**Sacrifice Notes**

Sacrifices necessitate substitution. We will want to return, eventually, to this with respect to psychoanalytic readings; but the first thing to note about sacrifice is that it’s always a substitution. The one sacrificing knows that the thing being sacrificed stands in the place of something else.

Sacrifice is, of course, ancient and precedes Christianity; but it’s inflected in *this* text through eurochristian contexts. We see lots of early information on sacrifice in the *Rig Veda* (1900-1200 B.C.E.). In that text, there’s a great deal of emphasis on the *soma* sacrifice.

Let’s look at some elements of sacrifice (I’m drawing on some notes developed from a seminar on sacrifice with my colleague, [Cleo Kearns, in the summer of 2020](https://inciteseminars.com/sacrifice-ritual-resistance/)):

* The word ‘sacrifice’ literally means “to make something sacred.” ‘Sacred’ means “set aside.”
* In Roman Law there was a law called *Homo sacer* (“sacred man”). If someone was deemed “Homo sacer” then anyone could kill that person and not be charged with murder. The Italian critic, Giorgio Agamben, has written several books on this. There are references to werewolves (literally “man-wolves”) in the Latin language (see Agamben’s book).
* Sacrifice is *a formal act of setting apart, relinquishing, and destroying something of worth with the intention to open communication with spirits.* (In eurochristian terms, “the sacred”).
* By “something of worth” Cleo Kearns means something living, whole, intact, and likely decorated. With respect to Christianity, it falls under a category of “work” rather than “grace.” The specific protocols must be followed because the stakes are always high.

* It can be used to seal oaths, establish hierarchy, open spaces for divination, engender paternity (baptism), discharge debt, blur human and animal relationships. Done with intention, sacrifice has a specific purpose.
* It’s done between and among volitional participants, including the “victim,” who assents to the sacrifice. (Note this with Jonathan Harker).
* Opens a pathway from the ordinary to the non-ordinary. It is not only metaphysical but theological. You have to kill or destroy your emissary as it’s sent across worlds. Death becomes a portal to send something through, moving it out of common use, changing it as it is dispatched to another domain.
* The killing of humans in ancient times was considered the ultimate sacrifice. It is paradigmatic of the victim who has great value or worth. This phenomenon exists at times today with war and military service, where “the nation” is what people die for. Critics of religious violence need to be aware that the State merely takes the place of the church when it comes to sacrificial violence. See William Cavanaugh’s book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*. By Cavanaugh’s logic, terrorism’s violence is not so much important because it threatens people’s lives as because it threatens the political founding myths of “secular” nation states. While Cavanaugh does not deny that people do violence in the name of religion, that violence is for him no different than the rationale to say, go to war for one’s country. However, secular, nation-state ideologies have at least partially legitimated their self-supporting uses of violence by naming ‘religion’ as a source of historically illegitimate violence.
* It is often capable of masculine reproduction (think Zeus and Dionysus). This can obviously uphold patriarchal society. Feminist theological critics have noted that baptism requirements seem to fulfill the erasure of the mother to establish a direct filiality to the father.
* Blood is highly adaptable to sacrifice.
* In principle, sacrifice must allow substitutions.
* It’s a question of connection between different realms.
* Spirits depend on humans.
* Both sides (spiritual and mundane) depend on substitution.
* To make sacrifice work there must be some non-arbitrary proportion between the sacrificed and the need.
* Money creates a problem. It is an abstraction. It is alienated and cannot easily be adequated to sacrifice even if it’s a lot of money.
* Gods cannot be bought out or tricked. They can deny a sacrifice. The spirits don’t want to be mechanical.
* Slaves cannot sacrifice because nothing about a slave’s life is volitional.
* While it may sound surprising to some, Jesus Christ was not initially sacrificed. He was executed. He was considered what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” by the Romans. He was “collateral damage” to control unruly people in Jerusalem. Only through retrospective narratives superimposed by Jesus’s followers was the action deemed sacrifice. It became sacrifice the more the movement became Roman. Many of the aesthetics of scapegoat sacrifice (crown of thorns, etc.) were used in the literature to signal a sacrificial victim. A famous New Testament scholar named Bart D. Ehrman has a class available through *The Great Courses Plus* titled “How Jesus Became God” that resonates here. He also has books. Why romanticize sacrifice?
* eurochristian poetics of sacrifice saturate western culture, even in cases seen as entirely “secular.”
* For more on sacrifice, see René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* and *The Scapegoat.* Non-eurochristian sacrifice material begins at least with *The Rig Vedas*, some of the oldest known religious texts in the world.

**Substitution (displacement of desire onto an alternate object through repression, also referred to as *cathexis***): In terms of psychoanalysis**,** because we cannot always get what we want, and because some things are forbidden by law (“taboo”), our desires -- as they seek to become manifest – get *repressed*. As they are repressed, other objects arise to take their place. In Freud’s thought, this has to do with individuating one’s self from the mother’s affection, hence the “Oedipal complex,” which is not so much about wanting to have sex with the mother (perhaps an ultimate taboo), but in failing to move into the symbolic displacement *necessary* for moving beyond the imposition of “the father” / super ego and adapting to social norms. That’s why, for Freud, the Oedipal complex was his attempt to articulate a “developmental” stage. He made the mistake of universalizing terminology that fit the heteronormative Viennese society. In context, it was an expression of Judeo-Christian, or what I will call **eurochristian** norms. Yes, Freud himself was Jewish, but he was “secular” and writing in a context dominated by European Christianity. Freud thought religion was an illusion produced by less evolved forms of human society. Generally, in his thought, through substitution and a balance between internal and external forces, we see the emergence of ego or “identity.” This is perhaps different from the idea of a “soul.” Identity / persona is constructed in the world through experiences; thus through psychoanalysis one can reorient one’s thinking to overcome psychological blocks, feelings about self-worth, etc. Cultural products from the 19th century are really helpful, along with early Anthropology, for seeing how eurochristian deep framing persists. For example, Bram Stoker’s context for *Dracula* fuses “modern science” and ideas about evolution with an idea of an archaic past in the form of the vampire and folklore, and it manifests as **sacrifice.** Psychoanalysts would easily see this as the work of the unconscious.