

Charles Andersen  
Dr. Laura Grillo  
Ritual & Ceremony MS 603  
Winter Quarter 2003

PANEL PRESENTATION  
KILLING AND SACRIFICE: A TOXIC RITUAL TRADITION

Beneath the scorching sun lay the royal tombs of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur, which were excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in 1929. Amazingly, along with the dead kings were buried their queens and dozens of attendants neatly laid out in order to provide service to the king/god in the afterlife. As quoted in Joseph Campbell's *Masks of God, Vol. I*, Woolley writes,

Clearly, these people were not wretched slaves killed as oxen might be killed, but persons held in honor, wearing their robes of office, and coming, one hopes, voluntarily to a rite which would in their belief be but a passing from one world to another, from the service of a god on earth to that of the same god in another sphere...If the king, then, was a god, he did not die as men die, but was translated; and it might therefore not be a hardship but a privilege for those of his court to accompany their master and continue in his service [409].

In conclusion, he says,

It is safe to assume that those who were to be sacrificed went down alive into the pit. That they were dead, or at least unconscious, when the earth was flung in and trampled down on the top of them is an equally safe assumption..., they are in such good order and alignment that we are driven to suppose that after they were lying unconscious someone entered the pit and gave the final touches to their arrangement.

As demonstrated by this little vignette, killing and sacrifice are aspects of the religious and political life of people from as far back as the dawn of civilization. The burial sites of the Ur kings are a reminder that there was a time when religion and politics were not separate but intimately interconnected. The purpose of this presentation is to examine some of the various rituals of killing and sacrifice employed in human civilizations and to look briefly at some theories about why killing and sacrifice is both pervasive and persistent even today in our own culture.

No one can state for certain when killing and sacrifice became a part of human culture. Campbell suggests earlier in his book that,

Neanderthal and Solo Man therefore, may have practiced some form of ritual cannibalism in connection with an early version of the headhunt; and if so, the formula should perhaps be carried back even to the period of Plesianthropus, who killed and beheaded men as well as beasts—in which case, this grim cult might reasonably be proposed as the earliest religious rite of the human species [394].

If Campbell is correct in his assessment, ritual killing and sacrifice may have been part of human development for the better part of a half million years. Certainly, it hasn't existed entirely in the form of cannibalism, but has transformed into human sacrifice, animal sacrifice and ultimately into spiritualized/sublimated forms of metaphoric sacrifice.

Some of the forms of human sacrifice have been in the form of regicide. Sir James Frazier has identified three primary forms of regicide: 1) kings killed when their strength fails, 2) kings killed at the end of a fixed term and 3) mock sacrifice of a temporary king, as was done in Babylon.

A very disturbing form of sacrificial killing of humans is described by Joseph Campbell in the *Power of Myth* [106]

There is a ritual associated with the men's societies in New Guinea that actually enacts the planting society myth of death, resurrection and cannibalistic consumption. There is a sacred field with drums going, and chants going and then pauses. This goes on for four or five days, on and on. Rituals are boring you know, they just wear you out, and then you break through to something else.

At last comes the great moment. There has been a celebration of real sexual orgy, the breaking of all rules. The young boys who are being initiated into manhood are now to have their first sexual experience. There is a great shed of enormous logs supported by two uprights. A young woman comes in ornamented as a deity, and she is brought to lie down in this place beneath the great roof. The boys, six or so, with the drums going and chanting going, one after another, have their first experience of intercourse with the girl. And when the last boy is with her in full embrace, the supports are withdrawn, the logs drop and the couple is killed. There is the union of male and female again, as they were in the beginning, before the separation took place. There is the union of begetting and death. They are both the same thing.

Then the little couple is pulled out and roasted and eaten that very evening. The ritual is the repetition of the original act of the killing of a god, followed by the coming of food from the dead savior.

When we think of bloody human sacrifices there is the ritual killing of sacrificial victims, such as the Aztecs performed by the thousands on slaves and captives. Of course there was throughout the world sacrificial practices involving the killing of children and the offering of virgins. Other less known acts of ritual killing include the fourteenth century massacres of the Mongol Timur the Lame, who liked to build enormous pyramids by piling up the heads of his victims. One such pyramid outside the city of Delhi consisted of more than 80,000 heads. Of course, the state sponsored killings of the Romans and the Nazis, while not necessarily religious are certainly ritualistic on an unimaginable scale.

So why the need for sacrifice? In the preparation for the panel, some suggestions included essays by Walter Burkert, and Rene Girard. *In The Function and Transformation of Ritual Killing*, Burkert suggests that people need to work out their aggression, while Girard in *Violence and the Sacred Sacrifice* attributes the need to work out our tendencies for violence. However, I found that Burkert has a much sounder proposition in a more recent work, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*. Echoing the ideas of Freud in such works as *Civilization And It's Discontents*, he sees the purpose of religion as relieving anxiety.

Burkert's thesis is essentially that people have always been anxious about death and the vagaries of nature. Religious practice helps to relieve those anxieties for a while, and sacrifice, particularly of a scape-goat, has proven to be satisfying in that regard. He analyzes the development in a circumspect and logical way that I found to be quite compelling.

Unfortunately, the role of anxiety relief continues to be played out in modern culture in such ritual practices as capital punishment. Because people can not or do not wish to deal with the ambiguities and complexities of unrepentant criminals and heinous crimes, many feel relief when such persons are removed from society by extermination. My contention is that such state sponsored killings are sacrificial in nature and clearly demonstrate how little we have evolved in the past half million years. At least we are not eating those we execute.

In summary, let me close with words from *The Myth of the Goddess; Evolution of an Image* by Baring and Cashford:

If we try to understand what has gone wrong in the thinking that leads to human or animal sacrifice, we might put it in the context of humanity's irrevocable disorientation on becoming aware of the fact of mortality. That is the moment when spirit is born. Up to that moment there is not a union of spirit and nature; there is simply unity that is unconscious of itself. Thus nature and spirit arise together in the hope that spirit will redeem the nature that is lost in the very act of perceiving it. Humanity's act of becoming aware, that it is a creature distinct from animal and plant, ruptures the wholeness of the divine order by splitting consciousness into a duality of perceiver and perceived. As Hesiod puts it, "When gods and men parted, sacrifice was created." This separation from nature, the condition of the birth of human consciousness, is experienced as a wound that continually challenges us to understand our relation to nature, and to heal the separation in ourselves between our "human" and our "animal" natures [162].

## Bibliography

- Campbell, Joseph *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God* New York, ARKANA, 1959
- Edinger, Edward F. *Ego and Archetype*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1972.
- Eliade, Mircea *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 1: From Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* Trans. Willard R. Trask Chicago, The U of C Press 1978
- Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund *Civilization and Its Discontents* Trans. Joan Riviere, Vol. 54 Great Books of the Western World, Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1952
- Gray, George Buchanan *Sacrifice In the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice* New York, KTAV Publishing House 1971
- Grimes, Ronald L. *Readings In Ritual Studies* New Jersey, Prentice Hall 1996