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Sacrifice is at the heart of Easter – and of human experience

The violent yet redemptive event celebrated by Christians this weekend has meaning and a use in our wider society.

For a religion that professes to be all about love and forgiveness, it can appear mightily confusing to an outsider that the central event of Christianity, Easter, is a **commemoration** of a violent death (and, of course, controversially, a **resurrection**). It is a confusion illustrated by the fact that the symbol of Christianity is the **Roman form of torture** used that day in Palestine, the cross. We live in an age when we prefer our violence on celluloid. We expect plenty of violence from Hollywood but what kind of religion puts violence at its heart?

How does Christianity make violence a central theme?

The point about Easter is not so much the violence as the sacrifice. Arguably, no word is more problematic in secular Britain. Sacrifice is morally disturbing: how can it be both violent and **redemptive**? The awkwardness of this question goes some way to explaining why Easter has become so emptied of meaning – for most people it's about DIY and chocolate.

Almost all religions have included **rituals of sacrifice** and, to this day, much of the world's population still use them. Ancient sacrificial practices have clearly shaped Christianity: priests, **altars**, a shared meal, and the frequent references to blood in rituals such as the mass. Some would argue that this continuity speaks of a deep **human preoccupation** with a set of dilemmas around the taking of life. Sacrifice explores this and offers some resolution. Others would argue that sacrifice has no place in the modern world and that it is symptomatic of a **superstitious irrationality**.

Does the idea of sacrifice serve our violent human instincts?

Sacrifice intrigued the literary scholar René Girard, and the theory he developed nearly 50 years ago has become immensely influential. Put simply – and he is a complex and subtle thinker – he argued that human beings imitate each other's desires: **we want what those around us want**. That triggers competition and often violence. That violence could become pervasive and uncontrollable, so societies channel it by creating **scapegoats** to maintain harmony. History is littered with instances of how societies are united by turning on a scapegoat. Christianity was radically innovative in that Christ exposed the innocence of the scapegoat victim, and offered an alternative of non-violence, turning the other cheek and resisting revenge and anger.

What is the root cause of violence according to Rene Girard?

What is the function of a scapegoat in society?

What is the ingenuity of the Christian scapegoat?

More recently, the theologian Sarah Coakley has offered a powerful new reading of sacrifice. She argues that it needs to be restored as a central biological, ethical and theological principle. Far from sacrifice being an outmoded ritual, it is **central to human experience**. She cites recent evolutionary theory that puts sacrificial co-operation on a par with mutation and selection as a fundamental "**principle**" of **evolution**. "Individual evolutionary loss can be group evolutionary gain," she says.

Rather than imagining our genes as selfish, struggling in a race for the survival of the fittest, we can see evolution as requiring ceaseless sacrifices, small and large, to ensure the survival of the group. For any mother, this experience of sacrifice has been **visceral** as she carries a child to term, gives birth and breastfeeds. The growing new life is feeding off her body: her hair, blood and teeth are often drained of nutrients.

How can sacrifice serve the evolution of a species?

What makes Coakley's ideas so challenging is that, as she suggested in her 2012 Gifford lectures, "there is a need for models of sacrifice in a society" – that the existence of people dedicated to an "**altruism beyond calculation**" plays a critical role in challenging, inspiring and provoking the social order around them.

How can sacrifice serve the smoother functioning of a society?

At some level, we are all aware of this power of sacrifice. We studiously attempt to avert our eyes. We are living in an age of sacrifice **on a near apocalyptic scale**: a great extinction is under way with hundreds of species being eliminated as their habitats are destroyed. Looking at another dimension of this age of sacrifice, we have developed a global economy in which people's wellbeing and communities are routinely sacrificed for the sake of economic growth and efficiency – strange gods built on fantasies that allege rationality.

What is the environmental sacrifice that we're currently experiencing? What is the social sacrifice that we're currently experiencing?

This is the ugly sacrifice that consumer capitalism attempts to conceal with its glamorous illusions and ideology of desire and entitlement, of self-fulfillment and self-expression. Capitalism offers speed, convenience and choice, but behind all of these lies sacrifice, from the poor working conditions of an exhausted workforce to the water-stressed cotton fields.

Who is called to make sacrifices and for what cause?

The urgency of us grasping the importance of sacrifice in human experience must surely be a vital part of any sustainable future.

Any proposal to slow down or reverse our destructive impact on the natural environment leads to talk of sacrifice on the part of consumers in western developed economies. Only when we understand how sacrifice can be a force for good have we any hope of restraining our destructive capabilities.

• *This is an extract from the BBC Radio 3 series The Retreating Roar*

Is the author contemptuous of the idea of sacrifice?