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INTRODUCTION

Christianity and the Secular Imagination

TOWARD A HISTORY OF SACRIFICE

*Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights. . . .
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.*

—WALLACE STEVENS, “SUNDAY MORNING” (1915)¹

IN HER CHAIR she lies, satisfied with sunlight, coffee, and a cockatoo. But more older satisfactions haunt her Sunday dreaming too. Dark offerings prowl around the gentle call of the flesh. The holy hush of ancient sacrifice disturbs drowsy thoughts, which pass “over the seas, to the silent Palestine, dominion of the blood and sepulcher.” These dreams are *her* dreams, her sleeping mind swells with ancient blood and death. And yet the dreams—like all dreams—are not hers to master. “What is divinity if it can come only in silent shadow and dream?” Wallace Stevens’s 1915 poem asked. One answer surely must be that divinity has *always* also come in silent shadow and dream.

For those of us who live in the long shadow of Latin Christianity, there are no sacrifices untouched by its dreamworld. The death of a God for the salvation of mankind, the redemption from sin, the ransom paid to satisfy God's wrath, the blood He shed to offer the possibility of life: the cross of Christ's atonement accompanies how we think about sacrifice the way that we do. It is an imaginary cross, one that is dreamed anew in every era, entangled in new ways of life, new priorities, new commitments. But if imaginary, it is real enough for thought, real enough to shape the world we live in now and the stories we tell about it.

We are not the first so affected. Sacrifice has always haunted the dreams of those who have lived after. The sacrifice to end all sacrifice, the Christians called their Messiah, the final death that abolished the temple sacrifices of Judaism and paganism. The Lamb of God closed the chapter on the rites of primitive man, or so was the hope, preparing the way for a new gospel of universal salvation. And yet, sacrifice lived its afterlives. The lavish rites of the Hebrew Bible, in tabernacles, temples, and on high places, for sin, trespass, guilt, and thanksgiving; the wild offerings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the temples of the pagan world ringing with the bleats of dying animals: these sacrifices never really disappeared. They too lived their own afterlives in a dreamworld, haunting Christianity's own intimate Sunday mornings.

This is a book about these afterlives, past and present, sacrifices ancient, Christian, and modern.



It is, above all, a work of history. But a *history* of sacrifice confronts an immediate concern. From where we stand now, steeped in modern ways of knowing, sacrifice seems properly the subject of anthropology, not history. It is one of those apparent constants of human experience—like sex, family, and death—whose nature transcends the vagaries of history. Virtually, or perhaps every human culture has practiced or practices some kind of sacrifice. Jewish temple offerings and circumcision rites, Greek libations, practices of self-mortification and asceticism, Roman military rites of devotion, Carthaginian infant-sacrifice, Vedic burnt offerings, the vegetable offerings of the ancient Pythagoreans, mysterious corpses dropped into northern European bogs, the children killed, wrapped, and deposited in ceremonial shrines across the Inca Empire, the feasts of Muslim *Eid al-Adha*, the human sacrifices of medieval Tibetan Buddhists, the

Christian Eucharist: the variety of actions compassed by the idea of sacrifice is nearly infinite.

No less various are the things offered. Prayers, smoke, wine, bread, salt, flowers, beans, onions, garlic, birds, sheep, pigs, goats, cows, and human beings are just a few of the examples preserved in sacred and other records. Some sacrifices are simple, no more than an offering laid in a special place. Others are among the most complex ritual actions known. The New Year's sacrifices of the precolonial Hawaiians stretched over three months, for example, and involved offerings to the Pleiades, the breaking of ritual coconuts, the feeding of the moon, procession of the god Makahiki across the islands, feasts, drunken revelries, pig sacrifices, and more.² Sacrifice has created social hierarchies, elevating the priests dedicated to serving the gods above the common rabble. It has organized political and military imaginaries, whether in hecatombs offered to the gods, or the giving of the self essential to cultures of valor. It has structured economies, animals circulated from fields to temples to markets, farmers and priests and merchants all trafficking in sacrificial flesh. It has organized where people live, human geography organized around special places of sacrifice: altars, temples, shrines, and holy places of all sorts. Indeed, whole cities—ancient Jerusalem or Tenochtitlan in the Aztec Empire, to name two—were designed around performances of sacrifice, and whole cultures were built to sustain them.

Nor have many other human activities attracted so much attention from anthropologists. Already in the nineteenth century, at the very beginnings of the discipline, people sought to explain the universal human desire to offer worldly things to the gods. Sacrifice entails “the whole field of sacred ritual,” wrote William Robertson Smith in 1886, “an action within the sphere of things sacred to the gods.”³ Since then, scientific theories of sacrifice have grown thick on the ground. For some, sacrifice is a means of communication with the gods; for others, a way to solemnize human fraternity. For some, the most important aspect of sacrifice is the killing, for others, it is the eating afterward. For some, sacrifice is a way to restrain human violence, for others, a way to assuage human guilt. For all, sacrifice opens a window into the durable structures of human religion, politics, society, and culture. Writing a *history* of sacrifice may thus seem to miss what is essential, exploring superficial change rather than deep continuity.

There are unusual aspects of sacrifice, however, that invite an historian's curiosity. It is not quite clear, for example, why such diverse activities have fallen under one conceptual umbrella. Ancient cultures had a rich

vocabulary that *distinguished* among these practices, after all. In classical Greece, this included *thusia* (things burned for the Olympian gods), *sphagia* (things offered to the infernal gods), *aparchai* (offerings of first fruits), *spondai* (pouring out of libations), and *askesis* (giving something up). The Hebrew Bible included words like *korban* (draw near), *olah* (burnt offering), *zebah* (slain offering), and *minha* (gift), and distinguished sharply between their various purposes: burnt offerings, cereal offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and votive offerings, as a standard translation has it.⁴ The mass interment of live sheep in the Egyptian temple of Tebtunis, the mummification of dogs in veneration of Osiris, the apotropaic burning of donkeys in Thebes: does the concept of sacrifice have *any* “descriptive utility,” one Egyptologist has recently asked, if it is supposed to explain such different things?⁵ The historian wonders how and why we came to think that it did.

To the historian, however, there is something even more puzzling about sacrifice. Compare it with sex, that pillar of anthropological inquiry. Virtually everyone has sex, or wants to have sex. Neuroses aside, at the social level, behavior and biology are reasonably well synced. A sexless life is perfectly fine as an idiosyncratic choice—ascetics of various sorts have been around forever—but a sexless society is a short-lived oxymoron. And because of this, every society also has a culture of sex, various ways of imagining, controlling, and celebrating human sexual relations. Or compare it with kinship. Everyone has a family, like it or not, but every culture also organizes kinship, often in various ways. Roman emperors expanded kinship through adoption, medieval Christians counted godparents as kin, some Native Americans treated animal as kin, and so on.⁶ No human society has *no* conventions of kinship, however, no conventions for which people are counted as kin and which are not. Anthropology traffics in constants like these.

It is hard to say the same thing about sacrifice. In the so-called Abrahamic traditions, the scholar Guy Stroumsa has observed, sacrifice *ended* in the late antique world. Sometime between the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the rise of Islam in the seventh century, blood gave way to *text* as the heart of religious life.⁷ For those who have inherited this history, sacrifice is not something that we do anymore, except perhaps in some metaphorical way. Few in the so-called West leave gifts to the gods, burn victims in hopes that the scent might please the gods, bring fruits, vegetables, animals, or people to the altar. “First fruits” does not mean much, and the “sacrifice of praise” of the Psalms rings oddly in the ear. We don’t burden goats with our collective guilt and send them from our cities.

In some sense, then, sacrifice is *only* historical for us. It is something that used to happen. If it happens still, it happens elsewhere, among other people who have not yet left it behind.

Yet there is more to it than that. To all appearances, modern Western society is not just unsacrificial. It is actively *anti*-sacrificial. We are encouraged to take, not to give. Maximize your profit, not your pain, economic rationality commands. Altruism is not an ideal, but a problem to be solved. The so-called selfish gene—popularized by the biologist and “new atheist” Richard Dawkins—explains why we only appear to sacrifice for others. An ethics of renunciation struggles to be heard in a culture where self-interest is the highest good. Politics is the realm of competing interests and factions, not a world of self-denial. The exception that proves the rule is the military: a culture of sacrifice that we acknowledge with the feeble gratitude of “thank you for your service.”

So there are puzzles here. If sacrifice is as foundational to the deep structure of human experience as sex or kinship, then we must be doing it too. But it does not seem that we are. Perhaps we live in a post-anthropological age now. Or perhaps we just *think* that we’ve left sacrifice behind, but in reality it is present in some hidden fashion. Or perhaps we’re just asking the question in the wrong way (my suspicion). But no matter what, something has changed. Here then we are on the terrain of the historian, who asks: what is peculiar about the history of sacrifice in the West?

The answer is, in a word, Christianity. And not just Christianity in the abstract, but the specific *history* of Christianity in the Latin lands from the later Middle Ages to the present.



Christianity has never quite known what to do with sacrifice. In the New Testament, for example, the Gospels barely mention sacrifice. Matthew uses the Greek word for sacrifice twice, both times to reject it: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” Christ says, quoting the prophet Hosea (Matt. 9.13; Hos. 6.6). The Gospel of John describes the Passion in moving detail, but mentions sacrifice not once. Later New Testament writings were more open to things sacrificial. The apostle Paul—and especially the author of *Hebrews*, long presumed to be Paul—connected the death of Christ to older temple sacrifices, both pagan and Jewish. Even this connection was a complicated one, though. Christ was the *last* sacrifice, Paul insisted, and the only real one. The bulls and sheep of the temple were mere “shadows” of the true sacrifice on the Cross. The death of Christ

thus both ended, the story goes, and *perfected* a prior world of Jewish and pagan sacrifice.

From early on then, we might say, Christianity both abolished and absorbed sacrifice. It abandoned the sacrifices of its rivals, the “new” covenant superseding the old. In that sense, sacrifice represented a past that Christianity left behind. But sacrifice was also alive *inside* the Christian imagination. It was alive textually. The fateful decision to retain the Hebrew Bible, what Christians called the Old Testament, as part of Christian scripture meant that the sacrifices of Leviticus were never forgotten. It was, for the same reason, alive liturgically. From early on, the celebration of the death of Christ in the Eucharist was intimately bound to the more ancient sacrifices of Cain, Abel, Abraham, and Isaac. Sacrifice was alive theologically. The doctrine of Christ’s atonement—very slow to develop but well established by the Middle Ages—was unimaginable without the “shadows” that prefigured it, that established the Crucifixion as an eternal truth of the world, there in Genesis as in John. And it was alive practically, as ordinary Christians only slowly relinquished the world of gifts and offerings, especially to the martyrs that populated the early centuries of the Church, and to the saints who came later.

Put another way, for Christianity, sacrifice is a name for *history*. Sacrifice is the past that Christianity left behind on its journey to becoming a universal religion. But sacrifice is also the past that makes Christianity what it is, the religion that does not sacrifice, yet continues to do so. The sacrifice of Christ, Sigmund Freud remarked in his 1939 *Moses and Monotheism*, energized the new religion because it recalled an “historical truth”: the murder of historical Moses, the true Father-God of ancient Israel, the original crime that monotheism was designed to conceal.⁸ We do not have to accept his analytic framework to recognize a deeper truth: “nothing that has once come into existence ever goes away.”⁹ A history of Christian sacrifice—as we will see—is a history of history itself.

History can feel like home, comforting and familiar. And for long centuries after the Christian conquest of the Roman Empire, and the expansion of Latin Christianity in the West, it did. The peculiar history that sacrifice carried, abandoned yet persisting, worked well for a church that controlled its own story without much fear of contradiction. The growth of an evermore sacrificial Christianity from the tenth century onward showed just how comfortable Latin Christians had grown with their own past.

History can also feel alien, however, a land of truths you would prefer not to know. The collapse of the medieval Latin Church into competing

heirs of the Christian past turned sacrifice—and its history—inside out. “Reformation,” as it came to be called, gazed back to go forward, looked to Scripture and the earliest Christians for a new, better Christianity. In so doing, Christian sacrifice became strange again. Not only was the sacrificial church of the later Middle Ages—with its Eucharistic devotion, its dedication to the Man of Sorrows, its sacrificing priesthood, and its cult of saints—discovered (by its opponents) to be a secret preserve of pagan and Jewish sacrificial rites. But even that ancient structure of “abolition+absorption” came under suspicion. Perhaps Christianity *never was* as Christian as all that.



“Autonomy is the sole principle of morals,” wrote the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1785. To the extent that we can legislate our own inner moral life, we are free. Anytime we seek the moral truths in an outer world—in history or nature or God or society—we are unfree, subjected to the will of another. Then, he remarked, “heteronomy always results.”¹⁰ Heteronomy is subordination to forces that we do not control. Autonomy releases us from these, from the world and history.

Adapted for our story, I have found these an historically useful semantics. The Christian doctrine of revelation might well be understood as a claim for autonomy, for example, at least from *human* truths and histories, the “city of God” declaring its independence thereby from the world. We detect a similar bid for autonomy in the Christian notion of “orthodoxy,” the “right teaching” that points toward the eternal beyond the mundane, and beyond history. Since the early centuries of Christianity, the drive to orthodoxy sought a self-legislating religion, a once-and-for-all right teaching free of worldly contingency. In the Latin west, the Church became the guardian of this dream of autonomy, Christ’s bride on earth, subordinate to heaven alone. The fall away from the eternal, back into the merely human, was given new names: heterodoxy and, especially, heresy.

Orthodoxy was not just a hope, but also a politics. It “worked” as long as the church believed it was legislating its own inner life, as long as it felt confident that it had the power to determine what belonged essentially to Christianity and what did not. In the Latin church, the Reformation ended this power once and for all. It ended it practically, for now there were many who claimed the title of orthodox. And it ended it theoretically, for the new contest over the eternal was waged on the terrain of

Christianity's own history. The Reformation insisted that much of what the Latin church called "Christianity" was no such thing at all, that Christianity had never legislated its own life, that it was as much a creature of history as any other human thing. It revealed, in short, the stubborn fact of Christian heteronomy.

Even before the fracture of Reformation, in fact, the Christian past had begun to seem less familiar. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were difficult years for the Roman church, plagued by schisms and competition over authority between Pope and councils. At the same time, learned writers began to pay new attention to the past, the classical revival that eventually encompassed the ancient Christian world as well. By the 1450s, and coinciding with the rise of print, a new Christian antiquity began to emerge, an "archive"—as I will call it—of writings from the first centuries of Christian life. For the first time, the varieties of ancient Christianity became public and visible.

The theological revolutions of the sixteenth century expanded and weaponized this archive. When did the church lose its way? And how can we find a path back to the world we have lost? Reformers tirelessly asked these questions as they groped toward new forms of Christian life and thought. In so doing, they repeatedly demystified the eternal verities of their Catholic opponents as merely time bound, the product of human concerns, not the mandate of heaven.

They also suggested another possibility, however, one whose likelihood grew as the prospects of Christian unity receded: perhaps Christianity has *never* been unshackled from the world. The early church seemed to promise a Christianity pure and homogeneous, a model for Christian life. But as reformers quickly discovered, no church was more variable than the ancient one, no church more indebted to the religious and intellectual environments where it thrived. The story of Christianity is not one of autonomy—they discovered—but heteronomy, past and present.



Sacrifice lay at the heart of this uncomfortable thought. And no wonder, since it had marked the controversial frontier between Christianity and its religious opponents since the earliest days of the church. Can we eat the meat from the temple sacrifices? Should we conform to the state's demand to participate in a public cult? Can we build altars to the martyrs and worship there? Can we use bread and wine—traditional elements in Roman sacrifices—in our Eucharistic rites? Is the Hebrew Bible and its complex

sacrificial law part of the Christian canon? Different communities had different answers at different times.

By the fifth century, most of these issues were settled, if not by agreement then by political fiat. The ancient controversies were suppressed, and sacrifice normalized in the Christian imagination. By the dawn of the Reformation, sacrifice supported three pillars of the Latin Christian church: the Eucharist with its sacrificing priesthood; the cult of the martyrs and saints; and the Atonement, the belief that Christ's crucifixion was a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Liturgy, politics, and doctrine, to put it schematically.

Each had a separate history. The cult of the martyrs was the most continuous, dating to the first centuries of Christianity and growing over time to sustain a broader medieval culture of sainthood. The eucharistic devotions of the later Middle Ages had a more recent provenance, though eucharistic piety—typically if not always accompanied by some aspects of sacrifice—is already present in the earliest liturgical documents of the church. A specific doctrine of the Atonement was almost entirely new from the eleventh century, though again, we find traces of Christ's saving sacrifice already in the New Testament. Three different and overlapping histories of sacrifice, each with different roots in the early church.

Each of these would have to be rewritten, in the minds of reformers, so that we might create a new, less earthly faith. This was no easy business, however. It was simple enough to reject the Catholic cult of images, to destroy the icons of impious worship, as so many people did in the early years of the Reformation. Sacrifice was different. It was delicately threaded through Christianity, always both central to the faith and potentially alien to it as well. Iconoclasm was too crude for sacrifice. What was required instead was a new kind of theology, one attuned to the past and capable of sorting the Christian archive for piety and profanity alike.

Sacrifice was thus the catalyst for new, mostly Protestant theologies, new methods of assessing and establishing Christian claims that advanced new kinds of evidence for Christian truths. These theologies were experimental. They combined reflections on expected doctrinal matters—the nature of God, Christ, salvation, and so on—with historical materials drawn from a rapidly growing Christian archive. At first, the church fathers were most important, but later pagan and Jewish writers were consulted. Antiquarianism, histories, chronologies, law codes, anthropologies: from the mid-sixteenth century onward, all were recruited to the cause. Theology itself became an ever-more syncretic intellectual project, bulging with claims about the nature and history of sacrifice, the origins

and varieties of religious worship, the forms of ancient religion, the history of law, the nature of politics, the history of mankind, and more.



In the seventeenth century, this syncretic project began to fall apart. Or better put, the original purpose that it served—the management of doctrinal, liturgical, and ecclesiastical disputes between Protestants and Catholics—began to lose its relevance. How and why this happened will be taken up in later parts of the book. But the consequence was the emergence of a new sacrificial imagination, an imagination turned *ad saeculum*, energized not by Christian doctrinal disputes, but by human history, anthropology, law, and politics.

Imagination is a key word in this book. Broader than doctrines or theories or ideologies, I use it to indicate the ideational furnishings that create and make sense of the world around us. It is both the deep background that lends a tacit sense of fitness to things, as well as the common fund of arguments used to make such commitments explicit. It compasses both the carefully reasoned propositions found in the works of philosophers and theologians, and the stories and images that circulate in poetry, literature, painting, and the other arts. It lives in language, but is no less embodied in practical actions, rituals, architecture, clothing, and so on. It is a collective idiom for orienting ourselves in the world, in short, cohesive without necessarily being coherent, a “common repertory,” in the words of Charles Taylor.¹¹

Most importantly, to me, the imagination is a way of making. “This world of nations has been made by men,” wrote the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico in 1744, forged from “the modifications of the mind.”¹² These worlds are products of what he called “imaginative metaphysics,” and we make them, even as they make us. Man “makes the things out of himself, and becomes them by transforming himself into them.”¹³ The imagination is not just a passive storehouse, but an active agent that creates and constrains the horizons of the possible.

As such, it is a distinctively *human* way of making. For limited mortals like us, for better and worse, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, nothing comes from nothing. “Worldmaking . . . always starts with worlds already on hand,” the philosopher Nelson Goodman tells us, “the making is a remaking.”¹⁴ To put it another way, nothing is ever only itself. Rather, we create our imaginative worlds from the new things we discover, and from the jumbled inheritances stored in our collective culture.

Whatever else it is, Christianity is a stupendous way of making, a 1,500-year-old experiment in what Vico called “poetic wisdom.”¹⁵ Sacrifice has always been at the heart of this. It was essential to Christian doctrine, to the teaching that God became man and died for our sins, Christ crucified the *salvator mundi*. But it inspired far more than dogma. Relics from ancient martyrs flowed through the Latin church, required by canon law for all consecrations. Veneration of these relics was among the most popular forms of Christian devotion, connecting modern worshippers with the sacrificial dead. Every Mass was accompanied by a “litany” in remembrance of these special dead, and the feast days that organized the calendar celebrated their “birthdays” into heaven. Ancient mosaics from Ravenna already populated churches with the sacrifices of the priest-king, Melchizedek, Cain and Abel, and Abraham (fig. 0.1). Altars were decorated with similar motifs, a circulating set of images that connected the celebration of the Eucharist with the world of the ancient patriarchs. Sermons and homilies regularly explored the sacrifices of the Hebrew Bible to shed light on the Crucifix. What Christians called typology—that is, the connection of Old and New Testaments through a logic of type/anti-type, shadow/reality, prophecy/fulfillment—meant exegetes could discover the death of Christ already in the early chapters of Genesis, and across the entire corpus of Hebrew scripture. The Christian sacrificial imagination formed hopes for salvation, habits of reading, ways of worship, and the politics of community.

This making was, however, also a remaking. Take the Christian political imagination, for example, whose intimacy with sacrifice dates to the ancient world and extends into the early modern period and beyond. This intimacy was hardly unique to Christianity. “Make sacrifice,” cried the doomed Iphigenia to the Greek armies, “and sack Troy! That shall be my long-lived memorial . . . my marriage, my good name!”¹⁶ Ancients had always knit sacrifice into practices of politics, both through the giving of the self, and the giving of another. Warfare was a rich site for this, conquered enemies slain, treaties ratified, cities purified, battles begun, rituals of devotion declared, all accompanied by blood and altars. No less important were the more routinized forms, the public administration of Rome depending on regular civic rituals of sacrifice, its college of priests made into functionaries of empire. So when Christ died on the Cross, King of the Jews, as the inscription often reads, it echoed the ancient intimacies of kingship, priesthood, and sacrifice. No less for the Christian martyrs, who sacrificed themselves that they might *not* sacrifice at Roman altars, the early political imagination of Christianity suffused with twinned images of sacrifice and

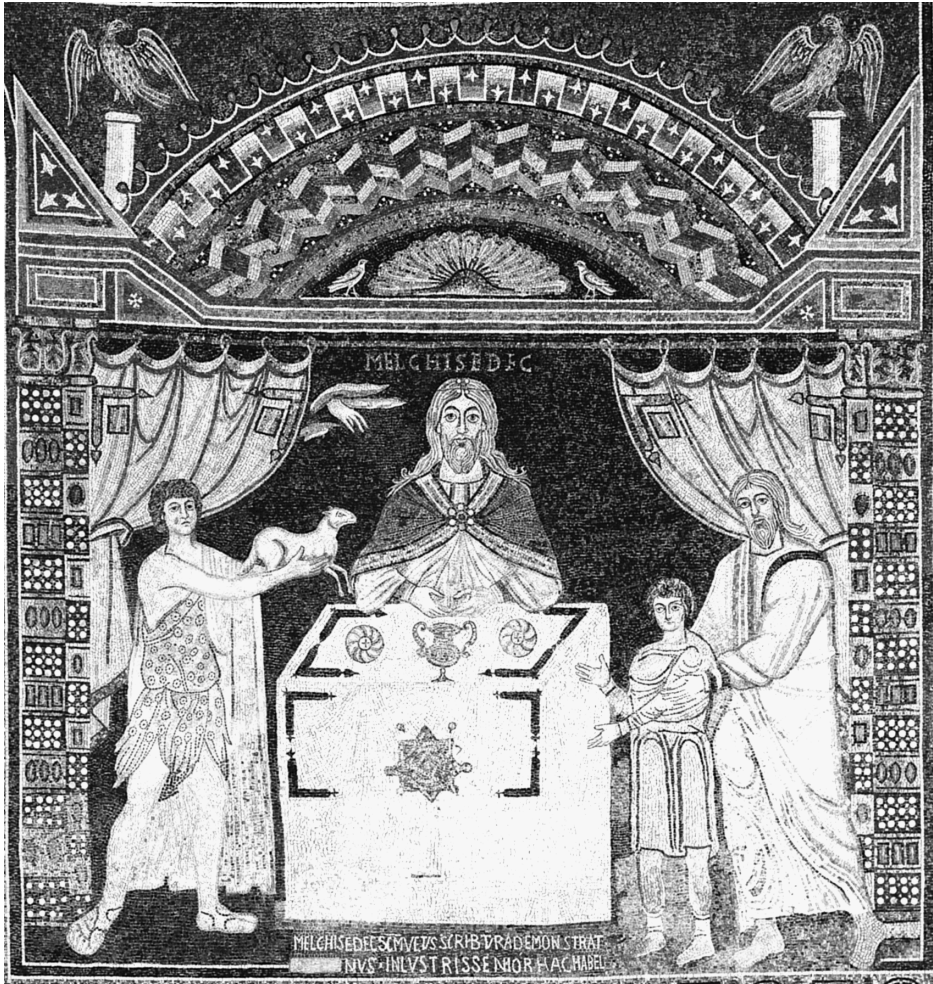


FIGURE 0.1. *The Sacrifice of Abel, Melchizedek, and Abraham*. Mosaic, Basilica Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna (ca. 533–549 CE). Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

self-sacrifice. All of these were re-energized in the sixteenth century, when a new and bloody world of Christian martyrs emerged, and reshaped the politics of Europe.

This book follows these makings and remakings of the Christian imagination. It also discovers the makings and remakings of a *secular* imagination of sacrifice, from its early modern roots to our own age. Like Christianity, this too was a motley affair. It incorporated much from the Christian world of its birth, as we will see. But it was no less populated by

the sacrifices of ancient Rome, which antiquarians, historians, sculptors, and painters began exploring already in the fifteenth century. Roman law too was drawn into this archive, both the sacrificial laws of the ancient Roman kings and the later compilation known as the *Corpus iuris civilis*. It too developed new ways of reading, typology giving way to history. Those Hebrew sacrifices that had once pointed toward Christ now became evidence of broadly human ways of negotiating with the divine. This was only aided by the encounters in the New World, an empire of sacrifice that assisted new imaginative projects in the broader history and anthropology of religion. A secular political imagination took shape too, efforts to think beyond the politics of Christian martyrdom and holy war. From seventeenth-century treatises on political theory, to the revival of Stoic tragic drama, to Enlightenment conjectural and comparative anthropologies of religion, to the republicanism of the eighteenth-century Age of Revolutions, this secular imagination shaped both horizons of thought and action. We bring this book to a close in a world near to our own, with the human sciences of the nineteenth century, which discovered in sacrifice a key to unlock the riddles of our very human worlds.



I call this latter epoch in the sacrificial imagination “secular” partly as a provocation. Over the past three decades, the very idea of “secular”—meaning colloquially either non-religious or anti-religious—has suffered withering criticism. So too have its various conceptual analogues: *the secular*, denoting roughly a social or political space free of religion; *secularism*, in the nineteenth century, a normative ideology of “free thought,” but now typically used to designate forms of political control over religious life; and *secularization*, the social-scientific name for the process by which either societies lose their religion altogether, or religion is demoted into just one value sphere among many.¹⁷ It would be tedious to rehearse all the recent objections (theological, ethical, philosophical, political, historical, postcolonial, anthropological, sociological, to name just some) to this constellation of concepts.¹⁸ But at their collective heart rests a simple observation: the secular is simply not as secular as all that.

Empirically, for example, it is undeniable that religious commitments persist even in an ostensibly secular age.¹⁹ More significantly, critics argue that the very notion of the secular has a religious provenance. Already in the 1950s, there were spirited debates about whether vaunted secular ideals like progress and history were not in fact *sub-rosa* versions of earlier

theological descriptions of the world.²⁰ Recent work has continued in this vein, seeking to demonstrate the genealogical dependence of the secular on a Christian past. Thus, for example, the separation of church and state, it is argued, was the product of a specifically Protestant milieu.²¹ As such, it should not be surprising that Protestantism should thrive reasonably well under its terms, while other, differently organized religions (e.g., Catholicism, Judaism, Islam) find it much more difficult. The organization of secular disciplines, and more specifically the academic study of religion, suffers similar criticism, that it reflects specifically Christian ways of describing religious belief, religious practice, the church, orthodoxy, and so on.²² State sovereignty, rule of law, toleration, religious freedom, women's equality: these are just a few of the supposedly universal secular values indebted, it is argued, to Christian history and power.²³ Some go so far as to argue that secularism *is* Christianity, full stop.²⁴

I am partly sympathetic to these views. Even if the “green freedom of a cockatoo” dissipates the holy hush of sacrifice, in Wallace Stevens’s terms, Christianity still doubtless lives on in the imagination of the modern.

This book wants to show *how* it lives on, however. It offers less a critique of the secular, than a history of Christianity and its secular afterlives. And this history indeed shows that the secular is heteronomous, that our age depends on previous ones, that the concerns, commitments, and conflicts of Christianity profoundly shape the modern imagination. This surely deflates the ideological hope that we might be (thank heaven!) finally over and done with Christianity.

But what is this “Christianity” that we might be done with? Theorists of the secular often assume that, once upon a time, there *was* an autonomous Christian realm with a consistent worldview supplied by a theology of its own making. In his 1985 *Disenchantment of the World*, for example, the political philosopher Marcel Gauchet discovered the “decisive originality of Christianity” in its “dogma of the Incarnation.” This theological innovation inaugurated an “irretrievable split” between terrestrial and divine, from which the secular world emerged. Christianity was “a religion for departing from religion,” he memorably wrote, and the secular a child of Christian metaphysics.²⁵

This is simply to take Christianity at its own word, however, to assume that there is or was a decisive metaphysics that defines the Christian. But why should we assume this? If history teaches us anything, after all, it is that the most allegedly foundational Christian views have been subject to violent dispute even (especially) *among the theologians*. Almost nothing has vexed theologians more, for example, than that very dogma

of the Incarnation! It seems peculiar, to say the least, for historians or philosophers to adjudicate among the varieties of views that have called themselves Christian, as if to speak from the throne of orthodoxy itself.

The view that theology (or Christianity) had a conceptual estate, in other words, that was either partitioned out to, or requisitioned by, ungrateful heirs assumes far too much.²⁶ It assumes that Christianity “had no immanent preconditions,” in the words of philosopher Hans Blumenberg. It assumes that its “*final* historical formation” was already there at the beginning, and thus that any other or later ways of imagining the world are dependent on a “truth that belongs to Christianity” from the outset.²⁷ It assumes that Christianity owns, legislates, and controls its own concepts, in short, and that there is a final way to determine what is, and what is not, a Christian form of thought.

But this seems unlikely. What this book shows, above all, is that Christianity *too* is a motley thing, that its concepts often have dubious provenance, that its archive is filled with stories, values, and concepts poached from other peoples, religions, and times. The heteronomy of the secular mirrors, in short, the heteronomy of Christianity.

If we acknowledge this, perhaps we can reclaim the language of the secular. Once we set aside the ideal of autonomy, for *both* the secular and Christianity, we can start paying attention, for example, to the subtler dynamics of historical change. We can speak of a Christian sacrificial imagination populated with figures from the Hebrew, Roman, and Greek past. *And* one populated with suffering Christs, bleeding Eucharists, sacrificing priests, and cults of martyrs, one in which the devout feel largely at home, and where controversy is manageable. We can speak of a Christian sacrificial imagination native to the age of confessional conflict, where sacrifice becomes the flashpoint for intractable liturgical, political, and doctrinal disputes. And we can speak of a secular imagination when, these particular disputes receding in time, the imaginative archive they helped create was translated and refashioned for new intellectual and cultural projects.

What is meant by secular here is thus simple: oriented toward the world, temporal, in the original sense of “*saeculum*.” What has sacrifice meant in this human world that we find ourselves living in? What kind of work has it done, and what kind of work does it do *in the world*? The secular imagination of sacrifice is filled with efforts to answer questions like these.

So the book explores how—starting already in the late sixteenth century, but accelerating through the age of Enlightenment—the Christian sacrificial archive was repurposed, materials first gathered for doctrinal deliberation now translated into new imaginative projects. The result

was a period of extraordinary syncretism of what we now regard as distinct domains of theology, history, law, politics, and anthropology. It was also period of extraordinary creativity, as authors with a variety of agendas found sacrifice useful to think with. Sometimes they were interested in sacrifice per se, that is, they tried to explain where it came from, why and how it worked, why all people seemed to do it. Sometimes they used sacrifice to think about more abstract issues, like the nature of ritual, ceremony, or religion in a universal sense. Sacrifice also found a home in histories of human institutions, and in political discussions of sovereignty, the relations of kings and priests, the nature of political solidarity, and later what Jean-Jacques Rousseau would call “civil religion.” These were just some of the work, writers discovered, that sacrifice might do *ad saeculum*.

These experiments in the secular imagination took disciplinary form in the secular human sciences of the nineteenth century. Anthropology, psychology, sociology, the higher criticism of the Bible, even philosophy: all made sacrifice foundational to the stories they told about human religion, politics, and the institutions of social life. The murder of Moses hidden behind the sacrifice of Christ, the original violence that religion aims to conceal: Freud’s was just one of many secular stories of sacrifice that shaped and organized the modern sciences of man.

These stories were innovative. But they were also familiar, bearing witness to the afterlives of Christianity in the sacrificial imagination. For Freud and others struggled to understand what Christians too had always struggled to understand: was sacrifice something alien and better left behind? Or is it something essential to the worlds that we inhabit? As it had been in the Christian imagination, sacrifice thus became a fault line in the secular imagination too. For some, it came to stand for the primitive world of religious violence that we moderns are happily exiting, now free of the burdens of religion. For others, sacrifice showed precisely the *failures* of secular autonomy, the dream of freedom belied by the survival of sacrifice, the “dark encroachment of that old catastrophe,” in the words of Wallace Stevens, still haunting those who dream of a world beyond religion.

The secular is no less heteronomous than Christianity, in short, and no less original for all that.



Some final words about the scope of the book.

Part I supplies a deep background, partly because it is my conviction that Christianity’s troubles with sacrifice began at the outset of the

tradition, but more importantly because the archive of materials created by these early troubles played such an enduring role in the long history of the Christian sacrificial imagination. For scholars of the ancient world, much of this material will feel familiar. That early Christianity was composite and very slow to assume anything like an authoritative form is by now a learned commonplace.²⁸ The field of late antiquity has grown immensely over the past fifty years, moreover, as scholars have used new languages, and new discoveries in archaeology and epigraphy, to rewrite the history of the ancient Mediterranean. Our understanding of ancient Christianity is changing fast, probably too fast for a nonspecialist truly to appreciate. I have done my best in this regard, but at the end of the day, the picture of the ancient world in *this* book is oriented principally toward its reception, the creation of that archive that proved so essential to the sacrificial imagination of the early modern and modern worlds.

The challenges posed by the scope of our story do not end here. This book was written in the hope that a deep history of sacrifice could supply new stories about Christianity, politics, the human sciences, and the secular. But to write across nearly two millennia—even if limited “just” to Europe’s Latin Christian world—is an historian’s nightmare. Extraordinary scholarship exists for every moment of this, and the sheer variety of languages, circumstances, and contexts puts paid to any fantasy of complete or even coverage.²⁹ To the extent that I managed this problem of scale, I did so by treating the material episodically and recursively.

Part II of the book, “Sacrifice and the Deep Time of Christianity,” consists of three chapters (2 through 4) that each reach back from the European sixteenth century into the Middle Ages, before moving forward into the conflicts that transformed Latin Christianity in the early modern era. This structure has its costs and benefits. The reader is spared a thousand-year march from ca. 400 to 1400 CE, but is also deprived of a careful treatment of the Latin church during the period of its greatest confidence. The luxurious growth of sacrifice in the bosom of the medieval Church—the sacrificial priesthood, the sacrificial Eucharist, the cult of the holy blood, the cult of the saints, the development of sophisticated doctrines of Atonement—will be taken up as necessary to understanding the *later* story. Because we will focus more on the reception than the internal structure of this imaginative terrain, readers will miss, then, many of the important nuances that a study of medieval Christian sacrifice per se would offer. Yet I hope those interested readers should find a sufficient sketch of its geography to pursue further study on their own.

Readers will find similar recurrences throughout the book. In part III, “The Heteronomy of Christianity,” four chapters (5 through 8) explore the ways that the archives of Christianity expanded between the late sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries. There again particular problems faced in the later period summon the histories that framed and shaped them. From the late sixteenth century, for example, we turn back to the early Renaissance and its symbiosis of Christian and pagan worlds. The early seventeenth-century appearance of *global* histories of religion recalls us back to the first reports of New World sacrifices and their curious fate in the European public imagination. The politics of sovereignty and civil war invites consideration of ancient Stoicism and its political and literary revival. And the rise of new, anti-Trinitarian heresies brings us back to the medieval discovery of the Atonement and the Man of Sorrows.

Part IV, “Sacrifice *ad saeculum*,” brings the story up to the early twentieth century. Here, as the religious conflicts of the Reformation recede into the past, three chapters (9 through 11) explore the new sacrificial imagination of the post-confessional age. Here too histories are remembered and remade. Archives of sacrifice collected for Christian polemic are reappropriated by freethinkers and skeptics, for example. Anthropological speculations forged in scriptural idioms are refashioned into new theories of human culture and religion. The politics of the martyrs and the kings are abandoned but also reimagined for a new age of sentiment and citizenship. And finally, the new human sciences of the nineteenth century fold all of these into stories of human culture, religion, and politics that continue to shape our own modern imagination.

The book resembles more the Ptolemaic than the Copernican cosmos, in short, complex epicycles rotating around a chronological trajectory from the deep time of Christianity to the dawn of our present. This organization is certainly a concession to the limits of my knowledge. But it also serves a methodological purpose. For it allows us to see how various pasts are recovered and reanimated in the long history of the imagination. History does not imitate the smooth orbits of the planets, after all, but is filled with complex whorls, unpredictable disappearances and returns. Any given present discovers the past that it finds exciting or disturbing, oppressive or inspiring. The past remains buried, until it emerges, for whatever reason, snagging the attention, nails poking from the worn floor of time. Most of the chapters in this book are built around such moments of rediscovery, moments when something familiar became alien and strange. This is a book of history, but it is also a book *about* history.

“What you inherited from your fathers/acquire it, to make it yours”: so spoke Goethe’s Faust, an epigram of life and history alike.³⁰ When we seize this inheritance, in active acts of imagination, so the poet wrote, we make the past our own. And yet much of the time we hardly realize what we have inherited, what belongs to us and what not. History-making *is* this process of realization, a process no less exhilarating for the liberation that it promises than it is sobering about the debts we owe to the dead.

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