

Law & The Sacred: After Serrano Sacrifice and Church Politics

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Casey, Fisher and Ramsay claim to speak in the name of "Christianity and the values of ordinary people". In order to claim to speak for Christianity, they must clearly demarcate who does and who does not have the right to call themselves Christian. Any ambiguity must be excluded. So called "liberals" must be cast out to the extent that they would compromise the integrity of the group. This attitude is much more akin to performing sacrifice than understanding it. But then, my respondents could make neither head nor tail of what I described as the logic of sacrifice.

The logic of sacrifice as I understand it is founded in the binary logic of the "A" versus "not A" distinction. What is clear from the extensive anthropological and sociological literature on sacrifice is that it is sacrifice that forms identity and community through integration and separation. Both communion and expiation safeguard the unity of the community through a process of differentiation. Whether a particular sacrifice is concerned with communion or expiation, its underlying logic is grounded in opposition. The underlying unity of these two modes of sacrifice is perhaps best expressed by the English word "atonement" which "is also always at-one-ment", to make at one. Although Hubert and Mauss had recognised the irreducibility of these two modes, they were unable to establish their unity. Nancy Jay suggests that this was due primarily to their commitment to the idea, beloved of French sociology, that the unity of sacrifice lay in its function as a means of "establishing a means of communicating between the sacred and profane worlds" (Jay 1992: 165 n4). Although Durkheim would not accept this distinction, sacrifice is only about the sacred in as far as the sacred guarantees the identity of the community.

My respondents speak, rather, in the name of those who would wish to purify the temple. They speak of blasphemy. However, there is more than one way in which to take God's name in vain. It is also a jealousy for what is God's that leads me to question too sure an identification as to what constitutes God's dignity. All we can say for certain is that God is glorified where humanity flourishes. This the respondents themselves acknowledge. They consider that the blasphemer in attacking religion is also attacking a human good. But one should not forget that the same argument was also used against the early Church when it stood outside the boundaries of the sacrificial economy of the Roman Empire. There is currently a struggle going on within the Catholic Church between conservative and liberal visions of that same Church. Both visions can claim a certain legitimacy, but not when one or the other wants to claim the whole, to the point of silencing other legitimate voices. There has to be a place within the Church, as within society, for others to push the boundaries and to question what has been taken for granted.

The respondents are correct in noting a certain amount of hyperbole in my article. Perhaps, I have been overzealous. The exigencies of the situation, however, seem to suggest that a certain rhetorical licence is required in order to establish the right for one's voice and place within the conversation. What I find offensive is the ease with which certain reactionary Christians claim to speak for Christianity as a whole. But then, this peculiar sensitivity of mine springs from my equally "peculiar ecclesiology" of a "pluralist Church". The notion of a pluralist Church is, I believe, at least consistent with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. The *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* in particular expresses a very positive attitude towards the pluralism of society and a need for the Church to engage with and incarnate that pluralism. But then, Archbishop George Pell considers that the Second Vatican Council was an experiment that failed.

The bottom line in my defence of Serrano's theological significance is my concern that a verdict was reached before seriously considering the question as to whether Serrano's work has anything theologically worthwhile to say. Casey, Fisher and Ramsay claim that "the community has spoken its preference in overwhelming numbers". But I am also aware of many conservatively inclined Catholics who have found that Serrano's work does raise worthwhile questions, even if ultimately, it is not to their taste. There is much more at stake here than the value of a particular piece of art or even of the integrity of artistic expression. I have jumped on the Serrano bandwagon because both *Piss Christ* and the reaction of those who consider the work to be blasphemous are pointing to something critical about Christian identity and the role of sacrifice in constituting that identity. My argument has been that *Piss*

Christ invokes something of the anti-sacrificial trajectory within the Christian tradition, a trajectory to which the anti-Serrano camp would deny any legitimacy, seeking instead to excise it in their efforts to maintain clear and defined boundaries as to who is in and who is out. The anti-sacrificial tradition has a correspondingly more inclusive understanding of the nature of the Church.

Historically, all major developments in sacrificial practice and theology have involved a corresponding development in Church social organisation. Since the Second Vatican Council the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of the Church's identity, has been seen less as a sacrifice and more as a sacred meal. According to Emminghaus

the Mass is a rite derived from a meal, not from a sacrifice... The Lord left his Church the Eucharist, that is, the prayer of thanksgiving over bread and wine as elements of a meal. It was precisely this that he bade her do in memory of him. He did not tell her to carry out a sacrificial rite (Emminghaus 1978: xx).

This has led to a levelling out and a democratisation of the Church that many "traditionalists" lament. (Although both positions have an equally valid claim to tradition.) That *Piss Christ* came onto the scene when the conservative backlash began to gain momentum seems timely to the extent that it can be seen to represent all that "traditionalists" find objectionable about the liberal excesses that had pervaded the Church.

I need finally to respond to the argument put forward by Casey, Fisher and Ramsay that my claims regarding the sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death in the New Testament is one of the few "falsifiable propositions in my article. Their refutation is based upon a simple equation of sacrificial interpretation with sacrificial language that, if accepted, would render my argument absurd. One cannot assume that all language referring to sacrifice was sacrificial in intent. It is, for example, the thesis of David Power, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Catholic University of America, that in calling Christ's death a sacrifice a certain violence is done to sacrificial language (Power 1979: 389). We should recall that in the world of the early Church, sacrifice was one of the principle means of communing with the divine. Christians were often suspected of "atheism" precisely because they did not sacrifice as the pagans understood it. For Christians in this environment to claim that they too have a sacrifice, but one that exceeds and replaces all others was, perhaps, the most straightforward way in which to express the radicalness of the Christian break with sacrifice.

This is not the place to get entangled in exegetical debates about the meaning of sacrificial language within the New Testament. Neither do I believe it to be either desirable or possible to "purify" the New Testament of sacrifice. What I am claiming is that there is enough evidence to warrant that the principle trajectory of New Testament thought was in fact anti-sacrificial. Taking what would seem to be the most unambiguous reference to the sacrificial death of Christ as given by Paul: "Christ, our paschal lamb has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5: 7), it can be seen that sacrificial metaphors are not necessarily sacrificial in their logic. The association between Christ and the Passover lamb was probably both early and natural to the extent that Israel considered the Passover to be the archetype of the eschatological event and the promise of salvation: "Both Josephus and the gospels show that the Passover was a time of intense messianic-eschatological expectation" (Daly 1978: 40). The context of the passage is interesting in that it is a liturgical metaphor used in the aid of an ethical argument. The passage continues: "let us celebrate the feast, then, by getting rid of the old yeast of evil and wickedness, having only the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (Daly 1978: 40). The Eucharistic context of the metaphor of the paschal lamb need not suggest a cultic understanding of sacrifice. Rather, a strong argument can be made that the sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death is perhaps best understood in the light of the eschatological blessings that Christ's death and resurrection inaugurated. Christ achieves what sacrifice cannot. Expiation is not brought about by offerings but by through the witness given by Jesus in his suffering and death to the kingdom of God and the witness that God gives to his servant by his glorification. Jesus' death only has meaning in the logic of his life of giving. His dying-for is the ultimate expression of his living-for others. And so in the memorial of Christ's life, death and resurrection "in the 'sacrifice' of the supper, it is God who gives to [men and women], not [men and women who give] to God." (Power 1995: 118) This in fact turns sacrifice on its head.

Recent scholarship has tended to link the Eucharist with the Jewish idea of *todah* understood as a sacrifice or praise which establishes a continuity between the Eucharist and the ideal life of the Christian. Typical of this approach is Romans 12: 1-2, where Paul argues that this kind of sacrifice is

given by Christ's disciples in a life lived according to the gospel by which they offer their bodies as true worship. That it is Christians themselves who constitute the "new temple" overturns the cultic traffic with transcendence by making the divine an immanent reality not separated from the profane, but transforming the profane into a "new creation". In Christ, all things are reconciled as opposed to the logic of sacrifice which constitutes the identity of a group by opposition and separation. That the sense of sacrifice in the New Testament and early Church is primarily non cultic is attested to the fact, as David Power observes, that the entire community of the baptised "were called priestly long before their officially designated ministers" (Power 1979: 392). The community leaders only began to be called priests with the increasing institutionalisation and the consolidation of the hierarchy of the Church as it completed the move from the private to the public sphere in the Fourth Century. As Daly notes, this process of institutionalisation was at odds with the anti-sacrificial trajectory (Daly, 1978: 139).

Pell's attempt to invoke the aid of the law in his crusade to reconfigure the boundaries of Christian identity make a lot of sense in the light of the historical fact that it was the original rapprochement between Church and State that saw the establishment of sacrifice at the heart of Christian identity. One cannot in the final analysis deny that the logic of sacrifice occupies a rather central position within the Christian tradition. However, I refuse to recognise its legitimacy as the sole Christian position. Whether the two can ever be reconciled is another question. Perhaps it is the wrong question. Perhaps, Christianity is better understood as a conversation rather than a single consistent and complete body of doctrine. It is, however, a conversation in which Serrano's *Piss Christ* deserves at least a hearing.

References

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