To Die for A Cause: A Discussion on the Nature and Elements of Sacrifice

Justin Berardi
Armstrong Atlantic State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2013.030301
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol3/iss3/1
Imagine a native of what is now southern Mexico in the year 1500 CE. Neighboring Aztec warriors attack his village, and take him hostage. After dragging him back to Tenochtitlan, their capital city, he is slain in a religious ceremony by a priest who dispatches him by thrusting an obsidian blade into his chest, removing his heart, and casting it into a fire to appease the Aztec sun god. Was this a sacrifice, or simply the ritual killing of a tribal enemy? The definition of sacrifice is a subject of contention among scholars of the subject, and theories exist from multiple viewpoints as to what constitutes and what is the ultimate goal of sacrifice. This essay will examine three interpretations on the nature of sacrifice proposed by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, René Girard, and Jan Van Baal, respectively. From Girard’s stance on the cathartic nature of sacrifice, to the idea of communication and communion proposed by Hubert and Mauss, to the gift giving nature of sacrifice held by Van Baal, a definition of sacrifice is reached by incorporating aspects from all three alternative theories. Sacrifice is thus understood as the ritualized and violent destruction of a consecrated life to the supernatural realm, or a supernatural being for the purpose of a reciprocal benefit. This
definition creates a concept that is generalized enough to span multiple, and more specific cultural interpretations while specifying a clear separation from mere ritual killings.

For Hubert and Mauss, a distinction had to be made between the roles of victim, sacrificer, and sacrifier. The term sacrifier is given to denote “the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects.”¹ The victim of a sacrifice is designated as the object destroyed by the sacrificer.² The sacrificer, according to Hubert and Mauss, is merely the one who “performs the physical activity of sacrifice” and “may be a specialist rather than the person intended to benefit from the action.”³ An integral aspect of what constitutes a sacrifice in this theory is the concept of the consecration of the sacrifice. This is clear in the very definition of sacrifice as designated by Hubert and Mauss that states that “Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned.”⁴ The flaw in this definition is that there is no clear distinction separating what could be considered an offering with an actual sacrifice. Could not a consecrated object be made an offering to a supernatural being without actually being sacrificed? This problem is addressed by Hubert and Mauss when they note that “if an animal is offered on the altar, the desired end is reached only when its throat has been cut, or it is cut to pieces or consumed by fire, in short, *sacrificed.*”⁵ While the essay as a whole includes this necessary distinction, the actual definition offered is, unfortunately, devoid of this aspect.

² Ibid., 12.
⁴ Hubert and Mauss, 13.
⁵ Ibid., 12.
In addition to designating what, in their theory, constitutes a sacrifice, Hubert and Mauss further hypothesize on the purpose of sacrificial practices. Schwartz correctly summarizes this hypothesis noting that Hubert and Mauss break from traditional interpretation to “deemphasize gifting and instead focus on sacrifice as an opportunity for communication - and communion - with the divine.”6 Hubert and Mauss offer a convincing argument for their interpretation of the aspects and purpose of sacrifice citing examples from Hindu texts and Hebrew ritual to support their theory.7 Their contributions are integral to creating a more concise definition of sacrifice.

Girard’s theory finds common ground with Hubert and Mauss in the sacred nature of sacrifice. His hypothesis focuses on the sacred violence of sacrifice in that “the sacrificial victim serves as a focus for the violent inclinations of the society.”8 This cathartic theory suggests that violence must find an avenue to escape human communities through a unanimously agreed upon victim that serves as a scapegoat for the redirection of natural communal hostilities.9 Girard proposes that through the mechanism of a scapegoat, sacrifice is meant to serve the greater good of the community. According to Girard, “The unanimous execration and destruction of a pseudo-enemy reconciles the community at the relatively modest cost of a single victim.”10 The violence in the act of sacrifice itself, for Girard, is of the utmost importance in a sacrificial ritual. Schwartz notes that “Girard provides one avenue to contemplating the centrality of violence in

6 Schwartz, 4.
7 Hubert and Mauss, 14–18.
8 Schwartz, 5.
ritual.”

A third theory is presented by Van Baal. He sees a clear distinction between an offering and sacrifice, but, as opposed to the view of Hubert and Mauss, does not hold their sacred nature as a necessary feature of either. In fact, Van Baal states that “Modern ethnographic research in simpler societies gives evidence that here the victims of sacrifice are relatively rarely held to be sacred.” An offering, according to Van Baal, is “any act of presenting something to a supernatural being.” A sacrifice is distinguished from an offering in that the former is performed in conjunction with a ritual killing of the sacrificial object, which further separates a purely ritual killing from a sacrifice in that there is no offering to the supernatural in ritual killing. Schwartz interprets the primary purpose of sacrifice and offering in the theory of Van Baal as “a gift to deities or supernatural beings.” It should also be noted that communication is central to the gift theory of Van Baal since, in his words, “the giving is a symbolic act of communication,” and further that “All communication begins with giving, offering.”

After the examination of these three theories of sacrifice, a return to the newly proposed hypothesis is necessary for its defense. Sacrifice is the ritualized and violent destruction of a consecrated life to the supernatural realm, or a supernatural being for the purpose of a reciprocal benefit. The concept of consecration is integral in the theory of Hubert and Mauss. The violent nature of the destruction of the object of sacrifice is the primary concern of Girard, and the reciprocal benefit of the act of gifting a sacrifice to a
supernatural being is the purpose for which Van Baal perceives the act of sacrifice. Also related to the theory of Van Baal is the point that the sacrifice is offered to a supernatural being, which distinguishes this definition from a mere ritual killing, while the violent act of the sacrifice itself separates an offering from a true sacrifice. Under this definition, attendant, gift, meal, substitution, communication, construction, and cathartic sacrifice can all be considered true types of sacrifice provided that all of the conditions (consecration, the destruction of life, and gifting of an object of sacrifice to the superhuman realm or a supernatural being) are met. An example of sacrifice that meets this definition is one described by Gillian Goslinga that she experienced in south India. In the ceremony that she describes a goat is consecrated, and decapitated. After the destruction of the life of the goat, the sacrificer drinks the blood from the headless animal. In this case, a life is consecrated, destroyed, and offered to spirits of the supernatural realm for a benefit perceived by the sacrificers.

About the author

Justin Berardi is a senior in history. He plans on pursuing his master degree in history at Armstrong after graduating from college in summer 2014.