

## **SACRIFICE AND ECOLOGY: The trajectory of sacrifice as a soteriological paradigm in biblical history and its relevance for the ecological predicament of modernity**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper traces the trajectory of sacrifice as a soteriological paradigm in biblical history and extrapolates its thrust to the modern problem of ecological deterioration. The original rationale of sacrifice is to give of one's substance to the deity in recognition of one's total indebtedness to the constellation of forces which determines one's life. The first born was a substitute for self, the animal for the first born, and its blood for the animal. In time this deeply religious motive was transformed into a mechanical routine to serve the economic and political interests of a ruling elite. At the same time representative suffering became a powerful motif. In the New Testament the paradigm is inverted: not humans offer sacrifices to God, but God sacrifices himself in Christ to humans. The paper argues that the ecological problem is caused by the loss of a sense for the necessity of sacrifice for life in modernity. Nature and society are expected to sacrifice for individual gratification without the right to demand sacrifices in return. While God, the source of the reality which sustains us, is willing to sacrifice so that we can live, he invites us to participate in his sacrifice to make the life of nature and society possible.*

### **1. The aim of this article**

This article is part of a larger research project in which I attempt to trace the trajectories of soteriological paradigms in biblical history and extrapolate their thrust to contemporary issues. The overall aim is to develop a holistic soteriology which is based on four assumptions:

- a) God's ultimate intention is the comprehensive wellbeing of all human beings within the context of the comprehensive wellbeing of their entire social and natural environments,
- b) any deficiency of wellbeing in any dimension of life is the target of God's redemptive concern,
- c) transcendent needs (that is, meaning, acceptability and authority) emerge from immanent needs (that is, psychological, physical, social, political, economic, ecological needs) and have no independent existence, and
- d) God's redemptive action is mediated through human and earthly means.

Trajectories traced previously include the Israelite patriarchs, the Israelite king, covenant and law, and creation (Nürnberger 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1997). The trajectory of the exodus-conquest paradigm is published simultaneously in *Missionalia*.

Methodologically I am guided by historical, social and theological critique. Historical critique assumes that a soteriological paradigm emerged and evolved in history in response to changing constellations of needs. Social critique assumes that religious motifs are used ideologically to legitimate the pursuit of collective self-interest at the expense of others. Theological critique assumes that an under-current of meaning which evolved in biblical

history has to scrutinise and supersede individual texts.

Unfortunately the constraints of a journal paper have not allowed a full treatment of the priesthood and the temple, where social critique would have focussed. We shall begin with the emergence and evolution of the sacrificial paradigm in the Old Testament and Judaism, sketch its transformation in the New Testament and finally apply its thrust to modern political, economic and ecological issues.

### 1. Sacrifice as acknowledgement of ultimate dependence

We can distinguish three roots of the phenomenon of sacrifice. The first is dependency. Human beings are embedded in a constellation of forces on which they depend and which is not under their control. Dependence implies vulnerability. Survival and prosperity are at all times precariously in the balance. As Schleiermacher has observed, it is the awareness (rather than 'feeling') of ultimate dependence which lies at the root of most religions.

Sacrifice is a response to this need. It consists of a symbolic act of subordination under the deity who is believed to be in charge of the life-determining constellation of forces. Sacrifice assumes that the deity might be disposed favourably by signs of human gratitude and servitude, and that the deity's wrath may flare up if human acknowledgement of dependence is not made manifest in some way.

Dependence thus conceived and expressed is ultimate and total. It is the awareness that one owes not this or that, but one's life to the deity. To acknowledge this total indebtedness, one takes a portion of one's substance and commits it to the deity as a symbol of one's entire existence. *Pars pro toto*: a part is given to substitute for the whole. For this reason genuine sacrifice generally involves the best one has, the most precious, even the most vitally important, not something that one can easily dispense with. It must be the first-born, or the first fruit, and it may have no imperfections. More importantly, once dedicated, the dedication must be honoured absolutely. One cannot play with God (Kaminsky 1995:78ff)! This motivation is still operative today in sentiments such as 'My utmost for my highest!' or 'For God only the best is good enough!'

#### *Sacrifice and guilt*

The awe associated with ultimate and total dependence translates into trepidation when guilt comes into the picture. This brings us to the second rationale for sacrifice, atonement. Guilt presupposes that reality is structured by a system of values and norms of which the deity is the author and guardian and which the guilty person or community has transgressed. In essence the rationale is, once again, an act which symbolically acknowledges total dependence and abandons the usurped autonomy which the iniquity had manifested.

Awareness of indebtedness does not only emerge in times of calamity, but also and especially in times of prosperity. Suffering seems to be experienced as a necessary part of existence. Referring to a poem by Schiller, 'The ring of Polykrates', Bergmann speaks of the 'feeling of dread that many men and women, burdened with a sense of guilt, experience when they are particularly successful or when good fortune beyond their expectations befalls them' (1992:17). Where the guilty are unaware of what they have done, or unrepentant, the deity might take the initiative and claim his/her due: punishment restores the sacred order. Sacrifice and punishment have the same cause - human dependence on divine benevolence - and the same goal - the restoration of the relationship, thus the redemption of the human partner.

The third kind of sacrifice is based on reciprocity. The ancient formula *do ut des* (give

so that you will be given) wrongly suggests the motive of calculated pragmatism. It is more true to say that sympathy, assistance, hospitality and gifts place the recipient in a position of embarrassing indebtedness. The moral superiority which the giver gains over the recipient has to be balanced out to restore equality of dignity between the two partners. Relationships of mutual dependence, cooperation and complementarity are always characterised by sacrificial acts and attitudes, for instance, reciprocal gifts and honours.

We see that sacrifice as a ritual is rooted in the concrete experiences of life. It is the vulnerability of humankind to fateful occurrences such as disease, war, drought, famine and death which occasions the ritual. The ritual responds to a spiritual need, namely acceptability or the right of existence, which emerges in the context of immanent needs.

### *Sacrifice of the first-born*

There are numerous forms of sacrifice, even in the biblical Canon. We shall concentrate on the sacrifice of the 'beloved son', because that is where the Christian emphasis lies. In the following I am indebted to the perceptive study of the Jewish scholar Jon Levenson (1993). In terms of the Western cultural tradition, the origin of child sacrifice seems to lie in ancient Phoenicia and its Mediterranean colonies (Mosca 1975:24ff). Such sacrifices have been offered to the Canaanite god El (Greek Kronos, Latin Saturn), who was perceived to be the father of the gods, the creator of creatures, the father of humankind, the eternal king, the ancient of days, the kindly and compassionate god, the god of boundless wisdom (Levenson 1993:32).

Perhaps due to the elevated character of this deity, there must have been a sense of wonder, appreciation, praise and adoration. This can be seen from the fact that, whereas the substitution of the child with a lamb was allowed, the instances in which such substitutions actually took place declined over time. Self-dedication became so serious and intimate that only the object with whom one was identified most closely was good enough to take the place of, or rather to symbolise, the dedication of one's own life. This is also borne out by the fact that the ritual seems to have begun with royalty, then spread to the elites and only later reached the lower classes. It was clearly a matter of prestige to make such a sacrifice.

Moreover, the underlying myth suggests that the worshippers emulated what they perceived to be the primordial action of the deity itself. Kronos, Philo tells us, was believed to have been a king who was deified after his death. He had an only-begotten son called *Jedoud* (the common designation of the first-born) by a nymph called *Anobret*, and 'when great dangers from war had beset the country, he arrayed his son in royal apparel, and prepared an altar, and sacrificed him' (Levenson 1993:26; Mosca 1975:274). Note that the king put his son in royal apparel, signifying the intention of self-sacrifice. The successor to the throne becomes the substitute for the incumbent.

Repugnant as this may seem to modern sensibilities, in a patriarchal society family members were considered to be part of the patriarch's own substance, his most intimate possessions, and the first-born son was considered to constitute his clan's future beyond his death. In patriarchal cultures it is not the individual who is the primary point of reference, but the clan. The individual death does not carry as much weight as the potential death of the clan. Far from being a symptom of senseless and primitive brutality, therefore, child sacrifice was seen to be the highest form of commitment, just short of self-sacrifice - or rather, symbolising self-sacrifice. Committed believers may want to consider how atrocious uncritical religious dedication can become! The first-born son was, as it were, the most precious part of the body of the clan of which the father was the head.

One may also pause to consider the fact that this reasoning is phenomenologically similar to the idea that, in times of war, leaders are entitled to expect their subjects to

sacrifice their lives in the interests of whatever these leaders proclaim to be in the interest of their community. We have not outgrown this assumption even in our enlightened age. How intimately sacrifice and war were related in ancient Canaan is evidenced by an Old Testament report on an incident believed to have happened during a war between Moab and Israel (Mosca 19975; Levenson 1993:15):

When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land (2 Ki 3:26f NIV).

It is known that, in spite of the intense rivalry reported in Old Testament texts between Yahweh and Ba'al during the times of the prophets, Israelites and Canaanites had shared a common religious and cultural background for centuries. The Canaanite El merged almost seamlessly with the Israelite God Yahweh (Levenson 1993:20ff). David took over Canaanite religious traditions after conquering Jerusalem. Hiram, king of Sidon, helped Solomon build the temple on Mount Zion. Without doubt many ritual and cultic aspects were borrowed from Canaanite precedents as well. Jezebel, wife of King Ahab was a Phoenician princess.

Some scholars do not find it difficult to assume, therefore, that child sacrifice was still practised in Israel during the time of the kings (Mosca 1975:238ff; Levenson 1993:4ff; critical Schmitt 1982:37ff). They argue that the intense hostility of the prophetic movement against the ritual can only be explained by assuming that they were fighting against an existing practice. In the text on the king of Moab, quoted above, the Israelite writer assumed that the sacrifice actually had worked. In spite of the deep sense of tragedy found in the story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, there is no indication that the sacrifice was not acceptable to Yahweh or to Israelite religious sentiments. Quite the contrary:

And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering (Ju 11:30 NIV) ... 'My father,' she replied, 'you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites.' (Ju 11:34ff NIV)

Likewise the pivotal narrative on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac does not contain any indication that child sacrifice was repugnant to Yahweh, or to Israel's religious sentiments. On the contrary, such a sacrifice is assumed to have been commanded by Yahweh and expected to be carried out. The last minute reversal of this command is only a witness to the possibility of animal substitution, which was already firmly established in the Canaanite prototype. For Abraham the right of the Deity to his prime heir, the only bearer of Yahweh's promises, was never in doubt. Nor was his resolve to carry out the command.

It is this total dedication to Yahweh which became the prototype of faith and righteousness in the Jewish, then the Christian, later also the Muslim, and finally the Marxist traditions. In all these cases personal lives could be sacrificed to a greater cause. The underlying theology is clear: humans owe their existence to God; and it is up to God to claim it, or relent, not for humans to refuse such a claim, or try to bargain themselves out of the ordeal in their own (surely short-sighted and misguided) interest. Think of Jesus' words in Gethsemane: your will be done!

### *The prophetic and deuteronomic critique of child sacrifice*

During the time of the kings, the confluence of Israelite and Canaanite religious traditions threatened the identity of Israel. At least, that is how it was perceived by the prophetic and the deuteronomic movements. Intolerance against Canaanite religion is found in many prophetic pronouncements, the story of Elijah, the Holiness Law (Ex 23:20ff), Deut 7, and so on. The prime target of this movement was the ritual of Ba'al, the god of the Canaanite fertility cult. Everything Canaanite became suspect. Child sacrifice must have fallen under this category. It is indicative that, in contrast to the Priestly Source, Deuteronomy omits the claim of Yahweh to the human first-born.

As Levenson remarked, this revolution 'aimed not simply at the substitution of animals for the first-born sons, but at the elimination of the very idea that God has a special claim upon the first-born son that had to be honored in the cult' (1993: 44f). This can be seen from the fact that Deuteronomy also omits the death of the Egyptian first-born and delivery through the blood of the paschal lamb in its account of the Exodus. The same is true for Jeremiah and Ezechiel. Jeremiah, who is close to Deuteronomy, is quite explicit in condemning child sacrifice as a Canaanite ritual (Jer 19:5). But had Yahweh not claimed the firstborn of Israel for himself? Even by the time of the exile, this fact seemingly could not easily be denied in view of the existing tradition (Levenson 1993:5). This contradiction caused Ezechiel to venture a startling combination of Yahweh's law with the motif that Israel was suffering because of its sin:

I, in turn, gave them laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live: When they set aside every first issue of the womb, I defiled them by their very gifts - that I might render them desolate; that they might know that I am the Lord (Ez 20:25-16).

### *The entrenchment of child sacrifice in the law*

By this time the intimate personal relationships between Yahweh and Israel had become formalised. With this a substantial theological transformation had taken place. What had emerged as a spontaneous human expression of dependence, was put into law as a divine claim to be honoured in a ritual routine. Human self-dedication turned into divine obligation. The harshest and most consistent of these legal formulations reads as follows:

Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day. (Ex 22:29f NIV)

This may suggest that child sacrifice was not only practised at the time this law was formulated, but had actually been made obligatory. However, the ancient alternative of substitution was also legalised. At some stage this substitution became no longer an option, but a requirement. According to Nu 18:15f the sons were to be redeemed by the priests as a matter of routine:

The first offspring of every womb, both man and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver ... (Nu 18:15f NIV).

The fact that the sons were lumped together with unclean animals seems to indicate that, probably under the impact of the prophetic critique, child sacrifice had become unacceptable. However, the underlying assumption that the firstborn belongs to Yahweh, thus to the priests, was not forfeited. To let all the first-born serve at the temple would have

displaced the Levites who were assigned that role. The easiest way out, and for the priests the most lucrative, was to accept cash in exchange for kind.

### *The politicisation and commercialisation of the sacrifice*

Originally sacrifices were sporadic, spontaneous and personal. Individuals brought sacrifices when they thought it was appropriate to do so. Sanctuaries or priests were not necessarily involved, even at a time when sanctuaries and priests already existed to dispense with oracles (Cody 1969:12). The sacrifices of the patriarchs are good examples (Baudissin 1967:55ff).

The relative unimportance of priests in early times can further be seen from the fact that the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:23 - 23:19) does not speak of priests at all (Baudissin 1967:55). According to J and E there were no priests at the time of the patriarchs. According to these sources, sacrifices could be made by the laity, while the specific

task of the priests was the oracle. There was also no rigid class structure between laity, Levites, priests and Aaronides (ibid 61). In contrast, Deuteronomy no longer recognises the right of laity to bring sacrifices (ibid 85). But there is not yet a high priest (ibid 88). Neither is there in Ez. So the high priest is an invention of the post-exilic era.

There seems to be a tendency for the idea of sanctity to grow on itself. 'Holy' originally means: dedicated to the deity. A part of one's possession set apart for the deity (the sacrifice), leads to a set-apart caste to administer this part (the priesthood), a set-apart place (the sanctuary), and a set-apart time (the religious festival). Once you have a priesthood, a routinised sacrifice is necessary to maintain the priesthood. The need of the priesthood for recognition, power and income leads, in a subtle way, to the claim that regular sacrifices are demanded by Yahweh and that priests are necessary to perform them. The empowerment of the clergy leads to the disempowerment of the laity.

Clans, tribes or groups of tribes may have begun to acknowledge the role of a priest in sacrificial acts at traditionally holy places. The priest Eli at Shilo (1 Sam 2ff) is a case in point. Very early in history, the Levites, a landless group dispersed among the different tribes, were considered to be more 'holy' than others and were preferred as priests (Cody 1969:119). An example is Micah's recruitment of a Levite priest in Ju 17 (Gunneweg 1965:78ff).

This general tendency was powerfully enhanced by the formation of the national state. From of old, religion was used to secure the inner cohesion of a kingdom or an empire. Just as patriarchs were responsible for the sacrifices of their clans, kings were responsible for the sacrifices of the nation. Therefore kings had, almost by definition, priestly functions (Baudissin 1967:272; Cody 1969:98f). The enigmatic figure of Melchizedek is an early example of the combination of the priestly and royal offices (Gen 14:18; Ps 110:4).

David and Solomon both performed priestly functions which later texts, such as Nu 6:22-27 (P), reserved for priests (Cody 1969:75, 106). David transferred the arch of the covenant to Jerusalem, the Canaanite city he conquered and designated as his capital (2 Sam 6). With that the religious centre of the united kingdom shifted from Shiloh to Jerusalem. Solomon built a temple on Mount Zion. That is how the national priesthood was born in Jerusalem (Cody 1969:87ff). When the North broke away, it was politically inconceivable that the Northerners would come to Jerusalem for sacrifices. So Jeroboam reestablished the ancient Northern sanctuary of Bethel and another one in Dan, at the other end of his kingdom (1 Ki 12).

When king Josiah attempted to recreate the davidic empire by conquering the Northern provinces, he also centralised the cult. Though praised by the deuteronomic movement, his battle cry was ominously close to that of Hitler: 'One Yahweh, one nation, one torah, one cult!' (Schmitt 1982:76). The Israelite priests, scattered on 'high places' in Judah, were

transferred to Jerusalem, the local sanctuaries and altars were desecrated and demolished, while the priests in Northern Israel were executed (2 Ki 23 - see Cody 1969:127ff for detail).

Unfortunately we cannot pursue the history of the priesthood and the temple, their social, political and economic consequences, their religious legitimations, the conflicts between priestly groups, and the prophetic critique in this essay (see e.g. Gunneweg 1965:114ff, cf. Cody 1969). Suffice it to say that when the Persians allowed the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem the status of the priests rose to that of a national elite. During that time the sacrificial routine became more prescriptive, complex and substantial than ever before, both in terms of the quantity and the quality of the gifts - servants, money, animals and agricultural produce.

By this time the intimate personal or communal relationship between Yahweh and his people had been thoroughly politicised, institutionalised, professionalised, commercialised and - as such - legitimated by divine sanction. It had become one of the prime means of oppression and exploitation. This situation persisted in some form or other until the destruction of the temple by the Romans. It may have been the prime target for the 'cleansing of the temple' by Jesus and the cause for his subsequent crucifixion.

### *The prophetic critique of the sacrificial order*

Note that, in the Samuel narrative, the demise of Saul's dynasty is attributed to the fact that he offered sacrifices (1 Sam 13:8-14) and that his men took from the spoil which Yahweh had claimed for himself 'sheep and oxen, the choicest of the animals laid under ban, to sacrifice to the Lord your God' (15:21 NEB). To which Samuel replies: 'Does the Lord desire offerings and sacrifices as he desires obedience? Obedience is better than sacrifice, and to listen to him than the fat of rams' (1 Sam 15:22 NEB). This becomes almost a standard motif in the later prophetic movement:

I hate, I spurn your pilgrim-feasts; I will not delight in your sacred ceremonies. When you present your sacrifices and offerings I will not accept them, nor look on the buffaloes of your shared-offering. Spare me the sound of your songs; I cannot endure the music of your lutes. Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like an everflowing stream. Did you bring me sacrifices and gifts, you people of Israel, those forty years in the wilderness?' (Amos 5:21-25 NEB). I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hos 6:6 - NIV).

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Mic 6:6ff - NIV).

Your countless sacrifices, what are they to me? says the LORD. I am sated with whole-offerings of rams and the fat of buffaloes; I have no desire for the blood of bulls, of sheep and of he-goats. Whenever you come into my presence - who asked you for this? No more shall you trample my courts. The offer of your gifts is useless, the reek of sacrifice is abhorrent to me... Cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed ...' (Is 1:11-17 NEB).

We shall come to Deutero-Isaiah's stance below (Is 43:23-25). Fasting, which is a form of sacrifice, falls under the same verdict in some post-exilic prophetic texts, notably the powerful statement in Is 58, but also in a late prophetic text such as Zec 7:5ff. The message of all these texts is clear: it is obedience and righteousness that counts, not sacrifice - righteousness in the sense of dispensing justice for the weak and vulnerable.

### *Blood as a sacrificial substitute*

In ancient cultures the most precious possession which could, and should, be dedicated to the deity was the firstborn male. When the firstborn is sacrificed, it is life which is committed to the deity - the life of the sacrifice, which substitutes for the life of the giver, as representative of the life of the clan, or, in the case of a king, the life of the nation as a whole. We have seen that an animal can again substitute for the firstborn. Because they stand for the whole, sacrificial gifts should, in theory, be handed to the deity in toto. So even where substitution (*pars pro toto*) was allowed, the underlying idea is clear: we owe ourselves wholly to God, thus what we give in the place of ourselves is wholly his and must be set apart.

In this sense the holocaust is the purest form of sacrifice. But it does not provide for the needs of the priesthood. It also does not allow for the human partner to participate in the act of reconciliation. The ancient idea that the life of an animal was located in its blood provided a way out. Because Yahweh was the author and owner of life, he was entitled to the blood of animals, whether slaughtered for consumption or for sacrifice. Blood was not meant for human consumption. So we find another substitution *pars pro toto*: the blood of the animal substitutes for the animal, releasing the meat for human consumption.

That God could take by force what is due to him leads to the idea that punishment is a kind of enforced sacrifice. The combination of the ideas of sacrifice and punishment with the concept of blood as a substitute explains the reasoning behind the Priestly narrative of the exodus (Ex 4:22-23). Israel is claimed by Yahweh as 'the son' who belongs to God in the sacrificial (not the biological) sense of the word (cf Levenson 1993:36ff). By refusing to release the Israelites, the Egyptians show that they do not recognise Yahweh's claim, thus Yahweh's lordship. This unredeemed sacrifice turns into punishment. Yahweh not only takes his 'son', the Israelites, by force, but also the first-born sons of the Egyptians, whom Yahweh could have demanded at any rate.

Yahweh could also have demanded the firstborn sons of the Israelites, as substitute for the nation as a whole. However, in this case Yahweh accepts lambs as substitutes. But Yahweh is specifically interested in the blood of the lamb, while the flesh of the lamb is utilised for communal celebrations. There is, therefore, a whole chain of substitution: from the nation (and every constituent family) to the firstborn, to the lamb, to the blood.

The *passah* symbolises what happened at the Exodus as the event which constituted the identity of Israel as Yahweh's chosen people. Yahweh claims Israel, as it were, as the 'first-born of humankind', but accepts a substitute. According to Levenson, this can again be understood as a sacrifice of Yahweh (1993:46; for other interpretations cf Schmitt 1982:28ff). The image of Abraham sacrificing his son is strangely turned on its head: God sacrifices his claim to the son by not really demanding his life. But substitution does not mean that the claim is suspended: the son belongs to Yahweh by right. That is the legal status of Israel as Yahweh's covenant partner.

### *The emergence of the atonement motif*

In pre-exilic times, Yahweh could be perceived to be patient, or to relent of his wrathful intentions, but, according to Koch, there was no perception of the possibility of actually overcoming sin, let alone effecting forgiveness through rituals. This insight was added by later redactors (Ex 36:29-33; Is 4; Mi 7:18f), when the 'God of forgiveness' had become an important motif (cf Neh 9:17; Sir 5:5).

That is why the prophetic castigation of Israel's transgressions was so radical: sins could only lead to disaster (Koch 1991:188). 'The reference to a God who overcomes sin is the



greatest advance in insight of the divine which the exilic and post-exilic time gained above those of the prophets' (Koch 1991:190). There are two versions of this idea, that of the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, and that of the priestly school, including Ez and P.

Deutero-Isaiah could argue that it was not Yahweh who had burdened Israel with demands for sacrifices, but Israel who had burdened Yahweh with her sins, which Yahweh would remove for his own sake (Is 43:23-24). The implication is that the sacrifices of Israel were useless; it was Yahweh who had to sacrifice for the atonement of sins. How could that be done? God had to provide the means, and God's means are his own people. In the famous servant song of Is 53:4-12, Deutero-Isaiah depicts an eschatological atonement ritual in which one person, the Servant of Yahweh, carries the sins both of Israel and the nations (52:15) - and then becomes the universal ruler (Koch 1991:201). This 'person' probably refers to the exiled Jews in Babylon, but there are other possibilities. Certainly these insights constituted a dramatic revolution in perception, a revolution without which the New Testament understanding of atonement would be unthinkable.

However, this insight was not developed further until New Testament times. Instead exilic and post-exilic Judaism developed an atonement ritual through which sin, perceived to be something like a contaminating substance, could be transferred to another person, who would then become impure and liable to be condemned to death. That is the origin of the concepts of pure and impure which plays such an enormous role in Judaism. Sin could also be transferred to an animal and gotten rid of by killing the animal, or driving it into the desert (Lev 16:7ff). This is similar to the perception of Deutero-Isaiah in so far as God has to take the initiative if humans are to be redeemed. According to Ez and P it was God who made this mechanism available. In contrast to Deutero-Isaiah, however, God's medium in Ez and P is the priest, and the way of getting rid of sin is no longer the suffering of God's servant, but the ritual.

Koch believes, therefore, that the atonement ritual should not be considered to be a sacrifice, because the priest acted in the name of God, not of human beings (Koch 1991:197). Moreover, all sacrifices now became atonement rituals (Koch 1991:201). The 'physical' removal of sin is not the same as the satisfaction of God. According to Koch it was only in the Greek-speaking diaspora that the idea of a God that had to be atoned emerged. Here sacrifice is meant 'to bring about the benevolence of ancestors or gods', thus the deity becomes the object, the human being the subject of the act (Koch 1991:204f). This sounds plausible enough. However, one has to distinguish between practical effect and religious rationalisation. Practically, the Jewish ritual does not imply that God makes sacrifices, while it does imply that the believers pay - and pay heavily.

The consequence of following not the Deutero-Isaianic, but the Priestly line of thought was that the role of the priest became indispensable, not just because Yahweh's holiness made him inaccessible to common people, but because without the priest there would be no possibility to obtain liberation from sin. According to Barker (1996), lesser offences were taken over by the priest when eating the flesh of the sacrificial animal. Thus the high priest collected all the sins of the people upon himself. During the Great Atonement the blood of the goat then substituted for the blood of the high priest. The high priest again was identified with the Lord, because it is the Lord who atoned. Just as, in another paradigm, the people could not attain wellbeing without the mediation of the king, they could now attain no wellbeing without the mediation of the priest.

With that a fundamental theological problem arises. The concepts of sanctity and sin correspond. On the one hand they can be seen in relationship terms. A relationship can only be expressed, neglected, renewed, broken, healed by persons in relationship; it involves the will of both partners at all times. Therefore reconciliation presupposes repentance and

forgiveness. A substance, in contrast, can be manipulated. If sin is a substance, it can be removed through symbolic washing, cleansing, purification, transfer to another carrier, etc. All this goes in the direction of magic and - at a later stage - technology. As a metaphor, 'substance' is not appropriate to express the relational quality of a sacrifice. Therefore the prophets rejected the idea. It was humility, righteousness, and justice which were called for.

However, the 'mechanism' to remove sin was declared by the priests to have been instituted by God. Again, this implies a particular concept of God which concentrates on 'sanctity' as a quality of offices, times, localities and procedures. To get right with God, the priestly approach insisted, one had to follow certain rituals, refrain from, or engage in, certain acts, and observe certain taboos. And, to be effective, all this had to be done meticulously according to detailed prescriptions which carried the quality of holiness. This trend finds its peak in Ez 45:21-25; 2 Ch 30; 35:1-19 and Esra 6:19-22, where the date, the cultic purity, the number and nature of the sacrifices, the precise functions of the priests and the exact procedures have become decisive (Schmitt 1982:94). The idea of sacrifice as the total 'dedication' of something to the Lord goes in a similar direction. The idea of the 'holy' can have frightful implications if it is abstracted from the redemptive will of Yahweh and absolutised as such. What has been dedicated to God in this form must not be utilised but abandoned, even destroyed - whether it is a firstborn son, a single daughter, an animal, the first fruit, an enemy, or a holy time such as the Sabbath. It is no longer meant to be a symbol of dependence and faithfulness, but to express the claim and right of a deity to demand anything and everything in pure self-interest. It is a sacredness abstracted from the intention of God to bring about the wellbeing of his creatures. In the Covenant Code, for instance, the Sabbath is meant to serve the poor, the domestic animals, even the wild animals (Ex 23:10-12). In the Priestly Code, in contrast, the Sabbath no longer serves anybody or anything; it has been absolutised as time handed over to the Lord. And the death penalty is placed on any transgression, even if it consists of kindling a fire in one's own home to feed one's children (Ex 35:2f).

One should not fail to note that this set of rules was formulated, imposed and controlled by the priestly caste. It does not seem to have been an original part of Israelite religiosity, nor did it continue to function as a necessary and indispensable part of the Jewish tradition after the demise of the priesthood and the temple. If the conception of sin and holiness in terms of substances is indeed more ancient than the prophetic critique (Kaminsky 1995), the priestly caste has revived, perpetuated and utilised an obsolete mindset to their own advantage. One cannot avoid the verdict that it was a form of social control and extortion designed to serve the consolidation of power, privilege and income of the priestly caste itself. All this should not sound too unfamiliar to Christians. In fact, Christianity did it all over again!

### *Representative suffering as a sacrifice*

There was a lot of resistance in exilic and post-exilic times to the prophetic and deuteronomic view that Israel was suffering for its own sin. Ez 18 denies corporate and intergenerational retribution; Ps 44:17ff denies the link between Israel's sin and her predicament (cf Ps 22); the body of the book of Job, its introduction and its conclusion offer three different interpretations of suffering. One of the alternatives to the deuteronomic interpretation of history was that the vicarious suffering and death of a righteous person, or the righteous people of God, can bring about the redemption of others. According to Gen 18, the existence of a few righteous people in an otherwise decadent city could save that city. Is 52:13 - 53:12 speaks of the sacrifice of the righteous for the unrighteous.

As we shall see, this text has had a profound impact on the interpretation of the death of

Jesus among early Christians. But in rabbinic theology it was the 'binding of Isaac' to be sacrificed by Abraham (the *aqedah*) which took centre stage. The occasion was the persecution of the Jews by Seleucid rulers and the Maccabean revolt. Isaac had already been identified with the sacrificial lamb, thus with the *passah*, thus with the foundational narrative of the Jewish faith, and it is that narrative with which the martyrs had to be associated.

Two problems emerged with this identification. The first was that the martyrs were heroes of faith, not passive victims. If they were to be identified with Isaac, Isaac had to be transformed from a passive victim to an active agent. He could not be 'imagined to have been willing to go to his appointed demise sheep-like, without awareness of choice'. So some of the writers 'were subtly but steadily transforming the *aqedah* from the story of Abraham's offering of his son into one of Isaac's self-sacrifice in the service of the God of his father ... The offered becomes the co-offerer in the near-sacrifice of the beloved son' (Levenson 1993:187).

The second problem was that the martyrs actually died while Isaac did not. In this respect the martyrs resembled the *passah* lamb rather than Isaac. But Isaac had already been identified with the *passah* lamb. In fact, the *aqedah* (binding of Isaac) had become an 'archetype of redemption', or the 'new Exodus' (Levenson 1993:182). But it was blood which made the destroyer pass the Israelite firstborn in Egypt. And blood certainly flowed in the case of the martyrs. The idea that Isaac's consent constituted a 'virtual death', accepted as such by God, could not satisfy.

So a tendency arose towards assuming that Abraham had actually killed his son. Levenson speaks of 'the startling transformation by which a story in which the father is explicitly forbidden to 'do anything to' his beloved son (Gen 22:12) metamorphosed into one in which he wounds or even kills the lad' (1993:192). In clear reference to the original child-sacrifice 'some rabbinic texts speak not of Isaac's blood, but of his ashes' (1993:194). Startling indeed! Never mind that in the original story it could only have been the ram's ashes.

But if Isaac actually died a physical death, like the martyrs, how could he have become the father of the nation? The answer was that he must have been raised from the dead. That is the closest approximation in rabbinic theology to the Christian proclamation of the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus. The difference is that, logically, Isaac had to return to this life, while Christians, in line with apocalyptic thought, proclaimed that Jesus had risen into the eschatological authenticity of a new humanity. The concept of Isaac's resurrection is a telling example of how dogma evolves in response to situational needs, rather than representing timeless truth.

## 2. Sacrifice of the beloved Son in the New Testament

### *Did God sacrifice his son?*

According to Levenson, 'that willingness (of Abraham, the righteous father, to sacrifice his beloved son), together with the son's glad and unqualified acceptance of his own divinely mandated death, became a theme of enormous import in Judaism in the Roman period, including the forms of Judaism that served as the matrix of Christianity' (1993:173). At first sight this statement seems to make sense, but some deeper reflections make one doubt.

Levenson says that the martyrdom suffered by Jews at the hands of Seleucid persecutors occasioned the shift of emphasis from Abraham to Isaac in rabbinic literature. In some cases Abraham seems to have become almost dispensable, because Isaac binds himself and sacrifices himself. This foregrounding of Isaac and the backgrounding of Abraham is

highly significant. It is almost as if Isaac has come of age and no longer needs the father for the sacrifice.

This mirrors the situation of the martyrs fairly precisely, but only on condition that one does not use the metaphor of the father (Abraham) for God. It is not God who sacrifices the martyrs; God graciously accepts the sacrifice of the martyrs. It is the people who part with their most precious possession, albeit as involuntary and passive onlookers of the macabre drama in which the martyrs lose their lives on their behalf. And it is the people who reap the redemptive benefits of this sacrificial death. The original paradigm remains intact, the only difference being that the initiative has passed from Abraham to Isaac.

Rabbinic theology does not seem to have claimed that God actually killed his 'son' in the way that Abraham was supposed to kill Isaac. God also did not, as in the case of the Egyptian first-born, pounce upon an unsuspecting victim to punish the people for their wrongdoing. Rather, God graciously accepted the voluntary death of the martyrs at the hands of their pagan persecutors as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. It is, again, the vicarious self-dedication of the substitute which stands in for the self-dedication of the people *pars pro toto*.

So Levenson's claim does not seem to apply in the rabbinic case. What about the Christian counterpart? Well, the early Christian community did not utilise the paradigm of the sacrifice of Isaac to express the significance of the life and death of Jesus at all. In the Gospels, Abraham is nothing but the first ancestor of the Jewish nation. In Acts 7, where the story of Israel is recounted, Abraham's sacrifice is not even mentioned. In Paul, Abraham is the father of faith, without reference to the sacrifice of Isaac. Hebrews, the letter most preoccupied with sacrifice in the New Testament, mentions the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac only as one instance of faith among many. When it mentions the restoration of Isaac to Abraham as a metaphor for death and resurrection, the motif is not applied to Jesus (Heb 11:17-19). James uses the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham only to demonstrate that Paul was wrong when he referred to Abraham to prove that justification is by faith and not by works (Ja 2:21-24). So there is a total blank!

This consistent non-utilisation of a paradigm which seemed so perfectly able to express the Christian creed cannot be accidental. Obviously the *aqedah* did not fit the theological rationale of the Christian proclamation. God did not himself kill his son, say by utilising unsuspecting Jewish judges and Roman executioners. Rather, God allowed his son to be killed by his enemies. Having identified himself with his son, God exposed himself, in his son, to human enmity.

What we have here is an inversion of the original paradigm: it is not the divine partner who had become an enemy of humans on account of their guilt, and who now requires a supreme human sacrifice from these human beings so as to be reconciled with them, but it is these humans who have become the enemies of God, and whose situation is so desperate that it needs a supreme divine sacrifice for them to become reconciled with God.

Who are God's enemies? The claim that the Jews were God's enemies, because it is they who were responsible for the death of Jesus, is a theological aberration. According to the Pauline school, especially, all members of the human race - both Jews and Gentiles, both those under the law and those without the law, both stubborn transgressors and humble repenters - are enemies of God.

It is also historically not true. The narrative of the crucifixion says it all: Jewish and Roman leaders cooperated to get him out of the way; his disciples misunderstood him; one of them betrayed him; the most dedicated of them denied him; the rest deserted him. According to the New Testament witness it is all the enemies of God, both the saints and the persecutors of the saints, who receive the self-sacrifice of God in his 'beloved son'.

### *Why only Christ?*

According to Maccabees (e.g. 2 Macc 7:18) the martyrs became 'a ransom for the sin of our nation. Through the blood of these righteous ones and through the propitiation of their death the divine providence rescued Israel ...' (Levenson 1993:188). Levenson argues that the Book of Maccabees was 'more democratic than Paul' because 'to all Jews who die the consecrated death it applies the language of propitiation or expiation that Paul was to apply to Jesus alone' (1993:189).

However, as Levenson recognised (1993:223), Paul's thought is inspired by apocalypics. There is a gulf between this age and the age to come, between the flesh and the spirit. Human dedication to the law, in fact the law itself, belongs to this side of the gulf, while the God who revealed himself in Christ belongs to the other side, the side of true righteousness. Christ belongs to the side of God by virtue of his death to the flesh (unauthentic existence) and his resurrection into the sphere of the spirit (authentic existence). Or, in apocalyptic terms, he has left the present age through his death, and moved into the age to come through his resurrection.

This side of the grave, therefore, righteousness can never be our own. Those who identify with the death and resurrection of Christ anticipate their own death and resurrection and, by virtue of this identification (= faith), participate in the righteousness of the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit. It is an 'alien righteousness', as Luther called it. As far as believers do participate in the righteousness of Christ, their suffering is indeed 'democratic' in that it has redemptive significance and power: 'We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body ... so then death is at work in us, but life is at work in you' (2 Cor 4:7ff).

This shows that sacrificial language is insufficient to express the Christian gospel. The sacrificial gift of God is not just a symbol of God's forgiveness and atonement; God's gift in Christ is, always and at the same time, the gift of a new life in fellowship with God. Christ is not simply the beloved Son of God, who is sacrificed for our sins; Christ is also the authentic human being into whose new life we are meant to be transformed. Just as sacrifice is not something that we have to perform, but something that we receive, righteousness is not something we have to achieve, but a gift of grace (Nürnberg 1993b). In short, it is not we who give sacrifices to God, but God who sacrifices himself in Christ, *pars pro toto*.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood (Rom 3:25). He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Ro 4:25 NIV). God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them ... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Co 5:18-21 NIV). This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 Jo 4:10 NIV).

### *What precisely is the gift of God?*

The expression 'only begotten son', reminiscent of the 'beloved son', seems to suggest that the ancient soteriological paradigm of child sacrifice was utilised by early Christian theology. However, this theology preferred a much more profound understanding of God's gift of his Son. 'Son of God' and 'Image of God' are Ancient Near Eastern titles for the messianic king. God upholds his order and channels his blessing through the king, his representative and plenipotentiary on earth. In the Christian reception, the messianic king as

'Son of God' is the authentic human being whose will and energy have become perfect vehicles for the creative power and the redemptive intention of God (Nünberger 1992).

This again implies that, just as the re-envisioned Isaac of rabbinic theology gave his informed consent to his own sacrifice because he agreed to its rationale, the will of Christ, the Son of God, merged so completely with the redemptive will of God that he voluntarily and freely gave his life for us all: 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does' (Jn 5:19).

But that is not the end of the story. The sacrificial movement that originates in God and is channeled through Christ involves those who open themselves up to this divine initiative. By faith and in the power of the Spirit we are enabled to participate in the new life of the risen Christ, the authentic human being. It is on the strength of this participation in the new life of Christ, which is a life in fellowship with God, that believers become participants of God's redemptive action.

And this is where our own sacrifice comes into the picture. This kind of sacrifice is not given by us to God; it is given by God through us to his enemies. God loves not only us, but the entire world, lost in sin, and through the risen Christ we are taken into the dynamics of this redemptive love. Election now becomes an open invitation, accessible to Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free (Gal 3:28); God's love is for the whole world (Jn 3:16).

For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body (2 Co 4:11). For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Co 5:14f). I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Ga 2:20).

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 Jo 3:16). God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him (1 Jo 4:16).

### *The Christian reception of the Passah*

Levenson quotes a rabbinic midrash according to which Isaac was identified with the paschal lamb to such an extent that '... the blood of Isaac has displaced the blood of the lamb that dies so that the Israelites may be freed from bondage in Egypt' (1993:180). The displacement of the *passah* lamb by the self-sacrifice of Isaac in rabbinic theology therefore seems to be a parallel to the displacement of the *passah* lamb with the self-sacrifice of Jesus in Christianity. But in the case of Christianity this was the end of the *passah*.

It cannot have been an accident that the date of the death of Jesus was associated with the *passah*. Did Jesus deliberately choose the *passah* for a liberative showdown with the temple establishment when he marched into Jerusalem and cleansed the temple? When the occasion did not lead to liberation, but to the death of Jesus, it seems as if the death of Jesus was identified with the death of the *passah* lamb, much in the same way as that of the Jewish martyrs.

Liberation theology, at pains to show that Jesus was actually a socio-political liberator, would love this idea. But is it a feasible reconstruction? Probably not. Given that the date of the death of Jesus coincided with the slaughter of the *passah* lamb, even that of Jesus and his disciples themselves, nothing could have been more natural than the association of the ritual with the death of Jesus. Taking this propensity into account, it is surprising how thin

the evidence actually is.

In the synoptic gospels Jesus is not associated with the lamb at all. In John's gospel, John the Baptist points out Jesus twice as the 'lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1:29, cf 1:36). This refers to the sin offering of Lev 4:27ff, rather than the *passah*. Acts 8:32 quotes Is 53:7, which does not have to refer to the *passah*.

In Paul we find the only direct identification of Jesus with the *passah* lamb in the entire New Testament (1 Cor 5:7), and even here only as an afterthought. The thrust of Paul's argument is cleaning out the yeast as a metaphor for ethical renewal. In 1 Peter 1:19 Christ is called an unblemished lamb with whose precious blood we were redeemed; again this refers to the sin offering. Revelation uses the term 'lamb' (sometimes adding 'that was slain') routinely as a title of Christ - even when depicting him as the ruler of the universe, where the metaphor does not seem to fit. The persecution of Christians at the time may have provided the occasion for this strong emphasis. But Rev 7:14 and 12:11 show that it is the sin offering, not the *passah*, that this appellation refers to.

All this shows that it is impossible to claim that the *passah* played an important role in early Christian theology. This finding is corroborated by the remarkable fact that Jesus, in his institution of Holy Communion, did not identify his body with the *passah* lamb, nor his blood with the blood of the *passah*. Because the institution of the sacrament happened during a *passah* celebration, nothing would have been more natural. Instead he used bread and wine. Consider the fact that Holy Communion is the central Christian ritual celebrating the death of Jesus as a redemptive event! If a link between the death of Jesus and the *passah* had to be established, it would have had to be here.

It is difficult to fathom the profundity of this theological shift. The *passah* is, after all, the ritual that signifies the exodus, the most foundational event for the identity of Israel as the people of God. This identifier was believed by Christians to have been replaced by the Christ-event - together with the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the circumcision, the Sabbath, and the torah. Surely this was not a childish supersession game with Jewish antecedents, as Levenson suggests. The first Christians were all Jews. The *passah* must have been as precious for them as for their fellow Jews. In fact, it is astounding that Jewish Christians abandoned the *passah* seemingly without any conflict on the issue. Remember that, in the cases of circumcision and the status of the torah, heavy conflicts ensued (Galatians 2, Phil 3). This shows that the replacement of the *passah* by the Christ event must have been universally accepted.

Unfortunately we cannot pursue the response of the Christian faith to priesthood and temple, which were equally revolutionary (cf Barker 1995). We can summarise our findings by saying that the sacrificial paradigm and its associated elements do not lie at the heart of the New Testament faith. In fact, the Christian gospel is an inversion of this paradigm: the gift of life goes from God through humanity to humanity, rather than from humanity to God through a substitute. It is the same revolution that made fulfillment of the will of God a consequence, rather than a condition of God's acceptance of the sinner.

One has to add that the Jewish faith too has shown that it could survive the destruction of the temple, the termination of animal sacrifices (except for the *passah*) and the disappearance of the priesthood. Faith again found its home in the community celebrating in the local synagogue (cf Fine 1996). The *passah* belonged in the family. The original task of the priesthood, which was to disclose the will of Yahweh, passed on to the rabbinate. All this is close enough to the Christian counterpart. But in Judaism the torah, rather than the risen Lord, continued to constitute the centre of divine-human relationships.

It is more than ironic that it is the Christian church which reversed the New Testament inversion of the paradigms of law and sacrifice and all their trappings. Again a

representative of God (*vicarius Christi*) resided in a political capital and claimed to be the supreme ruler of church and world. Christ's death on the cross was again interpreted as a sacrifice to God. The administration of this sacrifice was again restricted to a priestly caste. God's benevolence again became conditional upon fulfilling an elaborate code of ritual and moral laws. The mass could be purchased and used as a sacrifice to obtain all kinds of divine blessings in this world - as well as a reduction of punishment in the beyond. Again the sacrifice had become the source of legitimacy, status, power and income for a self-perpetuating and authoritarian elite.

By the end of the Middle Ages the post-exilic system, which faith in Christ had overturned, had replicated itself in the church more perfectly than in the Jewish synagogue. Luther's Reformation launched a concerted attack precisely on the mass as one of the fortifications responsible for the 'Babylonian captivity of the church'. But old patterns of thought do not die easily! By the time Protestant Orthodoxy and Pietism had gained the upper hand, the idea that Christ's death constituted a sacrifice to God on our behalf had re-established itself. It continues to determine Protestant faith, notably the modern Evangelical offshoots of Protestant Orthodoxy and Pietism.

### 3. Extrapolation of the biblical trajectory

#### *Occurrences of sacrifice today*

We have traced the trajectory of the sacrificial paradigm in biblical history. Three phases seem to stand out:

- a) sacrifice as a *pars pro toto* symbol of self-dedication to the deity,
- b) the transfer of guilt to a scapegoat and its subsequent demise and
- c) the reversal of the paradigm - sacrifice as a divine gift to humanity rather than a human offering to the deity. When trying to extrapolate the thrust of this trajectory into contemporary situations, we have to begin with the question where sacrifice actually occurs today.

The scapegoat sacrifice transfers the blame for all kinds of conflicts and calamities to an innocent victim which is then punished or liquidated. Modern instances range from psychological projection mechanisms to massive political strategies. Sadly the Jews have been convenient targets for millennia. The most horrific examples of scapegoating were the holocaust in Nazi Germany and the liquidation of the landowners in Stalinist Russia. In Maoist China scapegoating was practised as a regular ritual at village level; it exploded into giant proportions during the cultural revolution. Many civil wars - including those in Bosnia, Rwanda and Burundi - have been fuelled by scapegoating.

In terms of the Christian gospel, this kind of sacrifice is impossible to justify. Those who have been touched by the spirit of Christ will acknowledge their own agency in the generation of evil, proclaim the self-sacrificial initiative of God to overcome it, and allow themselves to get involved in the divine initiative. But what of the first type? Humble dedication on the one hand, vicarious suffering on the other, presuppose a situation of dominance and dependence. Can such vertical relationships be condoned? Can they be avoided? Let us look at some of the evidence.

We find dominance and dependence in patriarchy, feudalism, absolutism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism. None of these are acceptable in a liberal humanist context. But the competitive society, which inevitably produces market leaders and dropouts, also creates steeply vertical relationships, both in terms of social structure and in terms of social psychology. As Mannoni has shown, traditional societies are characterised



by dependency, while competitive societies suffer from inferiority. Within their own contexts both lead to structural and psychological subordination which can imply crippling sacrifices. When the two personality types interact, as they did during early colonialism, a neo-feudal relationship ensues (Mannoni 1956; analysed in Nürnberg 1996).

Part of the legacy of modernity is the reversal of dominance and dependence between nature and humanity brought about by the dramatic advances of science and technology. Whereas traditional societies treated an overpowering nature with awe and deference, modern humankind takes mastery over nature, and the human right to exploit nature to its limits, for granted. It is common knowledge that we have reached the threshold in many areas where the sacrifices humankind exacts from nature are so severe that it can no longer regenerate itself, nor cope with the output of waste.

In all these cases sacrifices are exacted from subordinate partners by superior partners in vertical relationships. The liberal answer to this problem is that, in principle, vertical relationships are illegitimate and need to be horizontalised. Where you find equality of dignity, imposed sacrifice disappears. However, liberal society has not been able to solve the twin problems of economic and ecological verticality. Nor are the elites of this society willing to forego the immense privileges which 'free enterprise' bestows on them. Can the trajectory of the sacrificial paradigm in biblical history provide insights in this regard?

### *Entropy and sacrifice*

The first question is whether the liberal assumption that only horizontal relationships are ethically legitimate can be upheld. If every organism were autonomous, and had an equal right to exist and prosper to the limits of its potentials, sacrifices as such could be dispensed with. But this is not how our universe is constructed. Fact is that all living beings are embedded in a network which depends, for its very existence, on sacrifice. Put in rather harsh but realistic terms, all living beings survive and thrive at the expense of other living beings. The only exceptions are found at the very lowest level, where organisms can survive on chemicals alone. All other organisms are predators. In its own way every organism is a devouring monster which, during its life time, consumes other organisms hundreds of thousands of times greater in volume than its own. The world consists of 'food and eaters of food' (Bowker 1970:200f, quoted by van Baaren 138). We can contemplate the size and the distribution of the prey, not the question whether there shall be such prey.

This is not only a biological, but a cosmic principle. Lower constructs, at whatever level of existence, disintegrate and some of their substance provides the building blocks for higher constructs. The rest goes to waste. Of course, the substance of the higher constructs eventually also goes to waste. In the language of the natural sciences, the evolutionary process, which leads to the hierarchy of complexity found in reality, must be seen in the context of the law of entropy.

The law of entropy says that ever since the big bang energy has had the tendency to move from infinite concentration to infinite dissipation. Wherever a construct or a process exists, energy is drawn from its environment, and the amount of energy withdrawn is always greater than the energy utilised by, and built into, the new construct or process. In other words, wherever we find construction we find a greater amount of deconstruction somewhere else in the system. This is true for the inorganic, the organic, the social and the intellectual dimensions of reality.

The peak of the food chain is the human being. Humanity is the consummate predator. There is no way human beings could live without consuming large amounts of organic material derived from other living creatures. There is also no way humans can live and prosper without the sacrifice of other human beings - beginning with the fundamental and

inescapable sacrifice of motherhood, and ending with the equally inescapable investment of human time and energy into productive efforts. There is also no way anything of higher value can be brought about by human beings without sacrifice. Political prominence, communal cohesion, scientific excellence, technological achievements, works of art, music and literature, religious commitment, moral distinction - you name it - are all subject to the law of entropy.

This means that reality, as we know it, will never get rid of sacrifice. Sacrifice sustains its very fabric. If that is the case, we have no choice but to retrieve the biblical insight that sacrifice, for all the suffering and death it entails, constitutes an indispensable, creative and redemptive process in the world. It is the price to be paid for the preciousness of existence. If God is perceived to be the Source of the reality we experience, we have to concede that God wills and blesses sacrifice.

Our hedonist culture is hostile to sacrifice, though it expects the rest of reality to sacrifice for its own gratification. Obviously hedonist culture is wrong on this point, but believers, humanists and ecologists, who oppose hedonism and alleviate suffering, also need a healthy dose of realism in this regard. If entropy is inescapable and indispensable, comprehensive wellbeing cannot refer to an ideal state in which nobody suffers and nobody dies. It can only mean that everybody and everything suffers and dies meaningfully, that is, for the sake of the greater wellbeing of the dynamic system as a whole. That lions will lie down with lambs may be an expression of the longing for justice and peace, but the sad fact is that lions and lambs need to eat if they are to exist.

### *Parasitic existence*

All this does not imply that we are entitled to indulge in a convenient kind of fatalism which serves to legitimate our privileges as humans versus the rest of nature, or as elites versus the rest of humankind. If sacrifices cannot be avoided, the question is by whom, to whose benefit, and in which manner they are being made. It is on this level that the decisive ethical questions present themselves:

- a) Are the sacrifices which humans exact from other species kept below the threshold where these species are able to regenerate themselves, and where the natural sinks can cope with the waste? This is a function of the number of humans around, and the average level of consumption claimed by these humans.
- b) Are the sacrifices that humans have to make to enable other humans to survive and prosper equitably distributed?
- c) Are the sacrifices made by nature and humanity minimised and optimally utilised, or is the entropic waste higher than necessary for healthy survival and reasonable levels of prosperity?

It is not sacrifice which is unacceptable, but parasitism. A parasite cannot be defined as an organism living off the sacrifices of others, because all organisms do that. A parasite is an organism which fails to make return sacrifices for the wellbeing of the whole.

Human parasitism has always been around, but in modernity it has become a dominant cultural trait. With their sacrifices primitive cultures try to make up for the harm they inflict on animals, plants and the soil - at least symbolically. Modernity is characterised by the refusal to sacrifice. Every individual is deemed to be entitled to autonomy, and individual self-interest is deemed to be absolute. Of course, individuals have to cooperate to enhance their common interests. They also have to resign themselves to natural constraints, otherwise they get hurt. But ideally, liberal society rejects obligations of whatever kind.

The same attitude prevails in our collective relation to nature. Nature owes humanity a

living; humanity does not owe nature a living. The right to use technology to create superabundance for humanity at the expense of nature is taken for granted. The implication is, of course, that nature itself is inexhaustible - one of the more serious fallacies of the modernist worldview. Individuals again have the right to appropriate whatever they fancy from this abundance. Nature, society, even one's own body, are nothing but a quarry to be mined for personal pleasure and satisfaction.

Immediate and total gratification has become the dominant expectation and the motivation to acquire more, whether by effort or opportunity. The legitimacy of this attitude is ceaselessly reaffirmed and propagated by the advertising and entertainment industries. Technologically and psychologically powered lures whip up the desire for novelty, deprecate what one possesses and incite higher consumption. The flip side of this phenomenon is that the orchestrated and perpetualised non-attainment of immediate satisfaction has become a major source of frustration and anger.

The point to be made is that modernist culture represents a full-circle inversion of the original sacrificial paradigm. In the original version, vulnerable and morally imperfect human beings had become aware of their ultimate dependence and indebtedness to the vast and superior constellation of forces which determined their lives. They tried to acknowledge their indebtedness by yielding their most precious possessions to a deity which they believed controlled this constellation of forces - *pars pro toto*. In the current version the life-enabling constellation of forces has turned into the dominion of autonomous, 'deified' human beings who expect the world to sacrifice its most precious possessions - *pars pro toto*.

### *The modernist revolution in worldview*

How did modern humanity attain this dominance over reality? Science and technology cannot be the answer, because primitive cultures also use science and technology at their level of development. Rather, it is a revolution in worldview which characterises modernity. Crudely speaking, the first step was the abstraction of the divine dimension from the concrete world of time, space and energy, and the simultaneous abstraction of the soul from the body and its social and natural dependencies (cf Kaminsky 1995:180ff). One could call this process the emancipation of the deity from earthly trappings of nature and society, and the emancipation of the person from all socio-psycho-somatic entanglements. One could also call it the 'overpersonalisation' of God and the self, that is the absolutisation of the personal at the expense of the non-personal dimensions of reality.

This emancipation marks the transition from Hebrew to Hellenistic frames of reference. For the Hebrews the divine was the personal power active in all processes of nature and society; for the Hellenists it was the abstract idea of truth, goodness and beauty, located in the spiritual world of timeless and spaceless eternity. For the Hebrews the soul was the concretely living human being as opposed to a corpse - a piece of mud granted life by God. For the Hellenists the soul was the immortal spark of perfection temporarily imprisoned in a malleable and corruptible body. For the Hebrews salvation was *shalom*, that is, the flourishing of the creature in a healthy natural and social context under the benign guidance and protection of the Master of nature and society. For the Hellenists salvation was deification, that is, the escape of the divine spark from temporality and corporality into the spiritual realm of eternity where it belongs.

But an abstract, worldless God is as unreal as an abstract, bodiless soul. What is experienced as unreal is also irrelevant and can be ignored. It is this scrapping of the abstract (God and soul) which marks the transition from classical to modern thought. The historical stages on this way were Aristotelianism, nominalism, empiricism and

utilitarianism. What remains, when the abstract is deleted with some consistency, is a mechanical world determined by natural laws - consisting of nothing but material to be deconstructed and reconstructed at will to serve all kinds of utility - and a mechanical body, also determined by natural laws, consisting of physiological functions to be manipulated and exploited at will to serve any kind of pleasure.

It is this set of assumptions which brought about the modernist parasite. The natural world and the social context are not supposed to have needs, to make demands, to lay claim on solidarity. Not even the needs of one's psycho-somatic creatureliness are taken into account, except where their neglect leads to annoying and unpleasant consequences. Boundless sexual gratification, the thrill of the shopping spree, the ecstasy of the powerful machine, and the 'high' produced by drugs are some of the ways in which gratification is sought. But these ways also enhance the craving and the misery of an unfulfilled life. The problem is that we have lost a sense of the meaning, and the inescapable necessity, of sacrifice.

Can this situation be redeemed? Modernist humanity seeks no redemption. But the continuation of this mindset has begun to question the very survival of the human species and we can ignore the danger signals only at our peril. The insights gained by science, the powers unleashed by technology, and the dynamics of progress cannot be undone; nor would that be desirable. As stated above this is not where the problem is located. Nor can we go back on human emancipation. Humanity has come of age and that is, at least partially, both the aim and the consequence of the biblical message. But the abstraction of the self as a dominant and exploitative command centre from its total natural, social and psycho-somatic context does not lead to the freedom and self-determination so eagerly sought by modernity. On the contrary, it leads to much more subtle and more crippling enslavements.

To survive we have to rediscover the fact that we are inextricably embedded in a world of multiple interdependencies. The idea that freedom was possible without responsibility is a suicidal self-delusion. To get out of the impasse we must forge a new reciprocal and sacrificial relationship both with ourselves as earthbound creatures and with the tightly woven network of our natural and social environments, of which our selves are inextricable parts.

### *The rationale of a personal concept of God*

The question is whether a reciprocal and sacrificial partnership with reality is possible where the life-determining constellation of natural, social, and psycho-somatic forces lacks communicative competence. Modernity shows that it is not, and many forms of traditionalism point in the same direction.

In African traditionalism, for instance, the supreme being is inaccessible and unapproachable. It does not reveal a will, it does not speak, it does not act, it does not hear prayers, it does not expect sacrifices - it simply subsists in its continuous, overwhelming and unpredictable impact on life. Though personified, it is not experienced existentially as a person but as 'fate' (Nürnberger 1975:174-200). People direct their sacrifices and prayers at their deceased, whose authority and care they have experienced, and who they assume might be closer to the levers of cosmic power. But ancestors are not believed to be in full control of reality. Therefore traditionalists also resort to magic and sorcery in the attempt to manipulate the unknown constellation of forces in their favour. That again causes much suspicion and fear. Communicative competence, or personhood, is the highest form of existence known to humans, indeed the capacity which makes humans human. Just as we have to rediscover our own personalities as the communicative centres of our socio-psycho-

somatic totalities, we have to rediscover the personal God as the communicative centre of the natural, social and spiritual reality we experience as a whole. As we have seen, God without the world is an abstraction - but the world without God is also an abstraction. Just as we cannot relate to another human body as such (bypassing the person) without dehumanising this body, we cannot relate to the world as such (bypassing a personal God) without reducing it to mere material.

It is futile to ask whether such a personal command centre of the universe exists. The question is how communication with the personal command centre of reality differs from the treatment of reality as an impersonal quarry for personal self-gratification. It is the difference between a spouse and a prostitute. Faith in a personal God once again makes it possible to approach reality with the awe and deference it deserves. In spite of our scientific insight and technological mastery, we have remained totally dependent on reality. We also have become guilty over against reality in the most varied and vicious forms. Guilt has to be acknowledged and atoned for in some form or another if humans are to remain human.

Once that is understood, the far-reaching significance of the inversion of the original paradigm by the early church becomes apparent. The human being is not supposed to give sacrifices to appease a potentially wrathful God, the Master of a mysterious and vindictive environment. Rather, the Creator and Master of a transparent natural, social and psycho-somatic reality is prepared to sacrifice part of himself so that we can live and prosper. 'If all life belongs to God, then it may be said that God gives of himself to make forgiveness possible' (Fretheim 1984:138f). It is absolutely critical for the future of humankind and the earth as a whole that we do not propose to make a few sacrifices to give a wounded nature a chance. Rather we must be taken by God into the broad stream of sacrifice which sustains us through other creatures and other creatures through us.

It is God who suffers in the suffering of plants, animals and human bodies including our own. Our infinite indebtedness to whatever sustains our lives is absorbed by God's willingness to bear the pain which our needs inflict on natural, social and psycho-somatic reality. Obviously this overarching indebtedness and accountability in no way obviates respect for the specific entities we are faced with in our daily lives. On the contrary, it restores to them and to us the immeasurable dignity and communicative competence of the creature of a personal God.

It is by virtue of this self-giving, suffering love of God that we are justified to eat and be merry. It is a profound kind of joy to which we are invited, a joy which does not ignore the suffering necessary to make it happen. But we are also invited to be involved in the dynamics of God's suffering love. By identifying with Christ, the authentic human being, we participate in the creative authority, the redemptive concern and the global vision of the God who revealed himself in Christ. Within the greater movement of God's love we become willing to sacrifice our most precious possessions - our time, our energy, our very lives, *pars pro toto* - to make it possible for other creatures to survive and prosper. It is this divine power of love which could motivate us to reduce our numbers, our consumption, our whole predatory, oppressive and exploitative behaviour to the indispensable and inescapable minimum.

#### 4. Notes

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