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The role of sacrifice in a violent world

Insights into the concepts of sacrifice in the religions and in christology according to René Girard

topics:

- rites of sacrifice in religions
- religious sacrifice and human violence
- Christianity and sacrifice/violence
- sacrifice vs. offering
- the theory of René Girard

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Part I: Deity/God and Sacrifice. Religious history and the theory of René Girard

Ritual sacrifices are to be found among all peoples and in all cultures. Only in modern world sacrifices do not play an official role any more. Nevertheless – the word “victim” kept a certain meaning¹ in most branches of today’s civilisation and points towards the importance of experiences once connected with sacrifice.

The variety of rites regarding sacrifice

There were many religions – there was a wide variety of sacrifices. Ethnology and religious science thus have had a hard time describing the very centre of sacrifice. A frequent explanation sees the sacrifice as a gift to a higher being (deity, demons, ancestors etc.) by violent destruction in order to gain a mutual gift (a good, a defence of disaster).² This perception should be similar to the very experience of those, who worshipped by offering; regarding the fact, that in archaic societies the offering and the received blessing were of central importance.³ It does not give all aspects of ritual sacrifice though; the following aspects should be considered here:

(1) *Sacrifices were surrounded by a holy shiver.* They were anticipated through ecstatic dances, intensified by masks and mind-altering substances. During a rite

those *taboos could be broken*, which otherwise were strictly preserved – often by religious means. According to M. Eliade all archaic religious festivals had a tendency towards altering the present order into a dangerous chaos: "Each 'festival' obtains an orgiastic tendency within its structure".⁴ If sacrifice is a donation to a deity, why are experiences of shiver and horror together with disintegration of order necessary at all?

(2) Sacrifices not only included the destruction of material goods (burning of food) but animals and even human beings were slaughtered as well. *The killing was the rite's climax and the centre of the sacred shiver*. Studying Greek religions, W. Burkert (Zürich) judges: "Not only in a devoted lifestyle, not only in prayer, song, or dance the deity is experienced as most powerful, but in the deadly stroke of the axe, in the running blood and in the burning of the extremities. The divine sphere is holy, but the 'holy' act, performed at 'holy' time at a 'holy' place by the actor of the 'healing', is the slaughter of the victims – 'hieruein' of the 'hiera' (...). The basic experience of the holy is the killing of the victim, the *homo religiosus* acts and becomes self-conscious as *homo necans*."⁵

The killing of victims was not only performed in ancient Greece. All ancient cultures knew bloody rites, frequently human beings were the "chosen" for the high ceremony. At the temple in Jerusalem animals were sacrificed in high numbers, and there were kings, who used human sacrifices in times of crisis (2 Kings 23:10; Jer 7:31; Jer 32:35). Why was such violence important in the offering for a deity?

(3) *The sacrificed animals or human beings no longer belonged to the daily or profane reality*. During the rite they were identified with a deity or with a hero within the cult and sacrificed as such – this is reported through many myths. Ad. E. Jensen, who studied archaic agricultural societies in various parts of the globe describes a unifying and central element in all cultures: "In the middle of the religious festivals there always stands the repetition of the ancient myth; it becomes obvious, that all sacrifices (human or animal sacrifices, rites of maturity or fertility, other ceremonies and ritual customs) are no single elements of culture, but are derived from the central idea of a killed deity, which by her own death sets the present order into being."⁶

The fact that originally a deity was killed is mentioned by other scientists as well. N. Davies points at the relation between this original event and the witnessed sacrifice of a king: "The story of a creator often ends in a very basic deed of violence, which again caused the most widespread, but not common – deed of killing the king himself. After a certain time he, as a descendent of the god once sacrificed, had to die himself. Those new and altered forms of sacrifice were a reinstallation, a going back to the beginning of time and the gods' first deeds. Their rites, which found their climax in re-birth or resurrection, were connected with consuming the god, in the person of his victim or his representative. The myth of the dying god thus became the base for human sacrifice."⁷

According to Mircea Eliade many minor rites of sacrifice (connected with the shaping of metals or harvesting for example) are to be understood through the myth of the killed deity: "Those myths, rites and customs probably refer to an initial mythical event, which came first and justifies it. Metals evolved from the body of a sacrificed god or a supernatural being. (...) After all, what we have said about the cosmogonic myth (the world, the human being or the plants, which once evolved from the body of giant), the imagination of the metals evolving from the body of one divine being seems to be only one reading of the same basic motive. As the offerings at harvest time repeat the symbolic sacrifice of the first highest

being, which, *ab origine*, made the appearance of seeds possible, also the human sacrifice on the occasion of a metallic artefact is an enactment of the mythical example given.”⁸ According to the myth of the killed deity not the sacrifice is an offering for the deity, but vice versa: the given order of life evolved from a sacrificed deity.

(4) Especially in Hinduism this understanding of sacrifice as the origin of all things is systemically unfolded and broadened to a cosmic perspective. In Hinduism, sacrifice is “the power of creation itself, the primal cause.”⁹ The poets of the Vedic hymns praised creation distinctively as the fruit of sacrifice, and consequently – as K. Klostermeier states – they put “first the sacrifice of the victim for the victim.”¹⁰ Not merely an offering for the deity, but an absolute and primal happening, from which all other realities – gods, human beings and the cosmos itself – gain their origin.

Recapitulation

Facing the various and even contradictory images connected with sacrifices, many authors deny the possibility a systematic explanation. Single voices even hold the word sacrifice as treacherous. Rites would be combined under one title, which had nothing in common. In science, therefore, the term sacrifice should be deleted. As opponents to Burkert, J.-L. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant state, that the only real thing in ancient Greek rites of sacrifice would be the preparation of food for the meal.¹¹ This type of criticism had no break through, though; still it is attractive – despite the various aspects within – how the phenomenon of a rite (again: among various cultures) in which something is destroyed made the participating members of the cult – under holy shiver and horror – trust in something good, which was to be gained by the sacrifice, as blessing by a higher power, prevention of disaster, founding of life-order, recapitulation of creation. To understand and to interpret this phenomenon remains the given task.

Today the only working theory of sacrifice that is paying attention to the different interpretations seems to be the theory of René Girard. He does not suppose only one single definition of sacrifice, but understands the offering-rites in the context of a primal event with paradox meaning and, moreover, expects a most complex further development.¹² His anthropology accordingly, does not expect peaceful coexistence as matter of course. Girard does not believe in an instinct of aggression but shows, how human beings easily get lost in rivalry by imitation (*mimesis*), which extends to conflict and aggression. Ratio cannot control these tendencies. In archaic society without a legal system of justice controlling most of the threatening conflicts as a neutral third, only violence could embank itself. Girard’s interpretation: on the climax of confused aggression mutual aggression could evolve into a common deed against one. One is found guilty and is sacrificed, so that the others restore their peace (the mechanism of ‘scapegoating’). This does not only include physical violence. Rage is blind, as a saying states, and in an archaic society human passion was far more elementary. Greek tragedies reveal heroes blind of rage, losing their distinction between human being and animal. The original collective aggression must have been of enormous agitation and blindness. Realistic self-perception was no longer available, and opponents grew into monstrous entities. When a victim was covered by this collective aggression, it was covered by collective projection as well. To the crowd it had become an incarnation of the evil. The same crowd, though, made the puzzling experience that

the killing of the victim gave back peace. The monster changed its face into the one of a supernatural and wonderful messenger of healing. It was both: frightening and fascinating, a *tremendum et fascinatum*. It was experienced as sacred. Ethnology has stated long ago, that in the archaic 'sacred' both sides are comprised: the condemned and the healing, the frightening and the fascinating, the good and the evil. The theory of the collective thrusting out and killing explains, how such diverse experiences could be made on one spot: In a blind and instinctive manner the victim had to carry all the guilt for the deadly crisis, but at the same time, through concentrating all against one, peace was restored unconsciously. The hidden collective mechanism which enabled human communities, and the first appearance of archaic religious characters are, according to Girard, aspects of one single happening. In ritual sacrifice he then sees a controlled enactment of the (formerly only instinctive) self-embankment of violence, in order to renew its healing purpose for the community. In the preparing rites (masks, dances) the latent aggression was exposed – to be once again turned off and alienated from the community by the act of killing the victim. All religious, cultural and political institutions then would evolve from the sphere of peace, gained in this way.

Girard's theory is able to explain different phenomena in the wide world of sacrifice: the meaning of killing, human sacrifices and their later change into animal sacrifices, sacred shiver and horror, tendency towards chaos and orgiastic rites with renewal of order and mythical reflex to a secret beginning. This theory also explains the strange though widespread myth of the killed deity, which provides life-order, in a stunningly simple manner. If the primal victim in its empirical reality was covered totally with projections, it had to appear to the crowd as a supernatural being, and because the killing caused a sphere of peace for the others, the sacrifice really appeared to create the given life-order. The myth therefore offers the perception of an actual happening – distorted by rage and blindness.

Girard's theory was criticised widely. One critique was, for example, that it would retract everything to violence. Here is a clear misunderstanding, since not violence but self-embankment is vital for the theory. The participants find the scapegoat-mechanism fascinating, because they are given – in a wonderful manner – a gift, they could not reach out of own effort: peace. Sacred violence brings life and healing, because it suppresses evil and self-destructive violence. But how about the gift to the deity, which, as we have seen, plays an important role in the world of sacrifice? Does this theory not speak against an explanation of sacrifice in the context of the scapegoat-mechanism?

Girard states clearly, that human beings are oriented towards a realistic transcendence. But as long as their realm of living is not in peace, their real vision of the infinite is imprisoned by passion,¹³ with which they fight for survival; and all of their judgements will be distorted accordingly.¹⁴ Once the traditions and patterns of behaviour, which evolved from the collective mechanism of violence-embankment, grew strong enough to guarantee for a stable order, religious sensibility can follow – step by step – its own intuition. Girard points to the far-reaching consequences of the development of a legal system on a national level where the State holds the monopoly of power. Since it became its task to guarantee for a more or less peaceful life within its borders, religiosity had the possibility to develop on its own. This happened slowly and differently in each culture, and some connection to the roots remained. In this way, says Girard, from the same starting point various and partly different ideas of sacrifice could develop on a rational religious level; they overlaid the unconscious realm.

The religious worlds and their sacrifices

The archaic sacred figure which evolved from the primal collective projection, could develop into a belief in a deity, which shared the life of a human community and was responsible for good and evil. In this context the myth of the killed deity got less important and gave way to sacrifices, which were to soften the threatening rage of the deity and beg for peace – by the sacrifice of a valuable gift as a first-born animal or even firstborn son. Such a development probably took place in Israel.

By new religious experiences the belief into a highest deity differed from the belief into minor sacred characters as ghosts and demons in the development of the archaic religious world. This was true for many areas in Africa. The highest god was relatively far away in daily life. Under such circumstances the rites had a satisfactory social function, as Girard describes, even if the religious community believed in soothing ancestors or ghosts and to prevent magicians from doing harm to the community.¹⁵ Still, the religious sensibility knew about a higher being, but the relation was not clear.

Another possibility was, that sacrifices – even those of human beings – remained in the cult, even though the political structures were stable – as in the culture of the Aztecs and other natives in Middle- and South-America. Myths of the killed deity survived indirectly; in part they transformed into the understanding that the victim itself would stabilise the whole present order – both political and cosmic. As the Aztecs believed: "The sun depended on nurture and strengthening by human blood and human hearts to leave the underworld and reach her place in the skies".¹⁶

India went a different way. Sacrifices here were spiritualised in a very own way. Not only human sacrifices but also animal sacrifices disappeared. Their place was taken by gifts of nature; on the other hand the archaic experience of sacrifice was maintained and transformed into the cosmic. Still, it was believed, that all deities and all worlds were created by one primordial sacrifice. "Everything was expressed in a terminology of sacrifice theology, each act of life, every single move of a star was sacrifice itself or vital part of one."¹⁷ Even contradictory aspects could coexist in this context. The archaic myth of the killed deity lived on (transformed) and at the same time got connected with religious-philosophical ideas of new spiritual energy. Out of the belief into a primordial sacrifice as the first truth, from which even the gods evolved, the understanding of one unity as the true reality, which comes before all differences, which after all only exist at the level of mere appearance. Hinduism though still held the Vedic fire rites highly – especially in the spiritual life of the Brahman. On their way to redemption and unity with the primordial sacrifice the human being was to be cleaned from guilt;¹⁸ their effect though was not related to the called god but to the sacrifice itself – "the god is only necessary as a technical term *ad quem* of the sacrifice – as part of the Yajna. The effect came *ex opere operato*, as an unpersonal effect of rite and mantra."¹⁹

Another way was taken by Buddhism – to neglect sacrifice as such and to only keep a spiritual way of sacrificing. Only the idea of renunciation was kept – sacrifice was neglected as it destroyed something valuable. Renunciation as liberation became the proper way to enter the divine unity (Nirwana) – only by the means of meditation and renunciation of all desire. Also Zarathustra and the great prophets

of Israel criticised the sacrifice, but out of inspiration. In Persia as well as in Israel the image of god was cleansed by prophetic inspiration, in the name of a newly given ethical system. The old world of rite and sacred tradition was questioned.

These short and summarising notes cannot give an overview of the complex world of religions and their sacrifices. On the background of Girard's theory they try to draw, how the images of sacrifice can be seen in one and still be true to their various phenomena. A very actual problem is mentioned here. To see the connection with today, the Christian understanding of sacrifice will have to be described first.

Christianity and sacrifice

In Christian teaching Christ brought the ever sufficient sacrifice on the cross. In Hebrews, which unfolds this understanding very much, the death of Christ stands on the opposite to the Old Testament's sacrifices. Back then animals were slaughtered daily, Christ offered himself to God once and for all. The priests of the old order carried foreign blood to the sanctuary, blood of kettle; Christ though stood before God with his own blood. With Christ the old sacrifices lost their value. But the 'Letter to the Hebrews' also names various Old Testament texts and so maintains a continuity to earlier days of Jewish religion. As seen, sacrifices were common in the early phase of Israel, also in the time of the kings (1020 to 586 B.C.) they were offered in many places even for different deities. King Josia favoured a religious renewal only accepting the cult of Jahve and destroyed all sanctuaries in the country leaving only the temple in Jerusalem. Before him the prophets began to criticise both priests and sacrifices in the name of Jahve and a new ethics, which focused on justice and attendance to the poor. The prophet Amos (around 750 B.C.): *The offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream!* (Amos 5:22f.).

And prophet Hosea with a similar tone at almost the same time: *For I desire steadfast love an not sacrifice, the knowledge of Got rather than burnt offerings.* (Hosea 6:6).

The prophet Jeremiah, around 150 years later, went as far as questioning, if Jahve ever did give the order for offerings (Jer 7:21ff.; cf. Amos 5:25). When Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed shortly after that (587 B.C.) and the wealthy part of the population went into the exile to Babylon, the belief in Jahve survived the time in between without sacrifices because of the prophetic criticism before pretty well. But when the temple was rebuilt (the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem 540 B.C.) the old cult with sacrifices at the temple was restored. Why so many bloody rites in a time, which also knew a harsh criticism against such practices? Old Testament scriptures do not give many answers. The well-known Old Testament scientist G. v. Rad says: "The Old Testament is full of divine event, when it becomes evident among God's people, full of intensive address, but there is no 'revelation' when it comes to what God allows with sacrifices, here is silence and secret."²⁰ The belief in Jahve seems not to have had a clear understanding, what the sacrifices were to cause. In the post-exile time the obedience to God's order and his word was emphasised above all. Probably, the cult was reinstalled because of God's order to Moses. Obedience for tradition, not the belief in the inner value of the sacrifice, was important. This shows, how deeply the cult of sacrifice must have anchored in the religious tradition of Israel.

Although Jesus stood in this tradition, bloody offerings had no role in his teachings. He did not oppose them directly, but did not give them any importance either. The faith in a near and caring God and the change towards a new behaviour (charity and love of the enemy) was crucial to him. Because of this message he was prosecuted collectively and trialed and executed.

After Easter the Christian community understood his death as a sacrifice, as shown in Hebrews. The understanding of sacrifice was changed in a radical way, became opposite to all former images. All ritual sacrifices had been offered in the temple or in another sacred space, the death of Christ took place, where criminals were to be executed. In the ritual sacrifice the killing are the offering and the priests at the same time, in the crucifixion of Christ the killing were only part of sinful mankind, Christ himself as the killed became priest in a radical new way.

If Girard's theory is reliable, continuity and radical change between old sacred sacrifices²¹ and the sacrifice on the cross can be edged out more visibly.

On the one hand a crowd is acting against an individual. In the foreground the crowd, which covers the victim with their projections, condemn it to total silence and believe their deed is a God-given act. Such a crowd is acting at Christ's death, too. But their motivation is not in control. Jesus as the One has challenged the crowd before with his message. At his trial he stayed silent and his disciples were carried away for a short time by the crowd. But through their experiences at Easter and Pentecost they converted and began to teach the message of their master, the single one, to the whole world. Sacrifice is not anymore the collective deed but vice versa: the deed of one for the many. Christ is not reacting with counter-violence (anathema) but answers the evil done to him – listening to his heavenly father – with forgiveness (Lk 23:34), devotion and love (Lk 22:14-23; Rom 5:6-8).

The new meaning of sacrifice brought a radical change and was challenging, as much as the believers in Christ themselves were overcharged with the task to hold the new sight and integrate it into their lives. The world the new Christians lived in was still controlled by the suction of the sacred sacrifice and also their Christian thinking was diluted instinctively, to understand the death of Christ in direct analogy to those bloody offerings. Because he was killed like animals are slaughtered – in a ritual sacrifice – the idea spread, that God must have offered his own son (by the means of sinful human beings) to soothe His rage. This idea spread first of all in piety, sermons and in popular theologies. Offering, even in a Christian way of thinking, was understood as killing and destruction to calm down God Himself.

Most works of theologians were critical against such views. But they had a strong influence on Christian life in general. But since the enlightenment more voices rose, who spoke with passion against a god, who would offer his own son. Many Christian authors though kept teaching the offering of the son by the heavenly father. So the question of how to understand sacrifice remains central in the Christian debate. Some state that the problem could be solved most easily by not mentioning the word sacrifice anymore. But this proposal might be too superficial. Sacrifice is rooted deeply in the world of violence. As long as there is violence in this world, the problem of sacrifice stays with us in one or the other way. As with the death of Christ the task to be performed will be to reverse the archaic meaning of sacrifice.²² Those who kill cannot be, by any means, those who offer. But those, who offer themselves in a very new and healing sense by not reacting to

violence with counter-violence. This way the old world of sacred violence can at least be altered in the realm of their own existence.

Places of sacrifice and relics

Bloody sacrifices stirred a sacred shiver and horror, a dark fascination. Sacrifices took place in spots aside from daily life. In temples, on mountains, in caves, in sacred woods. The act was performed on an altar, which was prepared and consecrated in a special manner. The flesh was partly consumed, partly burned. Bones could be kept as sacred objects. The dark fascination was very powerful, it seemed to stick like a substance at the spot, where the sacrifice took place. Places of sacrifices and relics of sacrifices therefore were worshipped and visited with the intention to find healing.

Christian sacrifice, as we have seen, had a very different meaning. The first covenants of believers, who remembered the death on the cross, did not need temples nor altars. They came together in their homes, sitting around ordinary tables (Eucharist). But as soon as old sacred images re-entered the understanding of Christ's death on the cross, they began to influence the understanding of the Eucharist. It was said, the priest would perform a slaughter in a symbolic way,²³ and that one could only come close to the offering with a sacred shiver.

As soon as those ideas spread, distinctive places for the sacrifice appeared again with regard to the Eucharist. Christians began to build their houses for prayer and community in analogy to the temples of the gentiles, the Eucharistic table became an altar and the altar was set aside from the ordinary people. The offering again became an act performed by priests, by distinguished personnel.

Similar things happened with the martyrs. They gave their lives following Christ not acting violent. But it became neighbouring, that they were to be remembered in the Eucharist. Interest changed in the cause and the bones of the martyrs (and the bones of other saints) were worshipped. It was believed they held a certain power bringing help and healing. Because of this belief relics were installed in every altar and places, where the bones of outstanding martyrs and saints were kept, developed into big places of pilgrimage.

A comparison with the bones of criminals shows that in the cult of relics old sacred ideas came into play among Christian impulses. M. Herzog brought together a good deal of historic material showing how executed criminals were worshipped as saints, even as "guardian gods", even in Christian countries.²⁴ Their bones were held as valuable as the bones of saints. A similar sacred ambiguity belonged to the executioner, as Herzog shows in another study.²⁵ The executioner was approached with horrified fascination and numinous awe. As hangman he could be doctor at the same time and use the relics of criminals for pharmaceutical purposes. Herzog shows a clear connection between execution and victim: "As in no other part of common belief in the drama of execution the alteration from the profane to the sacred by a ritual act of killing can be grasped that easily. Despite the fact, that the criminals die for their own misdeeds, their execution in popular piety is experienced as a salvation bringing sacrifice and a sacrifice of a substitute."²⁶ Such a connection will be hard to understand for modern thinking. But as with sacrifices, the latent collective violence is deflected and a peaceful and "healing" space is created. The conclusion could be drawn, that archaic images, as long as violence rules the world, cannot be exterminated and will keep showing up in one way or

the other. In Christian popular piety but also in the esoteric and the world of sects these phenomena should be observed carefully. The Christian belief tries – in its deepest aims – to enlighten the dark background of the sacred and not to embark violence by collective gathering for substitutional sacrifices, but to overcome violence with love and freedom of violence. This is not an easy way. Also in the world of Christianity there will appear mixed forms – as in the cult of relics or in the theories of mystical slaughter within the mass. They must be examined in a critical way, for even today, sacred violence is able to veil and justify physical violence.

References to Part I

- ¹ Cf. *Zur Theorie des Opfers*, ed. by R. Schenk, Stuttgart 1995; *A quoi bon (se) sacrifier?* (La revue du M.A.U.S.S., No. 5), Paris 1995 (Paris). While most Roman languages distinguish between "vittima" (the thing or person to be sacrificed) and "sacrificio" (the act of sacrificing), in German the word "Opfer" comprehends the whole rite with all its different aspects
- ² Cf. A.Caillé, *Sacrifice, don et utilitarisme*, p. 265. In: *A quoi bon (se) sacrifier?* (s. note 2) pp. 248-292.
- ³ Cf. M. Mauss, *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London / New York: Routledge, 1989.
- ⁴ M. Eliade, *Die Religionen und das Heilige*. Salzburg 1954, p.413.
- ⁵ W. Burkert, *Homo necans*, Berlin 1972, p.9.
- ⁶ Ad. E. Jensen, *Die getötete Gottheit*, Stuttgart 1966, p.78.
- ⁷ N. Davies, *Opfertod und Menschenopfer*. Frankfurt a. M. 1983, p.344.
- ⁸ M. Eliade, *Schmiede und Alchemisten*, Stuttgart, 1980, p.72f.
- ⁹ K. Klostermeier, *Hinduismus*. Köln 1965, p.78.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.111.
- ¹¹ J.- L. Detienne / J.- P. Vernant, *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*. Paris 1979.
- ¹² Important books by R. Girard: *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977; *Das Ende der Gewalt*. Freiburg i. Br. 1983; *Der Sündenbock*, Zürich 1990.
- ¹³ From a Christian perspective Girard's theory is close to a theology of original sin.
- ¹⁴ Even in today's complex world, there are certain arguments for this way of thinking. In Bosnia all involved parties – according to a long tradition – believe in one transcendent god, but still their private perception of the conflict itself are totally on the opposite and each party blames the guilt on the enemy. – In the novel *Medea* by Christa Wolf (Darmstadt 1996) Girard's theory finds an indirect application to today's Germany.
- ¹⁵ Cf. E. de Rosny, *Les yeux de ma chèvre. Sur les pas des maitres de la nuit en pays Doula*. Paris 1981
- ¹⁶ W. Krickenberg, et al., *Die Religionen des alten Amerika*. Stuttgart 1961, p.50.
- ¹⁷ Klostermeier, *Hinduismus*, (see note 9) p. 111.
- ¹⁸ "...the five great sacrifices had the purpose to clean the 'five sins', which were committed daily in the house. Hurting or killing of living beings: in the oven, in the mill, by sweeping the floor, in the water-pitcher or by the use of mortar and pestle." *Ibid.* p. 111.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.125
- ²⁰ G. v. Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Vol. 1). München 1957, p.273.
- ²¹ I distinguish between *sacred* and *holy* and understand the term *sacred* close to primordial religious experiences, for which condemned and blessed, tremendum et fascinatum were one; with the word *holy* I mean the Christian God of love and everything connected to him, directly or indirectly.
- ²² Cf. R.Schwager: *Jesus im Heilsdrama*. Innsbruck 2nd edition 1996; J. Niewiadomski (editor), *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke*. Thaur 1996.
- ²³ The Patriarch Nestorius for instance taught that within the Eucharist "Christ was crucified in a symbolic way, slaughtered by the sword of the priestly word." (cf. Loofs, *Nestoriana* (1905) 241, p. 24ff.)

²⁴ M. Herzog, Hingerichtete Verbrecher als Gegenstand der Heiligenverehrung. In: *Geist und Leben* 65 (1992) pp.367-386.

²⁵ M. Herzog, Scharfrichterliche Medizin. In: *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 29:4 (1994) pp.309-331.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.382.

Part II: The Sacrifice of Christ. New Christological insights on account of the studies of René Girard

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac, or rather of his “binding” (*Akeidah*, as it is called in the Jewish world), evoked a certain spirituality of surrendering to the will of God. It also sparked numerous discussions – in the era of the rabbis as well as in the modern days of information systems. More to the point, the story had an impact, reaching beyond the mere theological realm, playing an important role in the literary and philosophical works the Jewish¹ and the non-Jewish² world alike. All this proves how deeply rooted the notion of the sacrificial offering is in both, the rational and emotional sphere of the modern person.

But the biblical story may also serve the means of a harsh criticism of modern day historic events. The English poet Wilfred Owen for example, who died as a front-line soldier in First World War, left us with numerous poems that speak against the senseless killings of the war. In his “Parable of the Old Man and the Young” he follows the story of Abraham and Isaac, having the angel stop Abraham by saying:

*Behold!
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns,
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*³

In the story of the sacrificing of Isaac, Christian theology often saw an announcement of the death of Christ. With reference to this narration, Paul says about God: “He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give all things with him?” (Rom 8:32) In connection to this and similar Pauline statements, and based on the explicit theology of sacrifice which we find that in the letter to the Hebrews, Christian theology was often led to state that humankind deserves death since through their sins they have evoked the wrath of God. Although God’s great love proved itself in the fact that he did not destroy the sinners, his wrath, however, was satisfied by the fact that he did not spare his own son by sacrificing him on the cross in place of all worldly sinners. Such is the opinion not only with popular theology, but also with great and famous authors. Karl Barth, for example taught that Jesus was being struck by the wrath of God on the cross. Thus, the people were mere “instruments in the hand of God, agents and executioners of his steadfast judgement and intend.”⁴

In a meditative piece about the sacrifice of Isaac the Jewish author Elie Wiesel writes against the teaching of ‘salvation through the cross’, that “for a Jewish per-

son truth comes from life and not from death. Therefore, for us, the crucifixion does not represent progress but regression. At the zenith of the Morija the living remains alive and thereby marks the end of an era of ritual killing."⁵ In modern Christian theologians we sometimes find equally disapproving verdicts of a theology of the cross. A feminist voice may say that "to give one's own son, to surrender him to the cross, to leave him there and to kill him, is (...) the absolute perversion of what love stands for. It is a patriarchal act of perversion; to interpret a murder as an act of love, may be reserved to men only, or rather, to people blinded in the patriarchal fashion."⁶

The drama of Jesus and the role of humankind

Although Rene Girard is not a theologian he deals with the above mentioned matter extensively. He even dares to enter the often complex and confusing discussion and proposes a new interpretation. In difference to Karl Barth he does not see Jesus' executioners as instruments and agents of a divine will, but rather as instruments of those forces that have repeatedly exerted power over the human race since its early beginning i.e. the forces of lying and of violence. This is the reason why in his interpretation of the fate of Jesus he does not refer to the narration of Isaac, but rather he refers to a different motif of the OT the violent fate of the prophets.⁷

Based on this idea, Girard can propose the following dramatic interpretation of Jesus' public appearance: With his message of the coming kingdom of God, Jesus initially intended to create a kingdom of peace and justice. Had the people answered his calling, had they showed any willingness to be converted to unlimited forgiveness, to love for the enemy and to the principle of non-violence, then the kingdom of God would have begun here on earth and the cross would not have been necessary.

In reality however, Jesus' message was met with a rejection to which Girard applies a systematic meaning. He writes: "The failure of the kingdom, from the viewpoint of the Gospels, does not amount to the failure of the mission Jesus undertakes; but it does amount to the inevitable abandonment of the direct and easy way, which would be for all to accept the principles of conduct that he has stated. It is now necessary to turn to the indirect way, the one that has to by pass the consent of all mankind and instead pass through the crucifixion and the apocalypse".⁸ Girard emphasises, that it is the Gospel of Matthew that most clearly distinguishes between the coming kingdom of God and the proclamation of judgement and the suffering of Jesus. Between those two elements of distinction one finds the "momentous event" of rejection. We have to ask ourselves, what consequences did this moment rejection have? Girard now sees Jesus' words of judgement and his apocalyptic preaching not as the response of an angry God acting upon the resistance to his message. Rather he interprets them as a proclamation of what will come gradually if the people continue to reject the offer of the coming kingdom of God. In other words, Jesus' work unveiled the violent mechanisms which to this day stabilise many human cultures and societies.

Consequently humankind is faced with a more radical alternative: to either repent and to reconcile, or to destroy one another.

In this light Girard understands judgement as a collective judgement of and done by the human race. Through the proclamation of judgement, the people could

have awakened, but the opposite occurred: the moment of rejection grew into violent abolishment. Various Jewish groups normally hostile with one another (Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians and Zelots) unified in the name of opposition, and (for a short period of time) even collaborated with the Romans. This alliance was so strong, that it even affected the disciples who in turn betrayed him – or they even fled from him. For one moment the many (all) stood united against one. Thus, what Jesus had unveiled in the soul of the human beings was thrown back at him. He uncovered violence, and in turn was violently killed. He diagnosed a deceitful and satanic spirit in the minds of his opponents (Matth 12:22-45, 23:13-39; John 8:44), and in turn was convicted as a blasphemer (Matth 26:65). The full force of violence erupted, making him the victim.

However, due to the experiences of Easter and Pentecost those disciples who had betrayed him earlier converted and found a way back to their Lord. They now identified him as the stone which was cast away by the builders of the old world, and who was reinstated by God as the corner stone of the new community (Mark 10:12; Apoc 4:9-12; 1. Peter 2:4-8). They identified him as the innocent victim of collective violence, as the sacrificial lamb (John 1:29; 1. Peter 2:22-25), or as the scapegoat (2. Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13), who carried the evil and the sins of many. Based on their pre- and post-Easter experiences, Jesus did not remain to be one prophet out of many. But for the disciples he was the true messenger, the Son of God, whose crucifixion was not a random killing caused by a few evil people, but a fundamental act of all mankind.

In the NT Girard is able to find clues that place the rejection of Jesus in the context of world history. In this light the parable of the evil vineyard owners is to be understood. It shows the fate of the beloved son Jesus to be purely in succession of that of many prophets. With regard to the exclamations in Matth 23:34-36 – referring to Abel and all the innocent blood that has been shed here on earth – Girard writes: “Here one can detect the whole of the mimetic system. I believe that the gospels reveal it, since they let Jesus predict he will die like a prophet; and the exemplary prophet chosen is Abel – proving that he is not in line with Jewish prophets only, but with all religious killings since the creation of the world. Killings that are similar to Jesus’ suffering, in that they all are ‘foundational murders’ (*Gründungsmorde*) of the scapegoat.”⁹

We find the first Christian community being even more to the point, when in light of their own and the prophet’s experience of persecution they pray: “Lord, Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things?’ The kings of the earth set themselves in array and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed – for truly in this city there were gathered together your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate with the gentiles and the people of Israel to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” (Acts 4:24-28) It is a fact that at the time of Jesus most of the twelve tribes of Israel had ceased to exist, and heathens only sporadically came in touch with the fate of Jesus. As shown in Acts (and John 1:9-11), the praying community of Christians nevertheless feels the need to think of the killing as an act of alliance and of mobbing.¹⁰ For Girard however, the importance of this text lies in the fact that “all cultures – without exception – have proved themselves to be murderous in the face of the true God.”¹¹ Time and again humans have allied against victims, blaming them for all sorts of evil deeds. In unveiling the innocence of that one exemplary victim, that had been sent by God and was convicted

as a blasphemer by the people, it becomes apparent, that all those victims were not guilty in the sense of the prosecution – or at least no more guilty than those who convicted them.

The cross as an offering

Can we now conclude from the above analysis that although Christ became a victim of violence, on the cross itself he did not make a sacrifice? Let us turn to the book *Des choses Cachees depuis la fondation du monde*,¹² in which Girard is dealing extensively with the Bible for the first time. Here he is mostly concerned with analysing the difference between the archaic sacrifices and the death of Christ. In light of this dichotomy, Girard very clearly refuses to interpret the death of Christ as a sacrifice moreover, he harshly criticises the letter to the Hebrews¹³. In his later works, however, Girard has modified this position and lately he has even retracted it.¹⁴ Although he is holding on to the radical difference between the archaic sacrifices and the death of Christ, through many discussions he was forced to see how the notion of the sacrifice had been reinterpreted repeatedly in the times of early Christianity. The ideas of the offering or the surrendering of the self do not have to be interpreted how Girard first saw them (under the influence of the anti-Christian attacks that he has experienced). They are not a form of aggression to the self. On the contrary: To the violence he encountered he reacted with exactly the same spirit that he had preached about in his sermons. He did not retaliate, but excused his enemies, and prayed for their forgiveness (Luke 23:34). Moreover, he could identify with them, since he saw that they themselves had become victims of violence (see Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 9:4; Mark 14:22-24). Consequently, Jesus' offering of the self may very well be the most radical form of non-violence and love of the enemy. And with this act Jesus – as the good shepherd – manages to reach even the most deserted people, all those who themselves have become the victims of violence and evil. Thanks to Jesus' surrendering and his offering of the self – clearly his loving answer to all the violence he suffered – there now exists an Archimedic point in the history of humankind, a point where all evil has already been overcome. This point in history is near us, since through the osmotic kind of mimesis, or rather the act of imitation, all humans are closely connected with one another – more closely than the enlightening idea of the autonomous individual would have one to believe.

Coming from God – what does all this mean? Girard points out that “the crucifixion shows how the people reject God's truth. Moreover, since God does not want to win in a forceful way, which would not make sense, God made it possible to reveal himself in a way that does not violate the freedom of humankind. With this goal in mind God accepts his role as scapegoat”.¹⁵ God did not want the death of his son to happen; but he did want Jesus to ultimately follow the forlorn people – thereby risking his own life.¹⁶

References to Part II

- ¹ Cf. P. Tschuggnall, "Der gebundene Isaak", in: *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 114 (1992) p. 304-316.
- ² Cf. P. Tschuggnall, "Abrahams Opfer", in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 46 (1994) p. 289-318.
- ⁴ K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Church Dogmatics), Vol. 4/1, Zollikon-Zürich, 1953ff, p. 262.

- ⁵ E. Wiesel, *Adam oder das Geheimnis des Anfangs*, Freiburg i.Br. 1987, p. 81.
- ⁶ R. Strobel, "Feministische Kritik an traditionellen Kreuzestheologien", in: *Vom Verlangen nach Heilwerden*, ed. D. Strahn / R. Strobel, Fribourg 1991, p. 53; cf. Elga Sorge, "Wer leiden will, muß lieben", in: *Feministische Studien*, Beltz Mai 1983, p. 54-69.
- ⁷ Cf. O.H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1967.
- ⁸ R. Girard, *Das Ende der Gewalt*, Freiburg 1983, p. 211.
- ⁹ R. Girard, *Wenn all das beginnt... Ein Gespräch mit M. Treguer*, Münster 1997, p. 53f. (original title: *Quand ces choses commenceront... entretiens avec Michel Treguer*, 1994)
- ¹⁰ The prologue of the Gospel according to John describes this: "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." (John 1:9-11).
- ¹¹ R. Girard, *Wenn all das beginnt...* (op. cit.), p. 112.
- ¹² Paris 1978.
- ¹³ R. Girard, *Das Ende der Gewalt* (op. cit.) p. 251-254.
- ¹⁴ R. Girard, *Vom Fluch und Segen der Sündenböcke*, Thaur 1995, p 24-29; Girard, *Wenn all das beginnt...* (op. cit.) p. 161.
- ¹⁵ Girard, *Wenn all das beginnt...* (op. cit.) p. 140.
- ¹⁶ For a more thorough theological discussion cf. R. Schwager, *Jesus im Heilsdrama. Entwurf einer biblischen Erlösungslehre*, Innsbruck 1996, and J.Niewiadomski / W.Palaver (eds.), *Dramatische Erlösungslehre. Ein Symposium*, Innsbruck 1992.