similar sacrifice.

This was the gospel of love; salvation was a gift from God; Christ was the Lamb of God, who sacrificed himself for rich and poor alike to bring them into harmony with God. Converts should sacrifice themselves to bring this message to others, whether as revivalists or by joining benevolent associations or by raising money for missions.³

There was sacrificial work which could be done by all members of the body of Christ; this was the motive spirit of antebellum Christianity in America.

It must be said, however, that the image of sacrifice as a distinctive aspect of American piety and self-understanding did not finally come into focus until our great experience of national tragedy, dated 1861-65, which broke the back of our historical continuity even as it almost broke the back of the nation. The Civil War, we all know almost instinctively, was the one event in American history which touched every person in this land with the sorts of extreme expectations—for partisanship, for courage, for suffering—which demanded some sort of profound explanation. How could one explain a conflict in which brother challenged brother, in which men killed and were killed with a personal intensity scarcely ever paralleled before or since?

For many—for most—there could never be any explanation which could suffice. There were some, though, who felt that what sense or balance which could be found in the midst of that profound tragedy was dependent upon the

basic Christian image of sacrificial love. The most eloquent among those interpreters, perhaps, was Horace Bushnell whose response to the Civil War seems in some respects to have been a persistent preoccupation for most of the rest of his life. In a sermon which he preached at Yale during 1865, as that university paid homage to its alumni who had died in the war, Bushnell reminded his hearers of the dictum from Hebrews: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." In like manner, he proposed,

"without shedding of blood, there is almost nothing great in the world, or to be expected for it. For the life is in the blood,—all life; and it is put flowing within, partly for the serving of a nobler use in flowing out on fit occasion, to quicken and consecrate whatever it touched."⁴

In this case, Bushnell continued, those who have given their blood have served to open a new chapter for America. By the sacrifice of blood, the unity of the nation which was begun, but not completed, in our revolution and our struggle to make ourselves a constitution, was finally solidified and sanctified. We were become, at last, a nation; and the shedding of blood, as awful and awe-full as it had to be, was the necessary representation of the collective guilt of the American people, both North and South. Nothing less than such a monumental tragedy could have sufficed. Nothing less than such an interpretation could ever bring people of both sides back into union.

"These United States," Bushnell declared, "having dissolved the intractable matter of so many infallible theories and bones of contention in the dreadful menstrum of their blood, are to settle into a fixed unity, and finally into a nearly homogeneous life."⁵

Sacrifice—now set inevitably into the context of military strife—seemed for Bushnell the means of national grace.

And, of course, his words were seen as no mere "glory-to-the-gory" because of the poignant picture of a fallen president who had, both in sentiment and experience, embodied such an image of sacrifice. All along the way, culminating in his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln had given hints of the same notion of national sacrifice for the sake of judgment and redemption:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, it God wills that it continue until all wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."⁶

The Civil War thus became for many Americans, both North and South, the epitome of sacrifice, both personal and corporate; and even among the die-hards—the vengeful in the North and the revengeful in the South—there was a sense of the mystery of the event, which could not be fathomed by mere recourse to politics or sociology.

And it came to pass, further, that the figure of the fallen hero, from presi-

dent to private, was invested thereby with a special sanctity. Beginning shortly after the end of the war in the North, then finally spreading southward to all but a handful of states, the American people have undertaken to venerate our soldier dead of that and other wars by the observance of Memorial Day. This day, as Lloyd Warner had described it

is a cult of the dead which organizes and integrates the various faiths and national and class groups into a sacred unity . . . The principal themes are those of the sacrifice of the soldier dead for the living and the obligation of the living to sacrifice their individual purposes for the good of the group, so that they, too, can perform their spiritual obligation.⁷

Though it represents a spirituality which has far more in common with the nation than it does with the church, Memorial Day has come to epitomize the meaning of sacrifice in American culture. Somehow, the later efforts by Americans to speak of sacrifice within the context of faith have paled to relative insignificance.

III.

One of the recurring themes, for example, in the Social Gospel was the *imitatio Christi*: the self-sacrificing love of Jesus and the collateral demands upon his followers for personal sacrifice. Such a spirit, in the realm of compassion and social justice in the latter 19th century world of "root hog or die" was proclaimed as the essence of Christianity. As Charles Sheldon portrayed it with graphic repetition in his devotional classic, *In His Steps*, the believer was to confront each of life's situations by posing the question, "What would Jesus do?" Thus, it was supposed, the model of Christian sacrifice would become incarnate in the lives of all faithful followers of the Way.

Sad to say, however, such a pacific appropriation of the image of sacrifice was never to achieve widespread appreciation. Cynics (and others who should have known better) have met Sheldon's admittedly sentimental question "What would Jesus do?" with the retort, "I'm *not* Jesus;" thereby evading the claims of sacrificial discipleship upon their lives. In part, at least, this can be blamed upon the dominance that the more militant images of sacrifice and heroism have commanded in our national life.

It may be the case that there is an all-too-intimate bond in our minds between the fortunes of our country and the need for personal sacrifice. It may be that we need to take care as we assess the priorities of our allegiances. Our national existence and prosperity is, in my judgment, a gift of God for which we must make fit offerings of praise and gratitude to his name. Our nationalism, on the contrary, is an affront to God, a sin, an idolatry for which we must seek his forgiveness, lest he break out in wrath upon us. Our offerings on the altar of nationalism are of the sort against which we have been warned by the prophets from Amos on: "For three transgressions of Washington, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." If we can have learned anything from our history, and the recent history of the world around us, it ought to be that nationalism is a subtle but deadly idolatry. And we ought to have learned that,

as Aldous Huxley wrote, "Every idol, however exalted, turns out, in the long run, to be a Moloch, hungry for human sacrifice."⁸

The grim specter of that collective sacrifice called war, which lurks eternally in the shadows of our lives, materializes all too readily when the nation becomes a god. And it does not seem errant to remind ourselves that since Bushnell's all-atoning conflict of a century ago, we have enhanced the efficiency of warfare to the extent that the sacrifice, whenever it comes nowadays, increasingly includes the bodies of those who have no conscious, willing commitment to the ceremony—bystanders, if you will, whose bodies are offered up, willy-nilly, by their fanatic peers. And nuclear sacrifice, if ever it comes to that again, could make all our prior conflicts seem a Sunday School cookout by comparison.

And is it too much to say that our misapprehension of the meaning of sacrifice has served as prelude to our current misunderstanding of the word "hero"? Who are your heroes, anyway? It has been suggested that you can discover the nature of a community if you can identify its heroes. If that be true, God help us!

Daniel Boorstin wrote a while ago that we have badly misled ourselves in our quest for heroism. We have exaggerated our estimate of how much greatness can be found in individual representatives of the human species, and we have exchanged the older forms of greatness, he says, for a new kind of eminence. Heroism, saintliness, martyrdom have been overshadowed in our consciousness by this new creature, to which Boorstin refers as "the celebrity." "*The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.*"⁹ "Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God's purpose in him; today we look for his press agent."¹⁰

More than a trace of sarcasm there, but surely there is a measure of insight available as well:

The household names, the famous men [and women] who populate our consciousness are with few exceptions not heroes at all, but an artificial new product—a product of the Graphic Revolution in response to our exaggerated expectations. The more readily we make them and the more numerous they become, the less are they worthy of our admiration.¹¹

Thus, it may come to pass that we are witnessing the disappearance of heroism like the fading grin of the Cheshire Cat; and that our natural inclination to seek among ourselves role models to be admired and emulated will be confounded by the deft sleight-of-hand we call advertising. We look in vain for someone worth imitating, and we look, also in vain, for something worth living for—much less dying for.

Perhaps it is a fact of life that there are no more American heroes, whether or not they have been proved by "liberating strife." We have just about given up, haven't we, on the possibility that a person can make things different by the way she/he lives. Charles Reich asserted some years ago in his *Greening of America* that Bogart's performance in *Casablanca* represented the last moment at which most people were able to believe that a man could actually change fate by taking action. And Tom wolfe, perhaps equally tongue-in-

cheek, suggested that Junior Johnson of the Wilkes County moonshine-running, stock-car racing Johnsons, was the last real American hero. Since then it has all been downhill.

Consider the possibility that ours is a generation of Americans which must recover or discover the notion of sacrifice. Consider the possibility that, especially in these times, as Christians we are called to define the term "hero" as the woman or man who bears, who endures, who gives without counting the cost, who suffers, willingly, for the sake of other children of God. What if we could find, in this great nation, a group of folk who really did love "mercy more than life?" It has happened, occasionally, in other places: in the remoteness of Schweitzer's Africa, in the teeming streets of Mother Teresa's Calcutta or Dom Helder Camera's Rio. And, make no mistake, it happens here, too: in the courage of a single-parent of six, who fights the odds for food and clothing, schooling, and opportunity for a brood that has no place to go but up; in the determination of a schoolteacher in a ghetto, facing the physical fear of the classroom day after terrifying day; in the tirelessness of an advocate of justice who goes and goes and goes again into our jails to do the little things that bespeak compassion and hope. I believe that the times are right for those sorts of heroes: those willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of Christ. "Through the whole course of history," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr,

mankind has, by a true spiritual instinct, reserved its highest admiration for those heroes who resisted evil at the risk or price of fortune and life without too much hope of success. Sometimes their very indifference to the issue of success or failure provided the stamina which made success possible. Sometimes the heroes of faith perished outside the promised land. This paradoxical relation between the possible and the impossible in history proves that the frame of history is wider than the nature-time in which it is grounded. The injunction of Christ: "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" (Matthew 10:28) neatly indicates the dimension of human existence which transcends the basis which human life and history have in nature . . . It has been understood that a too desperate desire to preserve life or to gain obvious success must rob life of its meaning. If this be so, there cannot be a simple correlation between virtue and happiness, or between immediate and ultimate success.¹²

We are not called to succeed, but to sacrifice.

We are not called to win, but to be faithful.

NOTES

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 1: 260.

2. *Ibid.*, 266-71.

3. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 119-20.

4. In Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 199.

5. Quoted in William A. Clebsch, "Christian Interpretations of the Civil War," *Church History* 30 (1961): 217.
6. Quoted in Robert Bellah's famous essay "Civil Religion in America," reprinted in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper Forum Books, 1974), 31.
7. Lloyd Warner, *The Family of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 217.
8. Quoted in *katallegete*, Fall 1980, 42.
9. Daniel J. Boostin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 57.
10. *Ibid.*, 45.
11. *Ibid.*, 48.
12. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 144.