

THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION FROM SACRIFICE TO MERCY

SACRIFICE



A community in crisis unites by blaming one person for all its problems.



Killing the victim brings temporary peace to the community. The victim is both cause and cure of the crisis. Such power appears divine.



Over time, spontaneous scapegoating is ritualized into sacrifice. Violence appears to be sacred and good.

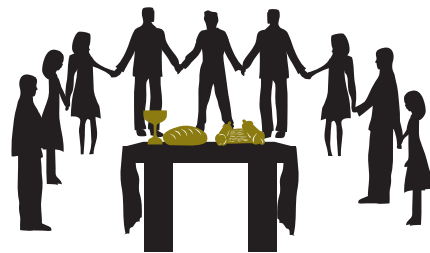
MERCY



The Hebrew religion slowly undid the idea that victims were guilty and God was violent.



God is revealed to be on the side of the victim and to be a God of life, not death, of forgiveness not vengeance.



We are called to a new unity formed as we recognize the innocence of our victims, the wickedness of violence, and God's call to mercy.

SACRIFICE

Why did ancient people believe that killing a human or animal victim would appease the gods? From our vantage point, they seem guilty of muddled thinking. However, the practice of uniting a community around a sacrificial event is based on a sound insight into human social dynamics. Today we call it scapegoating. Here are some modern day remnants of the sacrificial system that reveal just how clever the ancients were.

Gossip and Cliques

Unity can be created through exclusion and character assassination. Think high school or water-cooler gossip in which rivals are undercut and group belonging solidified by “sacrificing” an unfortunate victim.

Sport Rivalries

Crowds gather for festivals of emotional release around the symbolic annihilation of an enemy. When the ritual is successful (your team wins), fans experience elation and the opposing team is best served by silently disappearing into the locker room, providing the crowd with a symbolic death.

Patriotism

Patriotic feelings create national unity by comparing ourselves favorably to other countries. Those who are not part of “us” do not deserve the same respect and provide a ready supply of sacrificial victims (enemies who can be killed without remorse) should our morale need a little boost.

MERCY

The ancient system of sacrifice attributed the boosted morale and feelings of unity to the gods. And because the gods were said to demand the sacrifice, it was a sacred duty. But the Hebrew prophet Isaiah insisted, “they hated me without cause,” and the Gospels proclaimed Jesus’ innocence despite his conviction by the authorities. This revelation of the innocence of sacrificial victims undermined the workings of the system, which is why no ancient sacrificial systems have survived intact. All we have are remnants, as described above. To leave behind the remnants entirely requires that we cultivate mercy towards those we would exclude, condemn, or kill without remorse and learn to create unity without the need for victims.