

The animal sacrifice and its critics

by

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Abstract:

Animal sacrifice - to kill one or more animals and offering them to the gods - was the central observance of ancient Mediterranean religion. The traditional blood sacrifice was part of a cycle of life and death in which both animals and humans were expected to gain. During the Empire, Christians as well as pagans criticised such sacrifices. This article is about the pagan and the Christian criticism against the Greco-Roman blood sacrifices.

In the traditional sacrificial discourse power was built on killing animals in a cultic setting and on distributing and eating their meat. In the new soteriological discourse, power was built on a symbolic capital of moral and physical purity and intellectual insights, and the goals were spiritual excellence and salvation. Some of the religions which took part in this new discourse continued the animal sacrifice, while in Christianity, the animal sacrifice was disposed of.

Introduction

Animal sacrifice - to kill one or more animals and offering them to the gods - was the central observance of ancient Mediterranean religion. When the Greek rhetorician Libanius wrote to Theodosius in defense of pagan temples, attacked by Christian monks, he described them as places where “farmers have placed their hopes for themselves and their wives and children, for their oxen and for the ground they have sown and planted” (*For temples*, 30.8). The traditional blood sacrifice was part of a cycle of life and death in which both animals and humans were expected to gain.

During the Empire, Christians as well as pagans wrote against such sacrifices. This article is about the main points in the pagan and Christian criticism against the Greco-Roman blood sacrifices.

Pagan criticism of the animal sacrifice

“They sell men their blessings, and one can buy from them health, it may be, for a calf, wealth for four oxen, a royal throne for a hundred, a safe return from Troy to Pylos for nine bulls, and a fair voyage from Aulis to Troy for a king’s daughter!” (Lucian, *On Sacrifice*, 3). The idea that gods could be bribed was not according

to the taste of the satirical author Lucian, who wrote in the early second century. One of his complaints is that sacrifices, feasts and processions reveal a low opinion of the gods.

Neither is the cruder aspect of the gods’ gains to his liking: “If anybody sacrifices, they (i.e. the gods) all have a feast, opening their mouths for the smoke and drinking the blood that is spilt at the altars, just like flies; but if they dine at home, their meal is nectar and ambrosia.” (*ibid.* 9). The comparison between gods and flies is not flattering for the Olympians, but reflects than an animal sacrifice with its butchery, blood and carcasses must obviously have attracted not only gods, but also loads of flies.

Lucian mocks the rule that those who sacrifice ought to be clean, at the same time as “the priest himself stands there all bloody, just like the Cyclops of old, cutting up the victim, removing the entrails, plucking out the heart, pouring the blood about the altar, and doing everything possible in the way of piety.” (*ibid.* 13). This was a common criticism. How could one expect to reach divinity and elevated spirituality through bloody slaughterings?

Only briefly and in passing is the animal’s situation commented upon when Lucian says that it is slaughtered “under the god’s eyes, while it bellows plaintively - making, we must suppose, auspicious sounds, and fluting low music to accompany the sacrifice!” (*ibid.* 12). That the Egyptians, according to Lucian, mourn over the sacrificial victim, he finds equally ludicrous as their worship of animals (*ibid.* 15).

At the end of the third century, the neoplatonist Porphyry asks why, if abstinence from animal food contributes to purity - why does one slay sheep and cattle in sacrifices “and reckon this rite to be holy and pleasing to the gods?” (*On Abstinence* 1.57.4).

Porphyry introduces the vegetarian argument and claims that even if animals are sacrificed, it does not mean that it is necessary to eat them. It simply does not follow that because it is proper to sacrifice animals, it is also necessary to feed on them (*ibid.* 2.2.1-2). Another of Porphyry’s points is that even if some animals must

be destroyed because of their savagery (*agrion*), it does not follow that domesticated animals (*hemera*) should also be killed (*ibid.* 2.4.2). A third point is that if some people need to eat meat, as athletes, soldiers, people who work with their bodies, and even rhetors, it does not follow that philosophers too should eat meat (*ibid.* 1.27.1; 2.4.3). It is quite clear that Porphyry's opposition to meat-eating and sacrifices was not aimed at everyone, but at a professional elite of philosophers.

Like other neoplatonists, Porphyry at the same time felt obliged to voice a certain support for animal sacrifice. While he tried to promote an ideal spiritual religion, he did not totally condemn the traditional sacrificial religion, even if he criticised it. By introducing a hierarchy of divine beings, cultic acts and human worshippers, Porphyry attempted to combine the religion of the spiritual elite with the religion of the common people.

According to Porphyry, the evil *daimones* "rejoice in the 'drink-offerings and smoking meat' on which their pneumatic part grows fat, for it lives on vapours and exhalations, in a complex fashion and from complex sources, and it draws power from the smoke that rises from blood and flesh." (*ibid.* 2.42.3). Porphyry explicitly warns against drawing such beings to oneself and adds: "If it is necessary for cities to appease even these beings that is nothing to do with us." (*ibid.* 2.43.2). These "gods" can only provide things that Porphyry and his fellow philosophers do not need, and which they even despise. Material gods want material sacrifices, immaterial gods want spiritual sacrifices.¹ In *On Abstinence*, Porphyry does his utmost to distance himself and the spiritual elite from that type of sacrifices and from the demons that they attract, at the same time as he has to admit that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice animals to appease them.

Since Porphyry is of the opinion that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice animals, but is adamant that it is not necessary to eat them, an ordinary sacrifice becomes similar to a sacrifice performed to drive away evil - an apotropaic sacrifice - in which the victim was never eaten. These sacrifices were made to the gods of the underworld, were conceived of as polluting, and called "sacrifices not tasted" (*thysiai ageustoi*) (van Straten 1995:3). If Porphyry wanted blood sacrifices to be made, but not the slaughtered animals to be eaten, he in reality made all animal sacrifices into apotropaic ones, and put all gods on a par with the gods of the underworld. Porphyry himself explicitly draws the parallel to the apotropaic sacrifice and brands all eating of meat from sacrificial animals as contaminating (*miasma*) (*ibid.* 2.31.2). In this way, animal sacrifice was reinvented as the custom of people who lacked spiritual insight and it was effectively made into a cultural borderline between the spiritual elite and the *hoi polloi*.

In traditional religion, those who were the masters of sacrifices, who were able to kill most animals and to distribute most meat, had the highest status. The exaggerated sacrifices made by some of the emperors are cases in point. When Porphyry and his neoplatonic colleagues made purity into their chief symbolic capital they were

introducing an alternative religious value system in which religious power was distributed according to other rules than the traditional ones.

In the fourth century, Ammianus Marcellinus touches the subject of sacrifice only briefly in his biography of emperor Julian. According to Ammianus, Julian "drenched the altars with the blood of an excessive number of victims, sometimes offering up a hundred oxen at once, with countless flocks of various other animals, and with white birds hunted out by land and sea." (*The History*, 22.12.6). Ammianus adds that the emperor's soldiers "gorged themselves on the abundance of meat" and because of their eating and drinking of wine, almost every day had to be carried to their quarters by passers-by. When Ammianus sums up the qualities and faults of the emperor, he characterizes Julian as superstitious rather than truly religious, because "he sacrificed innumerable victims without regard to cost, so that one might believe that if he had returned from the Parthians, there would soon have been a scarcity of cattle." (*ibid.* 25.4.17).

This account clearly leaves us with the impression that ritual butchering was no longer conceived of as a pious religious act - at least not when it was performed on an excessive scale. Ammianus stresses as censurable both the great number of the victims and the overeating that was the result of the excessive killing. In the late fourth century, when Ammianus wrote, excesses in sacrifices were simply not *comme il faut*.

The Christian polemic

The pagan opposition to animal sacrifices was aimed at the anthropomorphic view of the gods; the false idea that gods needed sacrifices; the simple *do-ut-des* thinking; the uncleanness which the handling of the dead bodies of animals implied; the excesses in the quantity of animals offered to the gods; and the overeating that was sometimes involved. This opposition shows great concern for how animal sacrifices influenced humans in a negative direction, little concern for the animals which were killed.

The Christian opposition was similar to the pagan, but stood in an apologetic context and was part of standard counterattacks against paganism. The apologetic context gave the Christian opposition a few significant additions in relation to the pagan. One was that where pagan authors only went part of the way in demonizing the former gods, the Christians went the whole hog. In Christian thinking, pagan gods were systematically reinvented as evil demons, and blood sacrifices were seen as serving the purpose of providing food for these evil beings (Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 26-27; Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 45). Another difference was that the Christians did not only spiritualize the sacrifice, they substituted the animal body with the human body, especially with the master-body of Christ. In this way, they continued the Greco-Roman sacrificial discourse, but they also combined it with the spiritualizing and personalizing religious trends which were characteristic for these centuries.

In the *Apologeticus*, the work Tertullian wrote in defence of Christianity, and apparently also in defence of religious tolerance, he praises with few inhibitions the excellences of Christianity in relation to all other religions. (So much for religious tolerance!) With blunt directness and in his usual ironical way, Tertullian contrasts pagan and Christian worship: "Let one man worship God, another Jove; let this man raise suppliant hands to heaven, that man to the altar of Fides; let one (if you so suppose) count the clouds as he prays, another the panels of the ceiling; let one dedicate his own soul to his god, another a goat's". (*Apologeticus* 24.5). Tertullian neither estimated the souls of goats, nor did he find much of interest in an ox about to be sacrificed, but describes it as "a worthless ox longing to die" (*ibid.* 30.4.6).

The Christian opposition against animal sacrifices not seldom took the form of a polemic of polarities. While Tertullian contrasts the soul of man with that of a goat, Lactantius, for instance, says that "God does not desire the sacrifice of a dumb animal, nor of death and blood, but of man and life." (*The Divine Institutes* 6. 24), and Prudentius contrasts the worship of Christ with "those who offer rotting entrails to carved stones." (*A Reply to Address of Symmachus* 2.779-80). In this polemic there is a downgrading of animals in relation to humans and clear attempts to exclude them from the religious discourse as foreign to the divine world.

A Christian text which comments more directly on the differences between the Christian and the pagan sacrifice is the *Gospel of Philip*, probably composed in the third century. It is a collection of statements about sacraments most likely intended for those who were to be baptized.

The Gospel of Philip reveals a special interest in animal sacrifices. They are part of the pagan ritual system, which the Christian sacramental system is competing against. Animal sacrifices are seen as being invented to enslave humans and make them worship powers that are not real gods. The text says explicitly that those to whom animals were sacrificed "were not gods" (63:5; cf. also Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 10.2). On the contrary, these powers are themselves animals. As put by the text: "Indeed the animals were the ones to whom they sacrificed." (55:1-2).

When men have become Christians, they will no longer slaughter animals in honour of the powers (54:32-55:1). The change from animal sacrifice to human symbolic sacrifice is commented upon in a suggestive way: "God is a man-eater. For this reason men are [sacrificed] to him. Before men were sacrificed, animals were being sacrificed, since those to whom they were sacrificed were not gods". (62:35-63:5).

Seldom is the Christian variant of the Roman sacrificial culture, as well as its continuation of that culture, characterized more bluntly. The Christian god is not fed by animals, but by humans. In the saying that "God is a man-eater" (Coptic: *pnoute ouamrome pe*), the implication of the Christian discourse on sacrifice is given a radical expression when human bodies fully replace animal bodies. This man-eating god is launched as a contrast to

the powers who were nourished by animal sacrifices (cf. also Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 7). And in contrast to the animals who were offered up to God alive, and then died, man is offered up to God dead, and then lives (*Gospel of Philip* 55:3-5). Behind this simile lies the idea that humans are spiritually born through baptism, and will through baptism receive true life.

A more concerned view of animals is found in the converted Christian and teacher of rhetoric, Arnobius from Sicca in North Africa, who wrote a work in seven books labelled *Against the Gentiles*. Arnobius is one of the few authors who bases his opposition against animal sacrifices partly on pity towards animals.

Animal sacrifices presuppose, according to Arnobius, gods who are not only like humans, but rather on the childish and cruel side at that. Arnobius criticises the view that gods are nourished (*alere*) on the sacrifices (*ibid.* 7.3), that they are given pleasures (*voluptas*) by them (*ibid.* 7.4), that they are appeased (*placare*) by them (*ibid.* 7.5-8), and that they are honored (*honorare*) through them (*ibid.* 7.13-15). These views imply that gods are human, moody, and can be bribed and that they rejoice in honours that humans confer upon them. Arnobius has nothing but scorn for those that hold such views about the gods.

But Arnobius has also something to say on behalf of the animals which are sacrificed, and speaks against the cruelty and injustice which are done to them (*ibid.* 8.9). His most original move is to bestow human voice to an ox and let it speak out its complaint against the unfairness involved in its killing.² The main arguments of the ox are, in short, that it is unfair that it is sacrificed to placate the gods because of sins committed by humans, that it does not commit sins like humans do, and that there are basic similarities between cattle and human beings. Those similarities pertain to a common breath of life, common senses, common bodily equipments, for instance, the same number of limbs, love for its offspring, and the necessity of carnal union to bring forth offspring. Finally, the ox suggests that he too is a rational being and that the sounds he utters in reality constitutes a language. In this way he claims for himself what the Stoics, and usually also the Christians, restricted to humans, *logos endiathetos* and *logos prophorikos* - internal reason and external reason (which is language). The ox ends its speech with a plea to Jupiter in which it characterizes the acts of the sacrificers in terms which stress that these acts are bestial and savage - terms which are usually applied to the behaviour of beasts: "Is not this, then, bestial (*ferus*), monstrous (*immanis*), savage (*saevus*), does it not seem to thee, O Jupiter, unjust (*iniuste*) and barbarous (*barbarus*) for me to be killed, for me to be slain, that though mightest be appeased and that acquittal rest on the guilty?" (*ibid.* 7.9)

It is reasonable to presume that Arnobius' pity for the ox was also based on an identification with the Christian martyrs. When he gave a human voice to the beast, we are, through the mouth of the ox, also listening to an argumentation on behalf of Christian martyrs who like this ox were innocently slain.

Christianity, sacrifice, and the human body

The pagan and Christian critics of the animal sacrifices used similar arguments. The agricultural context in which blood sacrifices had originally been developed was obviously no longer sufficient to legitimate it. Arnobius rattles off a whole string of wild animals and carnivores as well as birds that could have been sacrificed, and asks why these creatures are not just as effective as those usually offered to the gods (*ibid.* 7.16)?

When the pagan sacrificial culture was changed for Christianity, a symbolic and ritual burden was lifted from sacrificial animals and loaded on Christian bodies. Traditional religion had been located in the animal body as the most cherished product of agriculture and animal husbandry, and the religious techniques had been aimed at transforming that body from living flesh to tasty meat, to give the gods their due share and to interpret what was inscribed in the intestines of the animal. Christians declined to participate in ritual butchery of animals, and replaced on a symbolic level the animal body with the human body. They worshipped a god who was himself the sacrifice. Thus, the master-body of Christ replaced the animal sacrifice as a religious and cultural key-symbol. It became a powerful symbol that gave rise to thought, aroused religious feelings and became a subject of veneration and piety.

The material and spiritual qualities of human beings converged in human flesh. This type of bodily reality begged for interpretation - whether the subject of interpretation was the resurrected body of the saviour, his flesh and blood consumed in the Eucharist, the mutilated body of the martyrs or the ascetic bodies of the holy men and women of the church. Sacrificial language was transferred to human beings, primarily to Christ, but also to the martyrs. Ignatius, who was made a martyr in Rome early in the second century AD, wrote a letter to the Roman Christians, in which he says: "I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts in order that I may be found pure bread of Christ." (*Romans* 4.2). Ignatius calls himself, "God's sacrifice" (*ibid.*), while Polycarp, who was burnt in Smyrna, is described as "a noble ram" and "a burnt offering," (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.32-33).

While in Christianity, there was a reinterpretation of the animal sacrifice in a new type of sacrificial discourse which was no longer dependent on an animal being killed, in other new religious movements in antiquity the sacrificial animals were reinstalled in new cultic and hermeneutical settings. The most dramatic of these

innovations was the taurobolium, the most widespread was the mysteries of Mithras, while neoplatonic theurgy represented a new sacrificial practice as well as a new theory of sacrifice.

The taurobolium, the Mithras cult, and the theurgical rites were innovations within traditional sacrificial religion. These innovations had moved the sacrifice from its original agricultural environment towards a new cosmological context. In this new context, the animal sacrifice developed a prominent salvatory aspect. The animals which were killed - in myths or in reality - were now used instrumentally to serve the salvatory ambitions of the sacrificers.

Christianity represented a new type of sacrificial innovation in relation to the taurobolium, the Mithras cult and theurgy because, in Christianity, a sacrificial discourse was continued without bloody offerings. In Christianity, the body of Christ had replaced the animal body as a ritual link between God and human beings. Real animals were excluded from Christian rituals, but bestial imagery was still used, for instance, when Christ was identified with the sacrificial lamb.

Conclusion

In the second to the fourth century CE, two types of religious discourses were competing. In the traditional sacrificial discourse power was built on killing animals in a cultic setting and on distributing and eating their meat. In the new soteriological discourse, power was built on a symbolic capital of moral and physical purity and intellectual insights, and the goals were spiritual excellence and salvation. Some of the religions which took part in this new discourse continued the animal sacrifice, while in Christianity, the animal sacrifice was disposed of.

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¹ Even if Porphyry is rather negative of animal sacrifices in *On Abstinence*, Eusebius points out that Porphyry claimed that sacrifices also should be made to the etherial and heavenly forces (*Preparatio evang.* 4.8). It supports the view that there is an ambivalence in Porphyry's treatment of sacrifices. Cf. also Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian Mysteries* 5.14.

² The speech of this ox is a faint reminder of how in parsī religion, the soul of the ox complained to Ahura Mazda over his fate (*Yasna* 29). We also remember how Plutarch let the bold pig, Gryllos, speak up against Odysseus (see Plutarch, *Gryllos*).

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