

CHRISM Paper 4

The Spirit of Sacrifice at Work

Sacrifice: "A surrender of something of value as a means of gaining something more desirable or preventing some evil". Collins English Dictionary.

The Nature of Religious Sacrifice

In every sacrifice there are three people or things taking part, actions to be done. In religious sacrifices these are:-

- the Victim - the person or thing that is to be sacrificed;
- the Giver - the one who gives the Victim to be sacrificed;
- the Taker - the one who takes the Victim and if necessary slays or otherwise changes it.

Most religious sacrifices are made in the hope of a result, that things will be better or less evil in future. Some are made to give thanks for better things already received. Let us call those better things, future or present: New Life.

The Giver

The Giver "makes" the sacrifice by Giving the "thing of value" to be sacrificed. He does so in the hope of, or in thanks for, some definite New Life. That New Life may be his own, or that of his family, friends, tribe or nation.

The Taker

The Taker also "makes" the sacrifice but in a different sense. He Takes the "thing of value" and ceremoniously slays, destroys or changes it in the manner prescribed by religious custom.

In all Religions this is recognised as a profoundly important task, normally undertaken only by a properly appointed person, that is, by a priest.

The Victim

The Victim must be a "thing of value", costly and "worthy" of sacrifice. A worthy Victim is in perfect condition and is either chosen by the Giver from his own possessions - food, animals, crops - or bought by him specially for the sacrifice.

If the most valuable things of all are seen to be human lives, and the most perfect are the lives of small children, then not a few religions in their early stages conclude that children are worthy to be sacrificed. But the story of Abraham, and the insights of the Hebrew prophets and other holy people, have made it clear that another human life, infinitely valuable though we know it to be, perfect as our own child, is never ours to Give and is not a proper Victim for a religious sacrifice. The revolutionary Good News

brought by Jesus, which he would insist is the logical conclusion of that same understanding, is that the most worthy Victim of any sacrifice, and the most costly, is the Giver's own self.

The Nature of "Ordinary" Sacrifice

Sacrifice is a normal, essential feature of all life of every kind. It is a part of reality, part of the truth of the universe.

We know that life on this planet depends absolutely on the supply of energy from the sun, energy which we know is produced by the consumption, or the sacrifice, of the substance of the sun itself. Life in turn comes about through sacrifice. Plants take their energy from the sun and minerals in the soil in order to live and grow. The animals, humans included, live by consuming plants or other living animals. Within an animal's body the muscles move and the brains function by the burning of carbohydrates and fat that the body used to be made of. If we have to starve, we first sacrifice the substance of our bodies until almost none is left.

Every one of these "natural" sacrifices has exactly the same structure as the religious ones we have just considered.

There is always a Victim, one which is slain, whose old form vanishes completely.

There is always the same purpose, of making New Life - the life which will be after the sacrifice is made.

The Taker, the one who slays the Victim, is the force by which the universe "works" - physics, chemistry and biology. Blind and impersonal they may be, to human minds, but through them everything in the natural order comes about.

The energy of the sun and carbon dioxide in the air (Victims) are Taken by photosynthesis, which destroys their old forms completely, converting them into New Life, part of a plant. The plant in turn may become a Victim. Taken by human physiology, slain and transformed into another New Life, part of a human person. Carbohydrate in a human person becomes Victim, Taken by biochemistry and burnt to create the warmth and energy of the future life of the body. And so on, ad infinitum.

Who is the Giver in all these sacrifices? Some say it is Necessity, the name they give to the force which governs the scientific forces which operate the universe. Others call it God.

God, we also say, Is. And this is how things are. Sacrifice is in the very nature of things, the whole universe is structured so that it operates through sacrifice and only through sacrifice. That is a truth, part of the Truth which we call God.

But repeat the question, who is the Giver in all these sacrifices? May it not also be, in every case, the Victim itself? Do not the sun and the carbon dioxide Give themselves to photosynthesis, following the universal laws of the universe? Does not the plant Give itself to the physiology of the stomach, the carbohydrate to the biochemistry of the muscle?

And in every case New Life is produced, related to the old, given life of the Victim, yet vastly different, richer, more complex.

Sacrifice in Society

Our society runs on opposite values. We are led to suppose that if a thing is good we should not sacrifice but keep it. Having is better for us than giving. Rewards are given to those who get and keep, not to those who give. To protect those values, society does its utmost to ignore its givers, to seduce them from it or to degrade them in their giving. The injustice, corruption and death which result are plain everywhere to see.

Yet we all have to get on with our lives. We must find places to live and food to eat, organise ourselves as best we can, cope with earthquakes, the weather, fear and grief as they happen, bear and rear the next generation to live better lives than ours. Our lives are unavoidably full of "ordinary" things to deal with and actions to be done.

The natural world runs entirely by sacrifice, continuously producing New Life. So must human lives. That way of sacrifice is the Christian Way, where all the things and actions of our lives are seen as sacrifices, in which we are the Givers, the Victims or the Takers, sometimes two or even three of those roles at the same time.

After every sacrifice there normally follows a delay during which we cannot tell what is happening, only grieve for the thing of value which has gone. But then, always, New Life bursts out - related to the old life but completely changed and making everything around much, much richer.

It is in living like that, we believe, as the natural world does and as Jesus of Nazareth did, that we are transformed and made New, and with us the society of which we are part. We can never forecast what the New Life will be like, only be sure that when we enter it through the gate of sacrifice it is very good indeed. For that is how it is with every sacrifice which we have ever known, from the sun burning itself out to the pain of my mother when she bore me, and I hope, to the time I have spent in writing this paper.

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