SACRIFICE
in a Secular World

LLOYD GEERING

Sacrifice in a Secular World

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St Andrew's Trust for the
Study of Religion and Society

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FOREWORD

Are we prepared to sacrifice our world, as the cover suggests, or are we preparing to do so unknowingly? If so, what for?

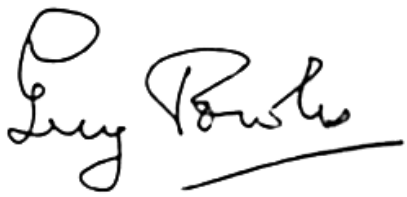
Musing over the human condition in our world today, particularly in our small New Zealand corner of it, leads to dark thoughts and fears such as the above. It leads to questions about our society in crisis, and fears for the future.

A check list of these thoughts and fears would cover such matters as peace and war, defence, the nuclear holocaust to come or not to come, the confrontation of the superpowers, the widening gulf between rich and poor, the worsening relations between employer and employee, our moral condition — including homosexuality and abortion — and, in our basically Christian society, the significance of the Cross, which to at least some of us denotes the supreme sacrifice.

It is fascinating that this ancient and sacred word — sacrifice — should be in almost everyday use in our writing and conversation, and on the lips of politicians, farmers, employers and employees. The word has indeed become secularised, but, as Professor Geering shows, a study of the concept today and of its long history throws light into many of our dark corners.

His lectures touch on most of our worries, and give us strength to surmount them.

The conclusion to his fourth lecture, about those aspects of sacrifice which are enduring, is a real challenge to us all.



Sir Guy Powles
Member of St Andrew's Trust

CHAPTER ONE

WHY MAKE A SACRIFICE?

Sacrifice is a word which is today frequently upon our lips. Not only preachers call their congregations to be sacrificial givers. Politicians explain to us that, in the interests of the future of our economy, various sections must be prepared to make sacrifices. In daily speech, if we stop to think about it, we shall find that we are frequently using the word to refer to some act of self-denial. A test cricketer may say, 'I'm not prepared to sacrifice my family for sport.'

Have you ever paused to observe the oddity of our using such a distinctively religious word, when the age in which we live is increasingly secular? Many other words and concepts from traditional religion are rapidly falling into disuse. Even such a basic word as 'God' is rarely heard today outside the precincts of religious buildings. Yet there was a time, not so long ago in Western society, when the word was on everybody's lips many times a day and in all sorts of contexts. Now in the course of a day's activities it is unlikely we shall mention the name of God once.

If the name of God is being retired from everyday public discourse because of the process of secularization, why has the same thing not happened to 'sacrifice'? For let there be no mistake: 'sacrifice' is a very religious word. The etymology of this word, which we have inherited from Latin, shows that it literally means 'to do a sacred thing', in fact 'to make something sacred'. Sacrifice was such a religious word that it was regarded as the key to all religious activities. Sacrifice was the religious act *par excellence*, the supreme manifestation of religious devotion.

When politicians call on us to make sacrifices, however, it is quite clear they are not expecting us to prepare a burnt offering on an altar. The word has evidently been changing in usage. But we need to ask: Why has the word changed its meaning? Why has the word been retained at all? What connection is there between what the word used to mean and what it means today?

Our modern use of the term 'sacrifice' makes it look very mundane and innocuous. Once we start to examine what it used to mean we may be in for something of a shock. The corresponding word for sacrifice in both Greek and Hebrew literally means 'slaughter'. That is why even the Oxford dictionary to this day offers as the first definition of the word 'sacrifice', the 'slaughter of animal or person as an offering to a deity'.

This immediately confronts us with a quite paradoxical situation. We may

regard the age in which we live as rather irreligious. Yet no matter what our personal religious convictions may be, the idea of slaughtering even an animal, let alone a human, as an offering to God on an altar fills us all with revision. What our distant ancestors regarded as the most holy religious act, we have come to regard as immoral, as irreligious. Yet the language which described it we have retained!

To understand why this is so we must try for a moment to put ourselves back in the cultural situation of our ancient ancestors. Although we cannot say for certain that human and animal sacrifice was ever universal in all primitive cultures, it was certainly widespread. It long played a dominant role in the religious tradition out of which Judaism, Christianity and Islam eventually emerged. In the oldest parts of the Bible there are even isolated examples of burnt sacrifice. Eventually this was resorted to only in times of extreme emergency. In pre-biblical times however, human sacrifice was not at all uncommon. It had been a common practice to offer the first-born child as a sacrifice to God, just as it long remained the practice to sacrifice the first lamb of the spring season. This is thought to be the origin of the lamb which was sacrificed and eaten at the Jewish Passover.

That ancient practice of sacrificing the first-born is actually still found in the Bible as a divine command: 'All the first-born are mine, said the Lord, I have consecrated for my own all the first-born in Israel, both of humankind and of beast; they shall be mine.' These words lie buried in the Bible and most Christians prefer to ignore them.

Already in the evolving religion of ancient Israel itself there was a growing revulsion against human sacrifice. It became the practice, on the birth of the first child, to slaughter a sheep or goat as a substitute for the child. It was said to be the act of redeeming the child. This is how the Bible states it: 'When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. Sacrifice to the bard all the males that first open the womb, but all the first-born of your sons, redeem with a lamb.'

Some of you may find this language vaguely familiar, not because you are conversant with the ancient practice of sacrifice but because the terminology was taken over to explain in a religious way the death of Jesus. He was called the lamb of God. He was given the title of Redeemer, for his death was seen as a sacrifice which brought to others divine forgiveness and new life. This sacrificial terminology has remained in Christian hymns and liturgical practices right down to the present day, even though the more gruesome aspects of their primitive origin have long since been forgotten or ignored.

It sometimes comes as a shock to us to realise that while *human* sacrifice ceased to be practised by the ancient Israelites, the sacrifice of *animals* on the altar at the Jerusalem temple continued as a regular Jewish practice until after the rise of Christianity. It seems almost certain that Jesus himself witnessed these sacrifices. Though he is said to have driven the money changers out of the Temple, there is no record of his having expressed any criticism of the sacrifices which took place there. The first generation of Christians, being Jewish, continued to frequent the Temple and be present at

the priestly sacrifices.

It was not due to any Christian pressure that animal sacrifice came to an end among the Jews. It was because the Roman armies destroyed the city and Temple in 70 AD and prevented the Temple from being rebuilt. The cessation of animal sacrifice was for political and secular reasons rather than religious ones. Today that magnificent Muslim building known as the Dome of the Rock stands on the site of the former Jewish Temple. Should, at some future time, that site ever return to the hands of the Jewish people, the strictly orthodox Jews would be faced with a dilemma. For on the most rigid interpretation of Jewish law those ancient sacrifices should be reinstated.

I do not believe this will ever occur. For just as Christians came to believe that the time for animal sacrifice had been superseded (indeed the New Testament book known as Hebrews was largely written to explain why) so also Judaism learned how to live without the animal sacrifices. Both Christians and more liberal Jews owe this solution to a viewpoint on sacrifice which began to surface in Judaism some 800 to 600 years before the Christian era. And it is to these people, the prophets of Israel, that we must look to understand the radical changes which took place in the practice of sacrifice and its continuing significance.

These prophets began to attack the practice of animal sacrifice in the most provocative and iconoclastic ways. Listen to how the prophet Isaiah interpreted what was going on in the mind of God:

> What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
>
> I am fed up to the back teeth with the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.
>
> I take no delight at all in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or billy goats.
>
> Don't bring these vain offerings to me any more.
>
> I'm sick to death of receiving them.

Just as the primitive human sacrifices had already been replaced by animal sacrifices, so the ancient prophets made a strong plea for a further radical change. The sacrifice of living creatures should now be replaced by a new and bloodless form of sacrifice. What was to be the new mode? The prophet Micah put it this way:

> Should I come to the altar of God with burnt offerings?
>
> Shall I sacrifice my first born to atone for my sins?
>
> Of course not! He has shown you, O man, what is good
>
> What does the Lord require of you
>
> but to do justice, and to love kindness
>
> and to walk humbly with your God?

Like all the prophets, the Israelites were ahead of their time. Their plea was rejected. The animal sacrifices were continued. People found it impossible to abandon the old and tried ways.

Yet slowly the words of the prophets began to take root. The concept of sacrifice came to be raised to a higher level. It was translated into moral or ethical demands. The focus of attention in all sacrificial acts began to shift

from the slaughter of animals to moral and social reform, such as the establishment of social justice. The elimination of oppression, and the caring of defenceless people, particularly orphans, widows and the socially handicapped. These moral duties became a new form of performing outwardly the supreme sacred act.

As well, sacrifice began to take an inward, spiritual form. This is how a later psalmist put it:

> O Lord you take no delight in sacrifice.
>
> Were I to give a burnt offering you would not he pleased.
>
> The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit.
>
> A broken and a contrite heart, you will not despise.

For over 1900 years of Jewish and Christian religious practice, animal sacrifice has been replaced by the moral and spiritual forms of sacrifice. Yet the language of sacrifice has remained. This has been particularly so in Christian usage. Christian hymns and theology have been permeated with the language of sacrifice. During the Middle Ages the most solemn act of Christian worship – the Mass – became conceived as a sacrifice on an altar. In this ritual the death of Jesus on the cross was portrayed and represented as a sacrifice which was thought to bring new life to the worshippers. The elements of bread and wine were believed by a divine miracle to be transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus, the sacrificial victim. The very word 'host' so dominant in Roman Catholic practice, is derived from the Latin word *hostia*, which means 'victim' or 'sacrificed animal'. For nearly 1,000 years the most serious penalty one could receive was to be excommunicated, i.e. to be cut off from the spiritual benefits which flowed from that sacrifice.

I have briefly sketched how, over a period of 3,000 years, the outward forms of sacrifice changed, first from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice and then from animal sacrifice to symbolic ritual. Sacrifice slowly became moralised and spiritualised. But the terminology remained. Christian worship is literally bloodless – yet to this day the Christian Eucharist speaks of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the sacrificed Jesus. To appreciate why, we must ask what it was which motivated our ancient ancestors to slaughter animals, and even humans, as their supreme act of devotion.

In looking for the answer to this question, we stumble on another strange thing. As I have said, sacrifice was a widespread practice. There are two religious traditions in particular in which we have inherited full and detailed instructions of how it should be done. One is the Hindu tradition. Their explicit instructions for the proper conduct of sacrifice are preserved in their sacred books, the Vedas. The other tradition is that of ancient Israel and it is preserved in the Jewish and Christian Bibles, where it takes up some 50 chapters.

But the strange thing is this. in spite of the most detailed instructions of what to do, there is neither in the Vedas nor in the Bible any hint of *why* it should be done. The spiritual purpose which sacrifice fulfilled was apparently self-evident to the ancients. There was no need to argue a case in its favour. This suggests that the widespread practice of human and animal sacrifice

evolved out of a deep-seated and unconscious urge. They found themselves doing it without being consciously aware of any rational theory of why they were doing it.

Modern scholars have tried to penetrate into the subconscious mind and search for those urges which made the ancients feel that sacrifices were spiritually effective. One theory, for example, suggests that a sacrifice was essentially a gift to the deity. After all, we humans both celebrate and strengthen our personal relationships with one another by exchanging gifts at appropriate times. Would it not be natural to show gratitude to God by bringing a thank-offering to his altar? We can take the analogy further. A husband who feels guilty towards his wife for some failure on his part may send her a surprise gift of flowers. If the misdemeanour has been really serious he may go so far as to buy her a new car! Would it not be natural for the worshipper, then, to atone for his or her sins by offering a really costly gift?

There is no doubt some truth in this gift theory but it still does not explain why the blood and flesh of a slaughtered victim seemed to be called for. Another theory suggests, therefore, that a sacrifice was essentially a common meal shared by the deity with his worshippers through the priests. In the ancient Semitic world every slaughter of an animal was treated as a sacrifice and the consumption of flesh for human nourishment was a sacred and relatively uncommon experience.

It may even point back to a more primitive period in which the gods were thought to be dependent on humans for their regular sustenance. In that context the sacrifices were seen to be the very food of the gods, prepared and offered by their menial servants, the human race, in return for various divine favours. The Babylonian version of the great flood myth reflects this view. It notes that while the flood waters covered the Earth no sacrifices could be offered to the gods. So the first thing the Babylonian Noah did, as the waters receded, was to make a sacrifice. And so, the myth says, the gods gathered round like flies. They were simply starving for nourishment. Of course all that sounds very comic to us.

Once again there is some truth in seeing the sacrifice as a common meal in which worshippers and their God are all present. This has been a significant factor in the Jewish Passover and in the Christian Eucharist, or Holy Communion. Moreover, in the transition from mediaeval times to modernity, the emphasis on Christ as the victim has been replaced by the emphasis on Christ as the bread of the world, broken to be shared by the worshippers.

But even the ‘communion meal’ theory leaves an essential aspect of the sacrifice still unexplained. Why did there have to be a taking of life? The New Testament puts it very succinctly: ‘Under the Jewish law almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.’

There emerged a third theory of the origin of sacrifice which maybe called the ‘life releasing’ theory. This rests on the obvious relationship between life and blood. If we suffer a serious loss of blood, life ebbs away. The ancients very understandably identified life with blood. ‘’The life of every creature is in its blood.’ says the Bible. Because of that ancient conviction. to this very

day the strict Jew will eat only Kosher meat, flesh from which the blood has been drained away at the time of slaughter. In the same way the Muslim world insists on the Halal method of slaughtering its animals for food. (For the same reason Jehovah's Witnesses forbid the transfusion of blood from one person to another.) Blood was thought to be the very life or soul of a person.

But what came to be forbidden to humans was in fact the most appropriate offering to God. To sacrifice a human or animal was to return the blood, or life, to God, the giver of life. The slaughter of living creatures came to be seen as not only the costliest but the most sacred religious practice. The life released from the victim was believed in some way to bring spiritual benefit to the worshipper.

The ancients sensed here the mysterious relationship between death and life. Not only does life come to an end in death; paradoxically, death also releases new life. 'He died that we may live,' Christians have been in the habit of saying about Jesus. But the very same thought keeps coming out in more secular contexts. On many a war memorial throughout our country you will find such words as, 'They paid the supreme sacrifice.' The implication is that the freedom and life we enjoy has been made possible by their death. So we call their death a sacrifice.

There is widespread agreement in the scholarly world today that none of these theories of the origin of sacrifice contains the whole answer. There is a certain amount of truth in each of them – the gift theory, the common meal theory, the life releasing theory. But the urge to sacrifice goes psychologically and religiously deeper than all of them. That is why, through the ages, people have continued to make sacrifices without being able to offer rational reasons for doing so. That is why, in spite of the diversity of forms of sacrifice, and in spite of the radical reforms which it has undergone, we still use the language of sacrifice. Thus when we call upon people to make personal sacrifices for the greater good of all, we have some confidence that it will strike a responsive chord in the depths of the human heart.

It is no doubt somewhat debatable whether or not we humans are all religiously programmed in such a way that the concept of sacrifice will always have the capacity to strike home to us because it touches something very deep in our human condition. let me tell a little story which illustrates how, in fact, that may be so.

I first heard this story when l was quite young, being brought up in the aftermath of World War One. A few Australian soldiers had been cut off from their unit in the battlefields of France. They were sheltering in a shell hole. They were in no-man's land, caught in the crossfire between the two opposing front lines. Shells were continuing to explode all around them. At any moment, it seemed, one was likely to land right on top of them. There were never any atheists in a shell hole, it used to be said. In this extremely critical predicament they looked to each other for someone to take the lead in praying for divine help. 'You can pray, Tom.' But Tom couldn't even remember a prayer from his Sunday school days. Another tried to say the Lord's prayer but petered out after the second phrase. At last, in

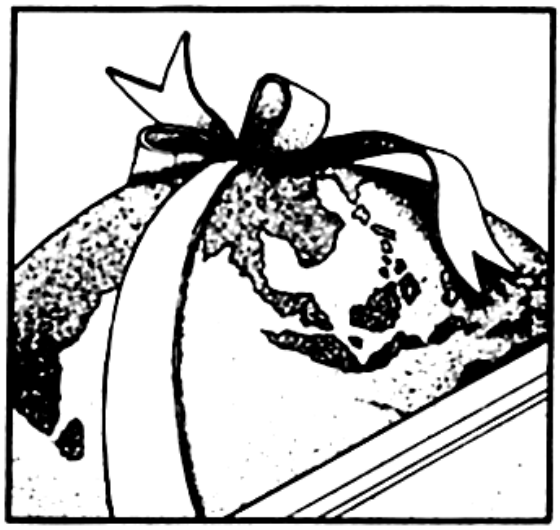
desperation, one said, 'Ere, give us yer tin hat Bill. I'm going to take up a collection. We've gotta do something religious!' This was not a true story, of course, but a joke, in which we used to laugh about the ridiculous incongruity of taking up a church collection in a shell hole.

But at another level this story may serve as a parable about something which is deep in the human psyche. In matters of life and death one must take extreme measures. All religious beliefs and practices originate out of life and death situations. One must do something to reach out to ultimate reality – the reality we traditionally call God. In the ancient world it caused men to reach out by slaughtering animals, and even fellow humans, without knowing why they did it. In that Australian digger we may see the same existential urge at work as, unconsciously, he grasps for that last remnant of the sacrificial act still present in the Protestantism of his boyhood.

You may have been wondering if what I have been saying about ancient sacrifices is very relevant to the kind of world we live in today I have tried to show that though the mode of sacrifice has changed, the language and concept have continued. if it is true, as I have suggested, that this is because the urge to make a sacrifice, to do this holy thing, arises in times of emergency out of the depths of the human condition, then any attempt to understand the nature of sacrifice is very relevant indeed.

An increasing number of people are coming to view the surface of this planet as a kind of global shell hole in which we are going to be forced to cower while the superpowers direct their nuclear missiles at each other. In such a condition what holy act, what sacrifice shall we be urged to make? To find the enormous sums of money necessary to build these armaments, the superpowers have been forced already to sacrifice millions on this planet to die by starvation. Think not that human sacrifice was stamped out in the ancient world. More horrendous forms of it have occurred in our century than ever before. There are sacrifices and sacrifices. Some we are called to condemn. Some we are called to make. In the next three chapters we shall be taking a critical look at the forms which this ancient religious practice is taking in our day, in spite of the fact that we call it a secular age.

CHAPTER TWO



SACRIFICING POSSES-SIONS

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Everybody in our society is familiar with that biblical commandment, It has always figured prominently in the Christian tradition. It finds constant expression in Christian worship and is frequently being expounded from Christian pulpits. Nearly everybody applauds the sentiment it expresses. Even those who have no longer any active association with the church regard this as the last remnant of the Christian lifestyle with which they can identify.

The commandment to love one's neighbour occurs no less than eight times in the New Testament. It is mostly found on the lips of Jesus of Nazareth. Most Christians are under the impression this commandment is unique to Christianity and that it originated with Jesus. In actual fact he was simply quoting from the Jewish Bible, or what Christians now call the Old Testament. Moreover, this commandment is found in a section of the Old Testament where you might least have expected it.

In Chapter One I drew attention to the fact that a most detailed description of how animal and other sacrifices were to be offered in ancient Israel is preserved in the Old Testament. This sacrificial code is some 50 chapters in length. Tucked away in the very middle of it, and then almost only as the casual end of a longer sentence, is this now famous commandment. It is perhaps because this Levitical Code is the book of the Bible least read by Christians that they have so often been unaware that Jesus was actually quoting Scripture, when he placed the commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' alongside the already famous Jewish Shema, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.'

But, you may ask, what has the love of one's neighbour got to do with sacrifice? My answer takes the form of another question: Why is it that this simple commandment, which has shown such capacity to stir human imagination, first come to the surface in a complex set of directions on the ritual of animal sacrifice? The answer is very illuminating.

I have already briefly described the origins of the sacrificial slaughter of animals – that widespread practice which the ancient Israelites inherited from their prehistoric ancestors and which they continued until the Romans destroyed their Temple in the year 70 of our common era. Long before that, however, the prophets of Israel had raised loud protest against this ritualistic slaughter. They denounced it in scathing terms. They urged its abolition. They called for its replacement with a practical programme for the promotion

of social justice. Indeed modern biblical scholars have sometimes seen these prophets as the ancient forerunners of the modern secular age in which religious rituals of an otherworldly character have a rapidly diminishing place.

As everybody knows, the sacrifices were not abolished but continued for another 700 years. Yet the prophetic words did not altogether fall on deaf ears. The priests of succeeding generations began to take notice of the prophetic protest. Some 50 years after the first protest a now unknown school of priests sketched out a blueprint for a new kind of society which took into account the prophetic concern for social justice. This blueprint is preserved in the Book of Deuteronomy. It reads like long sermons put into the mouth of Moses, for its unknown authors wanted to claim the authority of Moses for what they were setting out as their ideal society. The traditional sacrifices and religious festivals still find a prominent place there – but a new element appears. Here we have, for the first time, a piece of social legislation which looks like a modern trade union requirement. It insists that every worker, right down to the slave and the toiling animal, must be given one full day's rest in every seven. It goes further. Caring consideration of a special kind must at all times be extended to the orphan, the widow and the resident alien. These were the people who lacked the protection normally provided by one's family. The whole community was now called upon to see that these unfortunate people were not disadvantaged. Nowhere else in the world of that day was there to be found such a far reaching expression of human concern, which completely ignored distinctions of class, sex and race.

A century later came another burst of creative priestly activity. The priests and other chief citizens of Judah were now in Babylonia, where they had been forcibly deported. They were facing the possibility of national extinction and were making a desperate bid to preserve their identity and their cultural heritage. The priests were committing to writing, in systematic form, all the ancient practices they had been taught by the generations before them. This is how that sacrificial code of 50 chapters came into its present form. But the priests did more than just preserve the ancient traditions. They took the words of the prophets to heart and they tried to redirect the thrust of the sacrifices. Right in the middle of their sacrificial code is a special section, today often called the Holiness Code. it consists of Leviticus 17-24. It is a complete unit in itself, and sets out what the priests felt to be the chief matter of concern if the Jews were to be true to their calling as the holy people of God and avoid national extinction.

The Holiness Code *also* starts off with the 'how' and the 'how not' to sacrifice animals, but it then leads into quite different concerns. 'You shall not oppress your neighbour or hold back from him the wages which are rightfully his. 'You shall not pervert justice, either by favouring the poor or deferring to the rich.' 'You must not go spreading slander or take sides against your neighbour on a capital charge.' 'You must not hate your neighbour or bear a grudge against him, let alone take vengeance on him. Indeed you must love your neighbour as yourself.'

At least three different words are used for neighbour. Sometimes it is 'brother'. Sometimes it is 'friend' or 'companion'. Sometimes another word is

used which means something like ‘one of the people’, ‘a person of your own community’. This last word is used nine times and almost nowhere else in the Bible, This may reflect the priests’ growing community concern. Thus, first in the book of Deuteronomy and then in the Holiness Code of sacrifice, the Israelite priests began to shift the focus of attention from the ritual of the sacrificial slaughter to the moral duties of good citizenship ... to the need to develop a community spirit, which would have the effect of providing justice for everybody.

Let us pause to see the radical character of the changes first initiated by the Israelite prophets, for the modern world owes a great deal more to them than it ever realises. The primitive sacrifices, so harshly condemned by the prophets, had long been believed to he the way by which humans established good relations with the gods above and won their favours. The activities now being urged by the prophets, as the alternative, aimed at establishing good relations among humans. The prophets took the first steps in replacing the vertical look with the horizontal look And that, in a nutshell, is the essence of the process of secularization which characterizes the modern secular age. The word ‘secular’ properly means, not ‘irreligious,’ but ‘this-worldly’.

In the last chapter I pointed out that our word ‘sacrifice’ properly means ‘the doing of a sacred or holy thing’. It cannot be oven emphasized that (in the social and religious revolution initiated by the prophets} the promotion of social justice – the establishment of an harmonious human community – became the new way of doing the most holy thing possible. It is the form which sacrifice takes in a secular age, an age where our highest interests are this-worldly.

This revolutionary shift continued with Jesus of Nazareth, who followed in the footsteps of the prophets before him. For example, he is reported to have said, ‘If you are bringing your gift to the altar and you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, put down your gift and go and be reconciled to your brother. Only then are you ready to come and offer your gift.’

Again and again in his recorded teaching, Jesus of Nazareth emphasized that a person’s relationship with God can never be divorced from one’s relationship with one’s fellow-humans. They are like two sides of the same coin. That is why Jesus linked together the two Old Testament commandments ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart’ and ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. They were like two sides of the one commandment. And we have seen they were both composed by priests who had been influenced by the ancient prophets.

Some of the parables of Jesus are in similar vein. One of them portrayed the divine king as saying, ‘In as much as you have shown your care for one of the least of my subjects, you have done this act for me.’ In other words, to make sacrifices of time, money or love, for one’s fellow humans is the same thing as to make sacrifices to God.

We can now see why the word ‘sacrifice’ came to develop a new meaning as a result of the radical changes which were taking place in the Judaeo-Christian tradition over a long period of time. It originally meant a slaughter

of an animal as an offering to the gods above. It came to mean – and this is the second definition now offered by the Oxford dictionary – the 'giving up of valued thing for the sake of another'.

This latter is the meaning of the word which is uppermost in our minds when we use it in daily speech. Yet, when we lose sight of where the idea of sacrifice came from, something essential to its meaning easily and quickly becomes lost. When that happens the word becomes debased and is only the empty shell of its former self. Again and again in human history basic principles do get lost and then we have to backtrack for a bit to recover them. We need to recover the sacred character of sacrifice, the sacred component involved in surrendering some possession for the sake of another person. We need to learn again what a demanding, challenging and costly thing all genuine sacrifice is, whether it be ancient or modern.

The reason why the making of a sacrifice is a necessary prerequisite to the establishment of greater social justice is very simple. Social injustice arises out of gross inequality in the possession and use of the planet's natural resources. There are two chief ways in which the great gulf between the haves and the have nots can be bridged. The first is by the use of force. This means either conflict between nations or internal violent revolution within a nation. In the modern era, wars have usually widened the gulf rather than lessened it, for the haves more often than not have the military might to win the conflict, and actually increase what they possess or control. For similar reasons it has even become more difficult to overturn an unjust order by means of violent revolution for it seems to be easier for those in power to hold revolutionary forces at bay. Thus injustice only becomes compounded.

The other way to overcome social injustice does not use force – but it is no easier. It is the way of sacrifice, the way in which the haves voluntarily sacrifice some of their personal possessions in the interests of the larger good. Unless this way is to remain an impractical and impossible ideal there are two very important components of it about which we must be absolutely clear. Both of them were present in the ancient form of sacrifice. Both of them remain essential for genuine sacrifice in a secular age.

The first is that genuine sacrifice is always costly. Token giving is not sacrificial. Giving away something which one does not want or which one will not really miss is not a sacrifice. The ancients knew that. A warning was carefully laid down in the ancient ritual for animal sacrifice. How tempting it would have been for a person about to offer a sacrifice to look through the flock for the scraggiest animal, perhaps a lame beast which had no future. No! It was laid down that the animal to be sacrificed was to be without blemish, a perfect specimen, the best in the flock; not the worst. The word used meant 'whole', 'complete', 'perfect'. Sacrifice of such a kind was costly to the owner.

Something of that feeling clings to us still when we make gifts to our friends. We feel embarrassed if the gift we offer turns out to be cracked, or stained, or second hand, or even if the recipient later finds we got it in a sale for half price. Although we often say that it is the thought that counts rather than the commercial value, nevertheless quality remains an issue. If this be the case even with gifts, how much more is it essential for a genuine sacrifice?

Costliness is of the very essence of sacrifice. The more it hurts us, the more it is a real sacrifice.

The other essential ingredient of genuine sacrifice is that we give it voluntarily, It is not a sacrifice if it be forced from us against our will. This fact, too, came to be emphasized in the ancient biblical code of sacrifice. Indeed a special word came to be used it is usually translated 'free will offering' because it comes from a verb meaning 'to be willing', 'to be generous', to 'do something voluntarily'. What is even more interesting is that this particular term for sacrifice only begins to appear in those sections of the priestly heritage which reflect the influence of the Israelite prophets – the book of Deuteronomy and the Holiness Code. Thus already it was being recognized that any worthwhile act, either in the worship of God or for the benefit of one's fellows, must be a voluntary one.

Today, one of the ways in which we try to promote greater social justice in our community is through the social welfare programmes which are paid for out of our taxes. We may sometimes want to congratulate ourselves for (at least through our taxes) doing something worthwhile for those whose need is greater than our own. But that does not mean that our taxes may be seen as a sacrifice. It may certainly hurt us to pay our taxes. We may be acutely aware of their costliness to us. But most of us have to admit that, if we were left to pay our taxes on a voluntary basis, we would contribute a good deal less than we do to the welfare schemes of the total community. It is partly because of our past unwillingness to make the required degree of sacrifice that in the end they are squeezed out of us by legal constraints. What we contribute under these conditions, costly though it may be, is no longer a sacrifice. It is only as we give our possessions to the greater good in a way which is both costly and voluntary that they are genuinely sacrificial.

If social justice is to he advanced, both within a nation and between the rich and poor nations, it is essential that we recover the spirit of sacrifice. The way we at present do it through taxes is often costly but rarely voluntary. The way we do it by contributing to voluntary agencies is admittedly voluntary but most often it lacks the element of costliness. In both areas we fall short of the full requirements of a genuine sacrifice.

The possessions we are being challenged to sacrifice are not always of a material kind which can be given a commercial value. They may for example be rights or privileges which we jealously claim and will defend to the hilt. So let me look briefly at some of the arms where currently we are being challenged to sacrifice our possessions in the interests of social justice.

Just before doing so it is important to realise that we have already come some distance since those ancient prophets first made their plea, viz. that instead of putting our efforts into providing more burnt offerings on the altar we should cause justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Progress may have been slow – but it has been very real. Some clamourers for social justice too quickly forget this and speak as if living conditions for the disadvantaged are as bad as they can possibly be. That is not so in this country and it is counter-productive to further improvement not to recognise it. It is only after we have acknowledged this that we are in a balanced position to survey what yet has to be done.

Indeed, if we persist in fighting the same old battles as if nothing has been achieved at all it may well result in the loss of what has been gained.

Industrial relations is a case in point. In the last 100 years, through the strenuous efforts of the trade unions, tradespeople and unskilled workers have come to receive a much fairer share of the national cake than used to be their lot. But there comes a limit to the material gains one can expect to make. The time has come for industrial relations to be raised to a new level, where cooperation replaces confrontation, where people in all types of activity learn how to show restraint in their economic demands, whether it be salaries, wages or prices. Voluntary economic restraint is simply another term for sacrificing possessions.

In actual fact, instead of claiming that each of us is getting too small a share of the national cake, the truth may be that all of us are enjoying far too large a share of the international cake. The most urgent examples of social injustice are not to be found within a country like New Zealand. They are to be found in the great inequalities between nations, manifested in the degrading conditions of human existence in so many countries of the so called Third World. Recognising this deplorable state of affairs, the United Nations quite some time ago called upon the affluent nations to sacrifice one per cent of their gross national product as international aid. Only rarely has New Zealand managed to contribute even half of this amount. Yet such is our standard of living that we could sacrifice ten per cent of our GNP and we would still not go hungry.

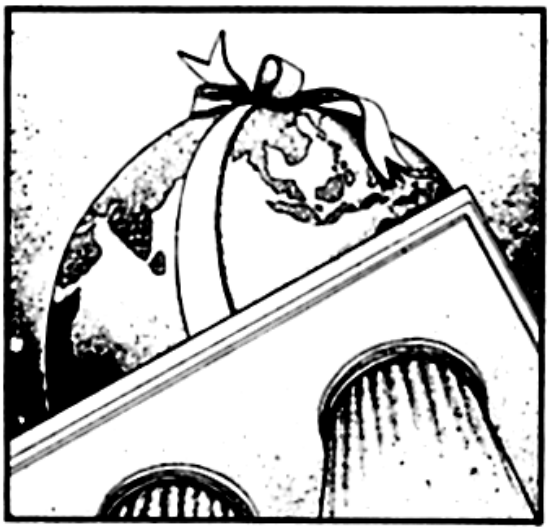
But while we New Zealanders have enough and to spare, about a thousand million people live on the breadline or below. Literally millions of people are today starving to death, and not only in Ethiopia. This is what is meant by social injustice, and we are a party to it! This is not simply because we shut a blind eye and do not care sufficiently. It is because our affluence is at their expense. We of the affluent nations are less than a third of the world's population but we possess or control more than two thirds of the world's resources. The gap between the rich and poor nations is widening. As we get richer the poor get poorer. This is why patronizing handouts on our part will not solve the problem. As well as percentage offerings of our GNP we shall need to sacrifice possessions and rights which we have long regarded as legally ours. And if we are not willing to see the writing on the wall and opt now for the way of sacrifice, the time may come when these possessions shall be forcibly taken from us. The mills of God grind slowly, it is said, but they grind exceeding small.

Let me conclude with another boyhood memory. When I was ten years of age, living in Victoria, I was given a book for my birthday. It was called *Our New Possession.* It was a description of Papua, that German colony in New Guinea which had recently been given to Australia, following World War I, just as Western Samoa came to be possessed by New Zealand. In those days l was puffed up with pride with this new possession. It was still the days of the British Empire on which the sun never set. Not only has that Empire disappeared in the half century since then, but something more has changed. If a superpower today marches into another territory and claims it as its new possession, it can no longer announce it as proudly as it did in the

19th century. It is required to justify its action to the outraged moral conscience of the world – as in Vietnam, Abyssinia, Nicaragua, Namibia and Cambodia. And the social conscience of the world is going to win. Today it is no longer considered morally right to take possessions from others.

Tomorrow it will no longer be right to hold on to possessions which exceed one's fair share of the Earth's resources. In order that we may advance to that time of greater social justice, in which the love of one's fellow human is not simply an ideal but a reality – and advance to it in a peaceful and orderly way – we must recover the ancient significance of sacrifice and learn how to sacrifice our possessions for the common good.

CHAPTER THREE



SACRIFICING PEOPLE

Sacrifice, as we have seen, is a very ancient and widespread practice, in its most primitive forms the blood sacrifice of both humans and animals constituted its very essence, for the ancient words for sacrifice literally meant 'to slaughter'. From at least two to three thousand years ago the human conscience began to develop a sensitivity about blood sacrifices. They came to be questioned and eventually condemned. This happened not only in the Israelite origins of our own cultural tradition, as a result of their condemnation by the ancient prophets. It also occurred in India, another ancient culture in which blood sacrifice was both dominant and central.

But in the Indian tradition the questioning was more tentative and consequently less effective. Blood sacrifice became explicitly condemned only by the Buddhists and the Jains. Asoka, who ruled much of India in the third century before the Christian era, and who was the only Buddhist king to do so, declared a royal edict. It stands inscribed in rock to this day: 'No animal maybe slaughtered for sacrifice.'

It did not stop there. The Buddhists, along with the Jains, developed the doctrine of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence. They fostered an attitude of respect for, and kinship with, all living or sentient beings from humans down to the humblest creature. Not only animal sacrifice but tribal warfare and the ill treatment of animals was outlawed. As Buddhism spread through the Orient, it is said to have exerted a remarkable humanising influence on the entire history of Asia. Respect for life became one of the chief virtues.

The Jains took this virtue to an almost ridiculous extreme. The first of the five vows taken by the Jain monk was this: 'I renounce the killing of all living things.' It became the practice for the Jain monk to carry a broom to sweep the path on which he was about to tread, lest he inadvertently kill an insect by standing on it.

Buddhism did not go to such extremes but the respect for human life which it fostered not only had the effect of softening the earlier warlike character of Tibetans and Mongolians but it meant that Buddhist societies, on the whole, have had a better record of peace and non-violence than either the Christian or Muslim societies. Moreover, Buddhist respect for the life of fellow creatures tended to cause them to become vegetarian, though this never became an absolute.

Eventually Buddhism almost disappeared from India, the land of its origin,

but only because some of its chief emphases were reabsorbed into the evolving Hindu tradition. Thus the doctrine of *ahimsa* became permanently embedded in Hinduism. In our own century Mahatma Gandhi became the most impressive and effective exponent of this doctrine.

Thus, it was not only in the Judaeo-Christian tradition that blood sacrifices came to be questioned and ultimately condemned. The human species is such that it has shown the capacity to develop sensitivity to the point where it can no longer tolerate the taking of life, even if this might appear to be for the very highest of motives, namely the worship of the gods.

This does not mean there is no room for further development of our sensitivity. Far from it. l shall later be pointing to the most serious examples in the modern world where we are being challenged. Here let me simply cite the way in which we practise blood sports and take them for granted. The few who protest are often treated as cranks and extremists, like the Jains. l have read that, as recently as 100 years ago in the Australian outback, it was not uncommon for the Aboriginals to be hunted and shot by European settlers as a kind of sport suitable for boring Sunday afternoons. That would not be tolerated today. We find it hard to believe that it ever occurred. Perhaps in the same way the time will come when wild game hunting, duck shooting and similar sports will be more than the sensitivity of our descendants will be able to tolerate.

For similar reasons, the time is coming when vegetarianism may well come to replace the eating of flesh. Certainly the eating of *human* flesh fills us all with revulsion, even though it was practised in this country and in Polynesia less than 200 years ago. Up until that time in those cultures it was not only accepted as right and proper, but the eating of human flesh was believed to be a way of absorbing hidden spiritual values. In other words it had a religious dimension. It reflected those ancient times in which the flesh of the animal sacrifice was shared as a sacred communion meal. The way in which this is symbolically, and even verbally, preserved to this day in the highest act of Christian worship is altogether quite remarkable.

I mention these things only that we may be reminded that we are much closer to the phenomenon of animal sacrifice, and even human sacrifice, than we usually realise. We may take some pride in the degree of human sensitivity which we have already developed, but there is no room for any easy optimism. What we call civilization sometimes appears to be only a thin and fragile veneer hiding a strong residue of our primitive past, in what we may call our unconscious corporate psyche.

In the late 15th century there was a dramatic encounter between an ancient type of civilization and what was fast becoming modern civilization. It occurred in Central America, with the Spanish invasion. Today there is considerable criticism of the Conquistadores because of the way they destroyed the Aztec civilization, partly by force, but even more by the diseases such as smallpox, which they inadvertently brought with them.

But however much we may want to admire the Aztec building achievements and certain aspects of their culture, none of us would deplore the fact that the Spanish brought to an end the ritual of human sacrifice which was such a central feature of their religious practices. In the last rebuilding of their

great temple in 1487, it has been reckoned, as a conservative estimate, that no less than 20,000 people were sacrificed in the space of four days. This may have been partly due to the fact that a series of military expeditions had led to the buildup of an immense concentration of prisoners of war, These could have constituted a threat to their captors if steps were not taken to reduce their numbers. On the other hand, one of the reasons for making war on their neighbours in the first place was to provide a continuous supply of living human hearts to be sacrificed to the sun god in the appropriate ritual. According to the Aztec view of reality, all life depended on the sun. In order to keep the sun in the sky it had to be fed a diet of living human hearts. In their view there seems to have been nothing crude or cruel about this ritual, as there is for us. They believed they were bestowing a religious honour on the sacrificial victims, for they were destined to become stars in the sky. To us, of course, such religious ritual not only appears to be magical hocus pocus, but it displays a lamentable lack of sensitivity in the treatment of fellow humans.

Although such practices cannot be condemned too strongly, we must nevertheless try to appreciate the religious motivations which lay behind them. I shall try to do this by going back to the one or two examples of human sacrifice which have survived in the biblical tradition, for here we are on more familiar ground.

Take, for example, the well known story of how Abraham was called by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac, Of course, in this case a ram was eventually sacrificed in place of Isaac and modern readers of the Bible heave a sigh of relief. Even the biblical storyteller shows some sensitivity on the matter and tries to make excuses for God. Right at the very beginning he says God was only testing Abraham and implies that God did not really intend the sacrifice to take place. In today's intellectual climate we cannot morally defend even a God who puts people through this kind of test, let alone one who calls for human sacrifice.

To understand this ancient biblical story, however, we must not jump in and pass judgement too quickly. In one sense the phenomenon of human sacrifice is only incidental to this story. The real point of this narrative is to portray, in the most vivid form possible, what it means to be committed in obedient faith to the divine will. Abraham finds himself in a most frightening dilemma. Is he to obey God, even though it means sacrificing his son? Is he to save his son, even though it means flying in the face of God?

The kind of dilemma so starkly portrayed here is by no means absent from our world, particularly where the lives of others are dependent on the decisions we make. We sometimes speak of this dilemma as a choice between two evils. But where the lesser of these two evils involves the death of at least one person, it can never be taken easily. Now if we were really to believe in God in the way in which Abraham did, and in the way Abraham's storyteller did, then the choice Abraham made, viz. to proceed as divinely commanded, was the only possible choice.

That is why this particular biblical story fascinated Soren Kierkegaard. that tragic Danish thinker of the early 19th century, who is often termed the 'father of existentialism'. One of his best and shortest books, *Fear and*

Trembling, is a series of penetrating reflections on this story of Abraham. Kierkegaard calls the theme of this story 'the teleological suspension of ethics'. It poses this question: Are there not times when we face critical decisions which call for the suspension of ethics? It occurs on those rare occasions when the highest end we seek to reach (we may call it the doing of the will of God) conflicts with the highest known ethical demand. Then that ethical demand must be temporarily suspended it must take second place to the call of God. That is ultimate. and that according to Kierkegaard, is the very stuff of which religious faith is made. It is an act of obedience by personal decision which is prepared to transcend, if necessary, conventional morality.

Of course, to appreciate to the full what Kierkegaard was getting at, we need to remember that he lived at a time when the most influential philosophers of his day, Immanuel Kant and Johann Fichte, appeared to be reducing the eternal truth of religion to a set of ethical requirements. Kierkegaard was reacting against their reductionism and was doing his best to salvage religious devotion as something which is independent of, and beyond, any set of moral imperatives.

In our world today, an increasing number of people would probably agree with those philosophers of 200 years ago, that the highest demands made upon us are moral ones; that the religions imperative is none other than the moral imperative. Our problem is trying to decide whether or not, with Kierkegaard, there is a religious imperative to be distinguished from the moral one in this. We cannot readily conceive. as the ancient biblical storyteller could, any situation in which the divine will of God would demand a human sacrifice, as it did of Abraham.

So let me take another biblical story of human sacrifice, much less well known than that of Abraham. In this, the sacrifice did take place. The prophet Samuel sent King Saul to quell the Amalekites. They are described as a marauding nomad people who kept making terrorist raids into Israelite territory. The prophet called Saul to a holy war. It was to be an ancient jihad fought in the name of God. This meant that all prisoners taken and all booty captured belonged to God and had to be delivered to God as a great sacrifice. Hebrew had a special word for this kind of wholesale slaughter and destruction which makes it clear it was seen as an act of religious devotion. Saul was successful, but he did not follow the prescriptions. He spared the life of Agag, the King of the Amalekites. He also kept for Israelite use the best of the domestic animals they captured. Then Samuel arrived on the scene. He was furious. He denounced Saul as a man unworthy to be the Lord's anointed king because he had not fulfilled the requirements of holy war. Samuel called for the captured king to be brought to them. Then – the Bible tells us with brutal simplicity – 'Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the Lord'.

What is our reaction to this story? We are repelled by the action of the holy priest. Our sympathies are with Saul. At least he showed a little humanity. From our moral view he did the right thing in sparing Agag. But he did the *right* thing for the *wrong* reasons! From the point of view of *our* morality Samuel did a dreadful thing. But he did the *wrong* thing for the *right*

reasons! This story helps us to distinguish between religious motivation and morality.

It serves to underline Kierkegaard's point. Morality varies from time to time and from culture to culture. There are no unchangeable moral laws. Moral laws are simply the conventions of behaviour universally accepted at a particular time.

That is why there is something higher – the religious imperative. It is only by means of the religious imperative that the moral conventions can themselves be held up to judgement. It was the religious imperative which gave the ancient prophets the power to question the conventional morality of blood sacrifice. The religious imperative is the highest we know. In our tradition we commonly call it the will of God.

Because we live in a different moral context from the ancient biblical storyteller, we are better able to appreciate the very real dilemma he was portraying in Abraham by translating the situation into one of our own current problems. Let us consider the case of a newly pregnant woman who has unintentionally conceived and in undesirable circumstances. Is she to have an abortion? Or is she to bring to birth a child which will face from the beginning more than the usual number of handicaps?

Let me make clear that l am not an anti-abortionist. l believe it begs the question to refer to the foetus as an 'unborn child'. It is only by the process of birth that we can at last speak of the existence of a child. The simplistic arguments and absolute dogmatism of many anti-abortionists hide the real issue.

But neither am I happy with some of the arguments and attitudes of the pro-abortion lobby. A foetus is not a child, but it is a child-in-the-making. The present occurrence in western society of large-scale legal abortion does mean that there is only a very thin line between our society and those ancient societies which regularly disposed of unwanted children. They were prepared to do it immediately after birth. We are only prepared to do it soon after conception. The parallel should make us very uncomfortable.

Yet there is a line of difference, though a thin one. And there are circumstances in which a pregnant mother faces a dilemma very close to that of Abraham. In that dilemma a choice has to be made. It is a choice which is not for the community as a whole to make by imposing its prohibition. Only the individual can adequately make that choice. That was the point Kierkegaard kept making. The most that society can do is to emphasize the holy, sacred character of that choice, to give guidance and counsel, and to respect the sincerity and integrity of the person making the choice.

Our ongoing moral concern with the phenomenon of abortion is only the first of three examples I want to take to show that human sacrifice remains a tragic reality in the modern world. We delude ourselves if we think human sacrifice was a practice which belonged to the crude primitive cultures and that it has long since been stamped out. Easily the most shocking example of human sacrifice ever conceived and executed in all human history took place not in the ancient world, but in the 20th century. It makes the Aztec

look complete amateurs. I refer to the Nazi extermination of their enemies and unwanted citizens in the gas ovens and concentration camps of Auschwitz, Belsen and so on. The Jews know it as the sacrifice of the six million – the approximate number of their fellow Jews who perished. But of course communists, homosexuals and others also lost their lives. A total of 13 million has been claimed. It is significant that the term Holocaust has come to be used for this gross act of inhumanity, for that term comes from the ancient sacrifices. It is the Greek equivalent of the biblical word for 'whole burnt offering'.

One of the most moving moments of my life was to visit – some 20 years ago – the Memorial to the Six Million, which had then been recently built on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It is a very simple but impressively designed monument. From afar it looks like a giant concrete slab. As one comes closer one sees that the walls beneath the slab are made of round stone boulders. They look like human bodies, heaped together, being crushed to death by an immense weight. One enters through giant doors into an almost empty space, dimly lit. As one becomes accustomed to the light, one sees on the floor a stylized map of Eastern Europe. There, are marked and named the death and concentration camps where the Holocaust took place.

Why did it ever occur? Today it is as hard for us to believe as the shooting of Aboriginals for sport. It simply shows the devilish wickedness of the Nazis, we say. Of course that's true, but its not the whole truth. The Holocaust was only the frightful climax of a long, drawn out process of anti-Semitic hatred in which the whole Christian world has been involved.

That is why, in 1985, the 40th anniversary of the cessation of the Holocaust, the Bishop of Salisbury called upon Christians to abrogate and disown the anti-Semitic elements in the New Testament. Many Christians are not even aware that they are there – but they are. And out of them grew the Christian anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages, which caused the Jews to be hounded and persecuted as God killers.

It was only because anti-Semitism had a long history in European Christendom that the Nazis were able to seize upon it and use it to whip up emotional support for their programme.

The Jews became the scapegoat on which was heaped the blame for all the ills which had befallen the Christian Aryan race. Dealing with the 'Jewish problem' became the way to solve all problems. And the only way to deal with the Jewish problem was to exterminate them, to offer them as a sacrifice to God (who was conceived as a pure Aryan). As this entered ever more deeply into Nazi ideology it became a fanatical obsession, a form of social psychosis. It is said that even in his last days in his bunker in Berlin, Hitler was still giving his attention to the way in which the Holocaust could be perfected. And even if he was to lose the war and soon to die, he would go down in history as the new saviour of mankind. That's madness for you!

Let us not think it is a madness in which we have clean hands, a madness in which we would never allow ourselves to become implicated. Many of the Germans who got caught up in the web of Nazi ideology were people just like you and me, people just like the millions who are today being sucked into a madness which is still gathering momentum. It is the madness by

which we are constructing implements to destroy the world. It is significant that we have also given the name holocaust to the possible coming global disaster – the Nuclear Holocaust. If this ever happens, as pray God it may not, it will be a disaster which completely overshadows the Nazi Holocaust. It would be the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, the sacrifice of the human species and of planet Earth itself.

Now all agree this would be the final unthinkable disaster. Nobody wants it. But how plausible are the arguments being used to support the construction of the ever greater arsenals which will make that dreadful possibility come closer! We find it hard to counter the arguments of self defence and deterrence, and to realise the utter madness of the direction in which we are going. Perhaps Sigmund Freud was right. Hidden in the unconscious psyche of us all is a death wish. If we cannot be immortal but must die, then, unconsciously, we shall see to it that the whole world dies with us.

Or perhaps, to understand this current madness, we should go back and search for the reasons why primitive man, for no clearly rational reasons, obeyed a deep psychological urge to sacrifice. Since those days we have thankfully become more sensitive to the human condition. Our moral values have changed. Yet we have not been able to rid ourselves of this deep urge to sacrifice.

For what all the plausible arguments about deterrents and self defence amount to is this. Unless the arms race is simply a bit of bluff – which I believe it is not – then we are ready to justify an action in which we shall sacrifice millions of our so called enemies in order that we may have one last chance to live. vain though it may be.

Because of what has already happened in this 20th century, because of what is happening, because of what yet may happen, we moderns are in no position to criticize primitive peoples for their practice of human sacrifice. We have already done it, and we contemplate yet doing it on a much grander scale. We may perfect it!

What is the answer to this most serious malady of ours – the urge to sacrifice others? This I shall try to deal with in the final chapter, examining the concept of self sacrifice.

CHAPTER FOUR

SACRIFICING OURSELVES

You may have noticed that the previous chapters on the theme of sacrifice seem to have been taking us in two opposite directions. The last chapter, 'Sacrificing People', ended with this observation: we have long since abandoned ritualistic blood sacrifice of either animals or humans. Yet the most alarming and wholesale acts of human sacrifice ever to take place in human history have occurred in this century, and we are even contemplating more massive acts of sacrifice to come. This is an act of sacrifice which cannot be condemned too strongly – and yet we find ourselves being drawn back to it and even giving our assent to it, almost in spite of ourselves.

But in the chapter, 'Sacrificing Possessions', I concluded with this observation: to advance social justice in a way which makes the love of one's fellow humans a reality we need to learn how to sacrifice our possessions for the common good. This is an aspect of the ancient ritual of sacrifice which we can applaud and which we need to recover.

I believe there is a very good reason why we have come to have such divergent views on these two components of sacrifice even though our ancient forbears were quite unaware of any inherent conflict between them and saw them simply as one. For them, they were the two sides of the same coin. This reason incidentally also explains why we keep finding it difficult to respond to the aspect of sacrifice we morally applaud while we are frequently being tempted back to the aspect of sacrifice which we morally deplore.

When we are sacrificing our possessions we are not only voluntarily surrendering something which is ours to give, but we are giving, as it were, something of ourselves. What we sacrifice is part of our extended self. For example, if we deny ourselves some pleasure in order to redirect our money, i.e. part of our livelihood, to such a venture as Operation Hope — we are not only sacrificing our possessions, we are also sacrificing ourselves.

In the phenomenon of blood sacrifice it is quite different. When an animal is slaughtered on the altar – and even more so when a human is slain – in order that we may reap some spiritual benefit, it is not really us so much as the sacrificial victim who suffers the greater loss. In other words, it is not the sacrificer who is experiencing the sacrifice of self, but the person being sacrificed. That is made very clear to us in the case of Jephthah's daughter, much clearer to us than it was to the ancients. The life of this young woman

was forfeited because her father had taken a vow to God. If God gave him the victory in battle over the Ammonites, then he would offer up to God as a burnt offering the first one to come out of his door to meet him on his return. Perhaps he expected a slave, who in that culture did not count. It turned out to be his daughter. He carried out his vow. But though he was the sacrificer it was not he but his daughter who showed itself – sacrifice, willingly going to her death to fulfil the reckless vow of her foolish father.

It is only because of the many centuries of slow development in moral sensitivity that today we can draw such a clear distinction between sacrificing our possessions and sacrificing the lives of others. In ancient times no such distinction was made for the simple reason that animals and even human beings were regarded as the possessions of the sacrificer. They were part of one's extended self, not only did a shepherd feel quite free to slaughter his sheep as required, but parents saw a young and unmarried son or daughter as a personal possession, over whom they had absolute rights.

That was even the case with the ancient story of Abraham and Isaac, which I briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed we moderns approach that story with such different premises that we usually no longer interpret it in the way the ancient storyteller intended. We naturally assume it was because Abraham loved his son so deeply that he was reluctant to slay him sacrificially in obedience to the divine command. Abraham's fatherly concern is of course an element in the story. But there was another, even more important, reason why Abraham was reluctant. In the context in which this story is placed, Abraham had been told by God that he would become the father of a great nation. Since Abraham had already reached old age and was childless, he found that divine promise rather difficult to believe. But he did show faith and he set out for the new world. At last his son Isaac was born to him. But while his son was still a lad, God called him to sacrifice his son. It didn't make sense. It was not just the welfare of his son which concerned him. It was Abraham's own future which was being jeopardized. How could he become the father of a great nation if he sacrificed his son, particularly when because of his age, he had no hope of fathering any more? That was the dilemma, indeed the absurd paradox which he faced.

When we read this ancient story within its larger context we find it is not only an example of sacrificing another. It is also an example of sacrificing oneself, in this case Abraham's own eternal future. That is how the story teller intended it and why he commended the faith of Abraham. Abraham did what was required of him in spite of the apparent absurdity. His obedient faith was divinely recognised. According to the culture of the day the story had a happy ending and Abraham became the father of a great nation. Indeed for Jew, Christian and Muslim, he became the perfect model of a man of faith. The lasting truth in this story of sacrifice is that Abraham was ready to sacrifice himself. That aspect of the story by which he was ready to sacrifice the life of another person is what we must today morally and spiritually renounce. It has for us become grossly immoral ever to sacrifice another for our own material or spiritual benefit.

Our ancient forbears were not yet in a position to analyse morally the ritual of blood sacrifice which they had inherited from the times of its primaeval

evolution. But we are in a position to do so – to disentangle the component of self-sacrifice from the component of sacrificing another for our spiritual benefit. It is only in the former component – the sacrifice of oneself – that the permanent significance and value of sacrifice is to be found. Only the sacrifice of oneself can be commended as a moral value.

Why is it then, in an age when the idea of ritualistic human sacrifice fills us with horror, that we nevertheless find the human race prepared to perpetuate secular human sacrifice on such a grand scale? Perhaps we find some clues to the answer by referring to a peculiar Jewish ritual which came to be practised in the last few centuries before the Common Era.

On the annual day of Atonement – the holiest day of the Jewish year, and one which has remained so in Jewish circles right down to the present – it was the practice of the high priest, in the course of a more complex sacrificial ritual, to take a particular goat chosen by lot, to lay his hands upon it, and to confess over it all the iniquities of the whole people of Israel. It was as if all the national guilt was being quite literally transferred to the goat. Then the goat was led away into the eastern wilderness across the Jordan. The Biblical sacrificial code says, 'The goat shall carry away on his head to a solitary land all their iniquities.' It is because of this practice that we use the term scapegoat to this day. Even in secular usage. we commonly apply the term to anyone upon whose shoulders somebody else tries to shift the blame for their own sins. Here is an ancient sacrificial practice which actually dramatises with unmistakeable clarity this widespread human phenomenon. When we should be sacrificing *ourselves* to make atonement for our sins, we try to transfer the guilt (and the appropriate sacrificial act) to someone else. We make someone else pay the penalty.

Carl Jung, that great pioneer in the field of human psychology, offers us an explanation of why we so often unconsciously try to make others the scapegoats for our own faults. Indeed, if his analysis of the human psyche is correct, we may have here an important psychological reason as to why blood sacrifices evolved in the first place. Jung coined the term 'shadow' to refer to the darker side of what goes on in the unconscious depths of our psyche. We can think of it as the residue in us of our pre-human animal origins. The shadow is a powerful motivating and even creative force, but it is quite uncontrolled by any moral considerations. We all have a shadow but very often we are unwilling to recognise it. The more strongly we reject our shadow (according to Jung) the more inclined we are to project it on to someone else. It is an unconscious mechanism by which we try to protect our ego-identity from the inroads of moral criticism.

To openly confess that we ourselves are guilty of some attitude or behaviour of which we strongly disapprove may be more than we can mentally cope with. It would require swallowing our pride, and a sacrifice of our ego, which requires a good deal of personal maturity. Instead of pursuing that course, we refuse to recognise the failing in ourselves and we project it on to someone else. Then we are free to condemn it for all we are worth. Mentally, verbally, and occasionally even literally, we slaughter or sacrifice that person. So whenever we feel strongly antagonistic towards a person or a group, without being able to supply very convincing reasons for our hostility,

and we refuse to listen to rational argument, the likelihood is that that person or group has some characteristics which we unconsciously know to be in ourselves. We refuse to recognise them, so we project our shadow on to somebody else. Let us look at some examples.

The prospect of homosexual law reform brought about a very emotional national debate. Psychologists have been warning us for some time that the heterosexuals who become most irrationally opposed to homosexual activity are those who are inwardly unsure of their own sexual orientation and who already experience some ambivalence. Those heterosexuals, on the other hand, who are able to discuss the pros and cons of such legislation in a calm and rational way, are quite confident of their sexual orientation and do not feel threatened by it. In a society where homosexuality has long met with strong social disapproval and prohibition, there is very strong motivation for refusing to recognise in oneself any signs of variance from what is supposedly the norm. As a compensatory form of self protection many people become quite irrationally antagonistic towards the known homosexuals, on whom they now project their own shadow.

Whenever the projection of the psychic shadow takes place at the community level, there is even less rational restraint than at the individual level. It leads to persecution and even blood sacrifice, such as lynchings. Jung himself regarded the Nazi persecution of the Jews as the projection of the corporate shadow of the German people on a minority who could then be blamed for all the ills which had befallen the German nation. They had become the great scapegoat of that time – and it led to the Holocaust, a perverted form of sacrifice on a mass scale.

If Jung were alive today it is likely that he would interpret the confrontation between the two superpowers in the same way. Both are projecting their own corporate shadows on the other. Neither of them are willing to become in any way subject to the other. That means that each of them, secretly or unconsciously, wants to be in the international driving seat. It would be too much to claim that publicly, so each accuses the other of wanting to rule the world. Each accuses the other of increasing the arms race. Each speaks of the urgent need to provide adequate self defence, but each constructs massive weapons of destructive offence. The situation calls for radical self sacrifice but all we hear is the readiness to sacrifice others for one’s own material benefit.

In the human condition from time immemorial there has been strong resistance to the recognition of ourselves as we really are. We cannot face our own faults and weaknesses. We hate losing face. Our shadow we project on to others. While true self knowledge does make us more ready to accept self sacrifice, we are always being tempted to transfer that sacrifice to others. We want others to suffer the loss we ought to be sustaining ourselves. So we are prepared to sacrifice others that we may retain our pride, preserve our freedom or reach some kind of fulfilment.

Even when we come to recognise the supreme value to be found in self sacrifice there is still one warning to be borne in mind We must not go to the other extreme and take perverted delight in sacrificing ourselves willy nilly. There is no value in self sacrifice for its own sake. The value of self sacrifice

is to be found in the particular cause which is being promoted. It is important to remember that, as well as having a duty towards our fellow humans, we have a duty to ourselves.

This is particularly well brought out in the biblical commandment which I discussed in an earlier chapter. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' As this comes from the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, it is just as important for the Jew as it is to the Christian. Jewish scholars often point out that Christians frequently misread this commandment and interpret it as saying: 'You shall love your neighbour more than yourself.' It does not say that. It commands us to love our neighbours equally with ourselves. There is no virtue in denigrating ourselves. We should no more denigrate ourselves than we should denigrate others. Each of us also is a human person, whose spiritual and even material welfare we have the duty to promote.

The need for self sacrifice arises when there are concerns and issues which must, by their very nature, take precedence over our own purely personal concerns. Perhaps this can be illustrated most clearly by looking at those examples where self-sacrifice may involve the surrendering of life itself.

Here, at the outset, we must say that this supreme form of self sacrifice can be morally justified only in supreme circumstances. None of us has the right to end our lives for trivial reasons or unworthy causes. Those millions in the armed forces who died in World War Two quite rightly had no intention of being killed, if they could possibly help it. Yet, generally speaking, they all judged the circumstances to be so grave and critical that it was necessary to take that risk. On our war memorials we say they paid the supreme sacrifice. We quote the words of the Bible: 'Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.' However much we deplore the rise of those circumstances and think of the war dead as a shattering human waste, we nevertheless rightly honour the memory of those who died and regard their actions as a form of self sacrifice. Note, however, it was not sought for its own sake, and it was for a cause they judged to be worth it.

A somewhat different element enters in the case of those Buddhist monks and nuns who committed self immolation in the streets of Saigon during the Vietnam war in the hope that it would promote the cause of peace. Here, however much we may wish to respect their decision and their courage, we may have reservations as to whether this kind of self sacrifice is to he commended or not. This is largely because the actual death was self-imposed rather than being brought about by others.

Even the New Testament has a warning about this kind of self immolation. Curiously enough it may well be because Buddhism had actually reached Greece by the time of Christian origins and a Buddhist had actually performed this ancient kind of self sacrifice in the streets of Athens, Although we cannot be sure about this, there is a small amount of evidence to support it and, if so, this may lie behind the famous reference in St Paul's hymn on love: 'Though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, I achieve nothing.' That was a warning against unnecessary self sacrifice.

It was a warning which Christians needed to heed in the early centuries. For during the period of the fierce persecutions of Christians by the Roman authorities, some over zealous Christians were tempted to seek out

martyrdom, as if it were the supreme virtue, no matter how it came about. It is recorded that on one occasion, when the persecuting crowds were on the rampage in Alexandria, the great Christian scholar Origen was only prevented from bringing about his own martyrdom by his mother, who hid his clothes so that he could not venture outdoors.

To understand the significance and value of self sacrifice we must steer a middle course between two extremes. At one extreme we reject all forms of self sacrifice and we end up by sacrificing others. At the other extreme we seek self sacrifice for its own sake and so do ourselves an unjust and unwarranted harm. Self sacrifice – whether it is of our pride, possessions or very existence – becomes a supreme virtue when we do not shrink from it in circumstances where it becomes a necessity because of a higher good. In there circumstances it must always be left to those most closely involved to make the final decision as to whether the higher good warrants whatever it is they are being challenged to sacrifice. That is why it is never for us to tell others what they must sacrifice and when to do it. When Captain Oates walked out into the blizzard knowing he would never return to his companions in the tent, he wanted to give them one last chance to return to base in safety, unencumbered by the burden he felt he had become to them. The world, ever since. has honoured his act of self sacrifice.

In this season of Lent we are nearing the time of year when the Christian world honours what it has long taken to be the prototype of all self-sacrifice – the death of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion at the hands of the Roman authorities. It is significant that the cross became the chief symbol of Christianity. It spells out vividly the enduring significance of sacrifice – the sacrifice of self. One of the New Testament documents, the Letter to the Hebrews, sets out to expound the death of Jesus as a sacrifice – a sacrifice to end all ritual sacrifice.

A tremendous amount of Christian thought through the centuries has been devoted to the sacrificial significance of Jesus's death. Much of it is no longer relevant. Some of it even has to be abrogated. Christians, after all, are no more immune than other humans to the common refusal to accept self sacrifice. The death of Jesus on the cross often came to be interpreted as the one great sacrifice which now relieved Christians of the necessity of sacrificing themselves. Here the projection mechanism was at work again. It is true that Christians have universally acknowledged themselves to be sinners. But the tragic consequences of our sinful failures – the penalty to be paid for them – we have too often simply projected on to the man on the cross. The sacrifice of self which we are being continually challenged to make we have transferred to the Christ figure. That is far from being the whole of the New Testament message.

It is true that Jesus of Nazareth did not shrink from the sacrifice he was called to make, even though he did not seek it for its own sake. It is true that he set forth the supreme example of self sacrifice. But, according to the Gospel teaching, he also said that if we would be his followers we too must take up a cross – our own cross. His act of self sacrifice does not relieve us of the necessity all through life, to sacrifice ourselves. No modern Christian demonstrated this more clearly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. April 9, 1985, was

the 40th anniversary of his martyrdom in a German forest by Hitler's orders.

In this short series of studies on the theme of sacrifice I have tried to show that there are very good reasons why this concept from ancient and even primitive religion has left a permanent deposit in our common secular language. I have tried to show, in the space available, what a rich concept it is, and how multifaceted it is both in thought and in practice, There are many aspects of ancient and traditional sacrifice which we must not only condemn but also do our best to avoid. Because of the nature of the human condition. they have a way of reappearing even when we assume them to be obsolete. But there are also aspects of sacrifice which are enduring. Chief of these is the challenge to sacrifice ourselves whenever the circumstances warrant it.

If we are to become whole and mature persons we need to acknowledge ourselves for what we really are and that means sacrificing our pride. If we are to build healthy human relationships in family, in industry, in civic and national affairs, we must sacrifice purely personal interests (such as material goods) in order to promote the common good. In international affairs we may have to sacrifice national pride, and even our national income, in the interests of promoting international peace and well being. The permanent value of sacrifice is that it is a continual challenge to each of us personally. If we respond, it can lead to new hope, to greater social justice, to peace and to ultimate wholeness.

This indeed is the heart of the Christian message.