

The Scapegoat: Notes on Sacrifice

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There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV)

The goddess Pallas Athena, gray-eyed, is said to have especially loved cow sacrifices¹. In Ancient Greek culture, a sacrifice was also a meal. The priests cooked meals for the community when the animal was sacrificed and spread the ash on the hill of the sacrifice. This symbolic burning could be said to be redemptive and purifying for the community like a scapegoat was for the early Israelites.

Pallas Athena is also the goddess of war. The prominent gods and goddesses could be said to represent the conditions of humankind. By ‘condition’ I refer to the universal behaviors of collective humankind that lead to progress and rapid change.

In the special case of the cow, there are two Ancient Greek stories of importance. The first is the story of Europa’s seduction or rape, and the second is of Io the princess of Argos. Zeus seduced Europa by transforming into a cow and attracting her interest inconspicuously. I believe this state of concealment by Zeus represents his mischievous aims. In this case, to carry off Europa to the island of Crete.

Argos is in Southern Greece, not too distant from Crete. Io, a princess of Argos, was transformed into a heifer. Some say it was a punishment from Hera and others suggest she was transformed by Zeus to hide his adultery. Zeus, always the dissembling god whose name etymologically means “to shine”, is paradoxical in his tendency to conceal. He doesn’t really live up to his name.

Why should both these stories involve transfiguration into cows? The stories seem to coalesce contextually—that is, they involve regal figures and Zeus’ dissembling. In the first, it is Zeus who is transfigured (I believe this suggests by design that his intentions were impure) and he carries off Europa who

¹ “The center of Greek religious rituals was the animal sacrifice, hence the presence of the altar at the temple. Most often, the animals were oxen, goats, bulls and sheep. Some gods were thought to prefer certain animals -- Athena was believed to have liked cows as sacrifices.”

is made queen of Crete. This story is vaguely familiar. It resonates with the story of Helen as well. Zeus sneaks in, steals his choice of woman, and she is crowned in a foreign land. Zeus represents the conscience of a people; the collective conscience is the ghost of history accumulated in the acts of a people. It is moral clause associated with the collective unconscious, defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica* as the “term introduced by psychiatrist Carl Jung to represent a form of the [unconscious](#) (that part of the [mind](#) containing memories and impulses of which the individual is not aware) common to mankind as a whole and originating in the inherited structure of the [brain](#). It is distinct from the personal unconscious, which arises from the experience of the individual.” This ‘moral clause’ is also embedded in our eusocial nature and need for self-preservation.

Io, on the other hand, is kidnapped to avenge the kidnapping of Europa. It is an act of revenge. Zeus falls in love with her and consequently must hide his adulterous intention—or Hera has punished Io by transforming her. Either way, Io is demoted to an animal sacrificed to Pallas Athena.

War is a state, or condition, that radically alters humankind. It is the political act of collectives against other collectives, whether as vengeance or strategical advance. Zeus is the dominant influence, the ‘light’ acting on the collectives. ‘Light’ is an active principle and, by nature, is revelatory by being the source of animation. The cow in these two stories suggest Pallas Athena as the ‘condition’ invoked by these stories. After all, one becomes the sacrificed animal in a totemic sense.

Metallurgy emerged at Mt. Ida in Crete. Perhaps Hephasteus began his work helping to conquer Argos? Is mythology descriptive text to embed history humanistically?

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Christianity, notes Girard, overcame the art of sacrifice. In *When These Things Begin* he writes, ““The principle, the goal of philosophy, of humanism, is to hide the founding murder. To be Christian is to unveil it.” In the Old Testament, hoofed-toed animals who did not chew their own cud were forbidden to eat. Camels, pigs, and hares were prohibited (Leviticus 11, KJV). Christ overcame death in his Crucifixion. St. Paul notes in the New Testament that the eating of the prohibited flesh is now permitted. Christianity is not bound by dietary restrictions. Jesus Christ indeed set the ground for redeemed humanity against the pretense of law. “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of

God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.” (Galatians 2:19-21, KJV). ‘Love feasts’ of the Christians included bread and wine. Essentially the Christian path is ‘taking up the Cross’ and walking with Christ. Kindness is a sacrificial art because it is counter to Original Sin which testifies that we are flawed by nature and therefore transgressive by nature. The resurrection of the flesh is an ascension to spirit.

Kindness balances transgression. The scapegoat restores humanity. Carrying your Cross, you will face fears and frustrations but ultimately God will be with you in those tribulations. Freedom requires the responsible act, the devotion to truth and dignity. To commit to the path of truth means to practice compassion for others and yourself. This is a balancing act between Self and World.

Great leaders not only lead humankind forward, but they absolve the sins of the past. Gandhi bridged understanding between Indians and the British colonialists. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. united Black Americans and insisted on nonviolence, ultimately martyring himself. ‘Peacekeeping’ metaphorically means shedding light on the nature of error. Christ liberates humanity in suggesting the dietary laws. St. Paul extended His teaching by offering liberated guidelines. We no longer have to concern ourselves with the sacrifice. Christianity, in guiding the creation of the Western world, grafted many profound things into the soul of civilization. Jesus’ Crucifixion is the ultimate teaching of the meaning of sacrifice, and suffering and how to overcome it. Jesus is the superman. He riddles the Unground and re-creates the human spirit; by regarding humanity’s errors, Jesus shows compassion and grief. He refers to the teachings of Pharisees and Sadducees as leaven. Leaven rises in the bread. Bread is seen as the body in Christian symbolism, thus Jesus is the teacher as well as the teaching. One must exemplify one’s pearls and shine them with one’s acts. Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves.

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Myth is perhaps the way cultures compete and learn to cooperate as well. It is a way of telling stories, first orally then in writing, for generations to remember history and human traditions.

We would be a fool to act as Zeus and seduce the European value system with the bull of social justice, and toss it to the winds. Instead we should elaborate and re-interpret these histories to reflect our current cultural crises.

It is wiser to revise than utterly destroy. Spread the ashes on the hill.

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Mythologies of the past, though imperfect, are the quiet revenge of historical misdeeds. We sacrifice each other to Mammon and Moloch. In faith, we are Crucified to our freedom in the Unground.

The dietary restrictions, some speculate, were to preserve health in the community. Perhaps it is time we resolve to free ourselves from crucifixion. Jesus prayed in fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking the Father to 'take this cup.' When we offer the libations, should they be the blood of brothers?

References:

1. [Religious Offerings and Sacrifices to the Greek Gods \(synonym.com\)](http://synonym.com)

About the Author

Dustin Pickering is author of the poetry collections *Salt and Sorrow*, *Knows No End*, *A Matter of Degrees*, *Only and Again*, and *The Forever Abode*. He has a short essay published at Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, and was a contributor to Huffington Post briefly. He is also the author of the fairy tale *The Red Velvet Robe*. His upcoming book *The Stone and the Square* will be published by Hawakal Publishers in Kolkata, India.