



11-2014

# Religion and Realpolitik: Reflections on Sacrifice

Carolyn Marvin

*University of Pennsylvania*, [cmarvin@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:cmarvin@asc.upenn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers)

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Marvin, C. (2014). Religion and Realpolitik: Reflections on Sacrifice. *Political Theology*, 15 (6), 522-535. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1462317X14Z.00000000097>

Preprint version.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/375](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/375)  
For more information, please contact [libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Religion and Realpolitik: Reflections on Sacrifice

## **Abstract**

Enduring groups that seek to preserve themselves, as sacred communities do, face a structural contradiction between the interests of individual group members and the survival interests of the group. In addressing existential threats, sacred communities rely on a spectrum of coercive and violent actions that resolve this contradiction in favor of solidarity. Despite different histories, this article argues, nationalism and religiosity are most powerfully organized as sacred communities in which sacred violence is extracted as sacrifice from community members. The exception is enduring groups that are able to rely on the protection of other violence practicing groups. The argument rejects functionalist claims that sacrifice guarantees solidarity or survival, since sacrificing groups regularly fail. In a rereading of Durkheim's totem taboo, it is argued that sacred communities cannot survive a permanent loss of sacrificial assent on the part of members. Producing this assent is the work of ritual socialization. The deployment of sacrificial violence on behalf of group survival, though deeply sobering, is best constrained by recognizing how violence holds sacred communities in thrall rather than by denying the links between them.

## **Keywords**

sacred community, religious violence, sacrifice, totem, solidarity

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Other Religion | Political Science | Sociology

## **Comments**

Preprint version.

## **Religion and Realpolitik: Reflections on Sacrifice**

**Carolyn Marvin**

**Annenberg School for Communication**

**University of Pennsylvania**

Enduring groups that seek to preserve themselves, as sacred communities do, face a structural contradiction between the interests of individual group members and the survival interests of the group. In addressing existential threats, sacred communities rely on a spectrum of coercive and violent actions that resolve this contradiction in favor of solidarity. Despite different histories, this article argues, nationalism and religiosity are most powerfully organized as sacred communities in which sacred violence is extracted as sacrifice from community members. The exception is enduring groups that are able to rely on the protection of other violence practicing groups. The argument rejects functionalist claims that sacrifice guarantees solidarity or survival, since sacrificing groups regularly fail. In a rereading of Durkheim's totem taboo, it is argued that sacred communities cannot survive a permanent loss of sacrificial assent on the part of members. Producing this assent is the work of ritual socialization. The deployment of sacrificial violence on behalf of group survival, though deeply sobering, is best constrained by recognizing how violence holds sacred communities in thrall rather than by denying the links between them.

Keywords: sacred community, religious violence, sacrifice, totem, solidarity

At Dartmouth College, the site of this conference on religious violence, twenty-four murals in the Baker Library depict the Mexican muralist José Orozco's rendering of the saga of American civilization. Near the beginning of the series, a panel called "Ancient Human Sacrifice" portrays the Aztec ceremony of slicing the heart from a live ritual victim. The victim's limbs, arranged in a perfect X centered on his soon to be excised organ, recall with a shock of recognition, the first page of the Mendoza Codex, a compendium of Aztec history produced twenty years after the Conquest by indigenous scribes. The same page conveys the founding legend of the Aztec capital city Tehnochtitlan. It images two waterways rendered in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross converging on an eagle perched on a blooming cactus sprung from a rock.

By legend the god Huitzilopochtli led the Mexica to a marshy islet in Lake Texcoco where the ripped out heart of his murdered rival had taken root in a flowering prickly pear on which a giant eagle rested. This, the Mexica were instructed, was the site of Tenochtitlan. Scholars say the eagle signifies Huitzilopochtli's hunger for the human hearts that fuel his daily journey across the firmament. The mortal heart of his rival, in turn, is the founding sacrifice of the

city where human hearts were surrendered to the god. Thus does Orozco analogize violent sacrifice to the iconic symbol (an eagle-cactus-rock glyph plus a serpent signifying the man-god Quetzalcoatl) of modern Mexico.

Toward the end of the series, another panel “Modern Sacrifice” depicts an elaborate flag-draped bier flanked with memorial wreaths bearing another sacrificial victim, this time to nationalist dreams. In these panels Orozco links an ancient religious rite to the modern religion of nationalism. His epic of America is a theme of continuous sacrifice, the ritual axis around which the founding, memory and renewal of a people revolves<sup>1</sup>. Orozco’s evocation of group sacrifice as a historical constant visually mirrors my own understanding of how religion and sacrifice are related, and how religious violence is related to national sacrifice in particular.

This perspective contrasts with those of several conference participants who question whether, in the first place, the term *religion* comprises any compelling empirical referents for analysis. To those who doubt it, *religious violence* as a subcategory of religion is so confounded with other sources of human motivation as to be a nearly meaningless analytical term. A different and somewhat contradictory perspective argues that religious violence by definition perverts the true nature of religion and, when it seems to occur, proceeds from something besides religion itself. Though these viewpoints are contradictory to one another, both serve a deeply felt and widespread belief that violence can never be a genuine attribute of religion.

Both positions belong, at least by tendency, to the book that is the occasion for this conference, William Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence*<sup>2</sup>. Cavanaugh suggests that Western nationalism has projected its own violent visage on the face of religious history. Insofar as Cavanaugh means to argue that religion is not easily distinguished from secular life, I agree, having myself argued for their overlap in my book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*,<sup>3</sup> from which Cavanaugh quotes. My inference from this fact departs from Cavanaugh’s, however (though I would argue he never explicitly disagrees with the position I articulate in *Blood Sacrifice*), and from the position of political theorists such as Ernest Gellner for whom modernity is defined by the triumph of the secular over the religious.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quetzalcoatl, bringer of a Golden Age to the Aztecs, is depicted as an exception who banishes sacrifice, but he is also tragically banished and the Golden Age lost.

<sup>2</sup> *The Myth of Religious Violence*

<sup>3</sup> With David Ingle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

I propose that prevailing notions of religious phenomena are not too wide, but too narrow, especially where nationalism is concerned. They fail to recognize that so-called secular modern states are religious down to the bone, though both leaders and citizens often deny it even as they organize the killing energies that define them.<sup>4</sup>

## Defining Religion

That some aspects of the binary divide between secular and religious practice have been strained to the point of collapse seems a consensus position among all conference participants, myself included. What is very much at issue are its implications. A collapse of the binary might acknowledge the absence of a fixed line between the religious and the secular, expanding backwards the range of what can be considered secular, and forward, the range of what is considered religious. But the impulse to disqualify *religion* altogether as a category of analysis suggests that a deeper purpose of the religious-secular binary itself was always to insulate religion, considered by some to be a category of the divine and by others the accumulated moral wisdom of tradition, from possessing morally questionable, which is to say violent, social impulses. In a political environment in which differences among some contemporary persons of faith have become categories of political condemnation, removing religion as a valid category for analysis makes it possible to avoid uncomfortable questions about the broader relationship of violence to religious phenomena more generally.

My sense of the inadequacy of the religious-secular binary strains in a different direction, however. As I see it, questioning the binary helps us recognize the fundamentally religious structuration of the nation-state. The sacrificial politics of the modern nation-state, on which co-nationals stake the lives of their children, their friends, and themselves, may suggest (and I will argue) that the problem of violence is not that it is a feature of religion as such, but that it is a fundamental processes of enduring groups generally, of which religious groups are exemplary cases.

That the term *religion* has emerged relatively recently to describe human activity is thought by some to disqualify what it refers to as a universal phenomenon of human societies generally. If new historical circumstances have forced to the surface a consciousness of religion as a phenomenon that may be

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 1, 205. See also pp. 313-315.

compared with other forms of life, this does not disqualify it as a descriptor of certain long-standing features of group practice. The discursive novelty of religion, relatively speaking, draws our interest to the timing and causes of its emergence as a focus of self-reflection. This is not to claim that religion is a natural social kind, but to acknowledge our need for vocabulary and concepts for social processes and systems that, though variable and instantiated in a variety of contexts, share a family resemblance, in this case with long-standing experiences of group preservation manifest in elaborated practices of communal devotion.

In this paper I will use *religion* both loosely and contradictorily in order to acknowledge the confessional lens through which most contemporary Americans think about it, and in a specific analytic sense as (1) *a field characterized by communities of believers* (2) *that form around and cultivate the self-sacrifice of members at various intensities of mutual commitment up to and including death (which may be social as well as physical)* (3) *to achieve the goal specified in the group's origin myth, which includes group survival*. In this definition I mean to encompass that which bounded groups take to be so undeniably true that they will kill and sacrifice in its name to demonstrate and secure the preservation of notions that so fundamentally define them. I treat *religious* and *enduring* as sociologically synonymous, since religious devotion is what is characteristic of enduring groups. In this view, the emergence of Western nationalism is a recognizably religious response—characterized by new modes of belief and practice—to a constellation of modernizing developments that historically challenged the great axial religious traditions that organized generations of pre-modern populations.

I define modernity in the Gellnerian sense as the (uneven) growth of economic specialization and interdependency based on new technologies of transport, material production, and communication from the sixteenth century forward that reset the conditions of group life on a scale that transformed traditional social relationships. My definition of religion focuses on how enduring groups persuade their members to sacrifice for the common good. My definition does not focus on the content or presumed moral worth of religious doctrines. Such accounts of *how* rather than *that* groups elicit sacrificial devotion are missing in most analyses of nationalism (and pre-modern histories as well, but see Inga Clendinnen's interpretation of Aztec culture<sup>5</sup>).

Such an approach may be seen as functionalist, which for some will raise a theoretical flag. In my view, conventional critiques of functionalism misconstrue

---

<sup>5</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *The Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

the Durkheimian formula in which religion renews the collective representations of the tribe and affirms its common sentiments.<sup>6</sup> A familiar criticism takes this to mean that mere ritual performance has the capacity to create solidarity.<sup>7</sup> But nothing in the Durkheimian oeuvre suggests that ritual performance never fails in its effectivity. While some neo-Durkheimians have indeed presumed an automatic effect for ritual performance,<sup>8</sup> others such as Clifford Geertz<sup>9</sup> and Bruce Kapferer have acknowledged and examined ritual failures in depth. My own work examines the conditions in which rituals of American nationalism fail and succeed. An available analogy is that groups conduct war in order to win, but not all wars are won by those who conduct them. Scholars have long acknowledged that ritual functions extend beyond group solidarity and include, among other things, displays of power, status transformation, and transmitting group memory. Nor has neo-Durkheimian theory itself been invariably functionalist. Roy Rappaport has powerfully shifted the conversation from solidarity to the commissives, or public promises, to which ritual performatives contingently give rise.<sup>10</sup> This work is highly suggestive for considering the relationship between religion and violence.

Finally, let me wrestle with the most obvious objection to the definition of religion I have proposed. It seems to disqualify ordinary religious practice and devotion, especially in the West, to the extent that these fall short of something like willing martyrdom. What it does capture is what Scott Appleby calls "militant" religion in his taxonomic categorization of the varieties of religious experience and devotion. Appleby's taxonomy addresses the range of self-descriptive claims on offer by those who count themselves believers. I am happy to acknowledge that the nationalist strain of religion I examine here falls under the category of "militant." Nonetheless, I argue that all religious doctrines consider, however indirectly, foundational concerns of life and death within a collective framework of devotional practice. This allows me to explore devotional practices that place life and death problems front and center, unvarnished and undiluted. These are the practices lie at the core of the relationship between devotion and violence.

## Religion and Violence

---

<sup>6</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* 1913 a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, - beliefs and practices which unite [into] one single moral community, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim [1915] 1964: 37 cited in Morris 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration" *Sociology* 1975 ( 9), 289-308.

<sup>8</sup> The classic case is Edward Shils and Michael Young, "The Meaning of the Coronation," *Sociological Review* NS (1) 1953, pp. 63-82.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," *American Anthropologist* 59 (1957), pp. 32-54.

<sup>10</sup> Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Though deplored as a failure of diplomacy and morals, violence is a well established strategy of enduring groups that compete for dominance<sup>11</sup>. E. O. Wilson, David Sloan Wilson and others have recently proposed that group competition is at least as powerful as gene competition as a selection (for E. O. Wilson *the* major selection) factor in evolution,<sup>12</sup> For political theorist Carl Schmitt group competition is culturally manifest in the fierce division between friends and enemies. Following Leibniz, Schmitt describes the rhetoric of the modern nation-state as “political theology”,<sup>13</sup> acknowledging that “in case of need, the political entity must demand the sacrifice of life.”<sup>14</sup> Regrettably, Schmitt does not elaborate how groups manage to persuade individuals to sacrifice flesh and blood for group goals. Nor has E.O. Wilson done this. The closest Durkheim came was describing the “collective effervescence” of tribalism, also without accounting for its dynamics.<sup>15</sup>)

Building on Roy Rappaport’s analysis of how social commissives are established by ritual,<sup>16</sup> I propose that ritual resolves the ethical contradiction that pits long term group interests against the immediate survival of individuals. Pursuing their own preservation, competing groups formulate a program of protective force manifest in the willing submission of group members to an ethic of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Three sorts of violence,<sup>18</sup> roughly speaking, characterize rituals of group competition. These are: (1) the use of force against internal enemies to protect group interests (2) the use of force against external enemies on behalf of group interests (3) voluntary self-sacrifice by group members on behalf of group interests. All qualify as cooperative and altruistic behaviors in the service of a “parochial altruism”<sup>19</sup> primed to incite hostility toward outgroups.

---

<sup>11</sup> Enduring groups are multigenerational groups committed to what E.O. Wilson has called “defense of the nest”, here understood as a definable territory, a population defined by a mission, or both, accompanied by organized specialization of labor to meet the material and social needs of group members. This is a modified version of criteria Wilson adduces to define tribes in *The Social Conquest of Earth* (2012).

<sup>12</sup> See Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (Liveright, 2012) and David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*

<sup>13</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology : Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, (1934; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), trans. George Schwab, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded edition, trans. by George Schwab (1932; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> He gives considerable attention to the totem taboo about which members of the clan agree not to disagree without ever exploring the content of that agreement, which I argue is group willingness to sacrifice group members. Marvin and Ingle, pp. FIND THIS

<sup>16</sup> Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 26-30, 391-396.

<sup>17</sup> The umbrella of group protection may extend beyond the immediate group to allies on whose behalf the primary group acts—e.g., the dependence of NATO or Canada on the dominant military power of the U.S.

<sup>18</sup> Defined as the amount of force necessary to compel someone to do something against their will

<sup>19</sup> Jung-Kyoo Choi and Samuel Bowles, “The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War,” *Science*, vol. 318, Oct. 26, 2007, pp. 636-640

The business of a successful tribe is to engineer this coercion and extract these sacrifices with the aim of cultivating a reserve of obligation that can be tapped in the face of perceived existential threats (the accuracy of the perception is not at issue, only the perception itself). A strategy that creates either internal or external scapegoats—enemies—to assuage intolerable group anxiety may come at devastating cost to those who execute it or are its targets.<sup>20</sup> This cost is always measured against and justified by the specter of collective disintegration. Even if group strengthening is sacrifice's animating motive, not all sacrifice succeeds. What makes a given sacrifice legitimate and potentially unifying to group members is the conviction that it is voluntary and fairly shared out. Pains are taken to conceal, minimize and justify sacrificial elements that fall short of these standards of devotion, but such adjustments may reduce and even eliminate their power to unify.

## Religious Mobilization of Group Assent

I have argued that the resolution of conflicting group and individual interests is achieved in the religious mobilization of group assent. Recall once more my definition of religion as a ritual vehicle that links bodies to gestures and discourses that instantiate social obligation. To effect the survival task established in a group origin myth, rituals cultivate the committed self-sacrifice of members at different

---

<sup>20</sup> Vivid examples of scapegoating include the disproportionate incarceration and execution of black males in the United States since Reconstruction from lynching and Jim Crow to state-sponsored capital punishment.<sup>20</sup> A more visibly religious case is the shielding by certain ultra-Orthodox communities in New York City of ultra-Orthodox child molesters by coercing the silence of some victims and their families so as to avoid the fracture of group integrity on the part of secular authorities:

Some ultra-Orthodox Jews want to keep abuse allegations quiet to protect the reputation of the community...And rabbinical authorities, eager to maintain control, worry that inviting outside scrutiny could erode their power, said Samuel Heilman, a professor of Jewish studies at Queens College.

"They are more afraid of the outside world than the deviants within their own community," Dr. [Samuel] Heilman [a professor of Jewish studies at Queens College] said. "The deviants threaten individuals here or there, but the outside world threatens everyone and the entire structure of their world." Sharon Otterson and Ray Rivera, "Ultra-Orthodox Shun Their Own for Reporting Child Abuse," *New York Times*, May 19, 2012.

Procrastinations and denials in the Catholic priest pedophilia scandal reflect a similar group-protective reflex by church officials. However, the church is subject to the jurisdiction of political authority, the relevant community with enduring group responsibilities. The sacrifice of children in the interest of survival is common in group sacrifice. More easily seen as legitimate than intra-group sacrifice by Catholics and Hasidim is the broad based sacrifice of soldiers—but only in popular wars (wars to which, by definition, such sacrifice is broadly consented to)! Poignantly, soldiers are typically young and always the children of citizens.

levels of devotion up to and including death. Death is not the only worthy devotional practice, but religious commitment is often measured by the willingness of individuals to die for the myth. It may be national or religious so long as it establishes what is required for the survival of the group and its mission.

Granted, this omits those conventionally religious groups in the West for which few members would willingly sacrifice their lives today. The history of modern warfare suggests that, in the face of serious group threat, many of these members will rapidly move to place themselves under the protection of a nationalism that does ask some group members to sacrifice themselves. At any historical moment, the worthiness of the request is a pressing and legitimate debate. This makes the point that religion—confessional or national—is, for the purposes of this argument, less a carrier of noble doctrines than a strategy of mobilization for group preservation. That strategy is very much served by noble doctrines of cooperation in combination with prescribed gestures of ritual devotion. This is not a cynical observation. Notions of goodness are regularly anchored in group ideals of cooperation, consensus and sacrifice. Their power is captured in Clifford Geertz's well known dictum that religion acts to "...(2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."<sup>21</sup> In this context, virtue is amically determined. (An analytic disposition to resist universal notions of religion may be contrasted with its logical obverse—the less controversial disposition to invoke trans-group ethical standards condemning violence wherever it is found.)

Why do I insist that violence (and its paler shadow, non-violent group coercion), a social action many contemporary faiths reject unequivocally, is religiously foundational? Because humans want to believe that the lives of group members can be sacrificed, whether willingly or by coercion, for an ultimate truth only. It is no great step from this to the belief, commonly articulated in religious rhetoric, that what we are willing to sacrifice our bodies for must, therefore, be the truth. Sectarian religion and nationalism are parallel communities of faith since the true object of worship in each case is the entity to whom legitimate authority to kill is morally assigned. By this reasoning, nationalism may be understood as the ascendant faith of our historical moment. Some who are reluctant to acknowledge the killing authority of so-called secular powers are willing to invest God with the

---

<sup>21</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. M. Banton, ed., (London: Tavistock XLII, 1985), p. 176.

right to “take” souls, as the saying goes. The foundation of the Christian message is, of course, a son willing to die for the eternal preservation of the father’s other children. Even believers often make practical peace with the killing authority of the nation-state in principle, while particular circumstances for properly exercising it remain up for debate. There are also national communities in which killing authority is seamlessly shared between God and a nation that is said to act on God’s behalf. Those who fear the fervor of confessionally mandated killing and self-sacrifice may sometimes fail to recognize the ways that similar mythic mechanisms authorize self-sacrifice within their own national groups.

Among the attributes shared by national and confessional groups we may count the following<sup>22</sup>:

1. Origin myths that situate believers in the cosmos and offer consolation for the most wrenching human tragedies, especially mortality.
2. Primary social bonds expressed in ritual obligations that connect community members to one another and to an origin myth of a transcendental group purpose.
3. Explicit forms of participation that establish grounds for group membership.
4. Doctrines of correct belief and commandments of duty and devotion including self-sacrifice.

That enduring groups are authorized to command and take human life, effort, and treasure when group survival requires it, are what Schmitt and Agamben<sup>23</sup> call the state of exception. This does not mean killing authority exercises its power absent criticism or objection from believers. It means that sovereign authority is vested only in that entity that undertakes to guarantee group survival, in this case, the nation or group deity. While treating violence as a failure of moral imagination, liberal philosophy fails to address how enduring groups can persist absent the option to act with force against existential threats. Even those who believe violence is always morally wrong rarely condemn non-violent self-sacrifice. Since non-violence often turns out to be most potent when it provokes a violent response from antagonists, those who deploy non-violence logically share responsibility for whatever violent response it may inspire.

---

<sup>22</sup> Adapted from *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, 1998).

Examining the historiography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Cavanaugh argues that instead of being the solution to religious wars, the liberal state actively instigated or was complicit in wars mislabeled as religiously motivated. As he sees it, the self-deceiving conclusion that the liberal nation-state is the solution to religious violence is enshrined in the triumphalist creation myth of modern Western societies, and this myth has long been used to justify Western military intervention, most recently in the Middle East.

When we do try to justify violence, we often cast it, reluctantly, as a political necessity in a fallen world or as a failure of diplomacy and morals, rather than theorizing it as a strategy of persisting social groups asserting their interests in order to survive and prosper over long periods, as national and religious groups do. (Such groups are characterized as *eusocial* by the evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson *The Social Conquest of the Earth* (Liveright, 2012). They are multigenerational, characterized by defense of the nest, and the specialization of reproductive and defensive labor.)

It may be more helpful to regard violence as a shocking but unavoidable feature of the social cooperation that is necessary for group survival. Abstractly defined, cooperation is a strategy of working consensually toward common ends. Our most optimistic notions of cooperation envision approximately equal efforts by willing collaborators. This is a quality of much cooperation, and fine as far as it goes. But some forms of cooperation involve very unequal contributions of time, talent, and treasure among collaborators, up to and including the death or impairment of some members of the group to serve its larger good. Through this lens, violence experienced within the group or perpetrated on outsiders is the dramatic, physically coercive assertion of the perceived survival interests of a group or tribe against whoever resists those interests, including reluctant members within the group. Cooperation—a collective undertaking for the ultimate purpose of enduring generationally—requires significant sacrifice, variously voluntary and compelled, and sometimes violently enacted.

The negotiation of that sacrifice is always political. This is because sacrifice is often not in the immediate interest of those doing the sacrificing (hewing to a fundamental definition of sacrifice as the maintenance of the conditions of group existence by a propitiatory offering that requires alienating something of value to the sacrificer), however much it may be in the long term interest of the group. The business of a successful group is nonetheless to extract these sacrifices by creating

strong and weak ties that provide conditions for daily flourishing and a reserve of collective commitment to draw on when existential threats loom.<sup>24</sup>

The discussion suggests a sinister dimension to collective survival within groups, never mind outside them. Some sacrifices may indeed come at devastating expense to some group members, as when scapegoats are feverishly sacrificed to assuage intolerable group anxiety. (Some would count the disproportionate incarceration and execution of African-American men in the United States since Reconstruction in this category, whether by lynching or capital punishment.) When violent coercion is internally exercised for sacrificial ends, pains are taken to conceal, minimize and justify it (rarely in self-consciously conspiratorial terms given broad collective support for denying the ethical quandary of sacrificing members the group exists to protect in the interest of group harmony and survival). That individuals cannot survive at all outside group protection sets up an inevitable ethical conflict between individual and group interests that will, in the end, be resolved in the perceived interest of the group if the latter is to flourish.

In pursuit of generational viability, group rhetoric treats all cooperation as a win-win at both individual and tribal levels regardless of how sacrificial effort is distributed. Such rhetoric is not framed as an emotionally and morally deflated cost benefit-analysis with respect to that distribution, though such considerations are present. Those who embody group moral and political authority proffer a tribal notion of the group as embodying a purpose larger than any single member. In the name of this purpose, cultivated and reinforced in ritual (focusing shared attention, establishing obligation to a group goal and presuming shared sentiment)<sup>25</sup> (Wilson (2012), p. 228), willing sacrifice is elicited from those who must be persuaded, converted or, if absolutely necessary, intimidated and coerced—whatever it takes. The more visible the level of coercion, however, the more shared sentiment about goals is brought into question, and the less effective the exercise in the service of group bonding. For this reason much energy goes into rehearsing and socializing the foundational myths and logics of group persistence from early in the lives of group members. This continuing cultivation in members of an obligation to the group is a religious exercise at its core, buttressed by demonstrably religious

---

<sup>24</sup> It is not necessary for everyone to believe all the time in this metaphysical sovereignty of the national group, anymore than it is necessary for everyone to believe all the time in the metaphysical divinity of the religious group. All that is important is that when the crisis comes, that religious and citizen believers are willing to make the necessary effort on behalf of the group to keep it alive. If they are not willing, the religion or nation will die. Even if such efforts do not issue in immediate worldly victory, though it is of course better if they do, the group will not necessarily cease to be. Enduring groups who keep the faith alive can last a long time as fellowships of believers bereft of homeland or the granted privilege to worship. What kills nations and religions is when their believers simply become indifferent or desert the cause.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, p. 228.

language and symbolism. Patriots and religious believers are, in this light, different blooms on the same tree of group flourishing.

National and confessional groups alike embody transcendental, sacred purposes narrativized in creation myths discursively rehearsed, ritually performed, updated to encompass unfolding events, and interpreted to instantiate a mythical history in which founding heroes are the originators, and contemporary figurers the bearers of group values and purposes. What Cavanaugh calls the creation myth of national groups is the collapse of real and invented history into an account of why a given group embodies a righteous claim to killing authority compared to groups that preceded them and competitors they face in the struggle for dominance.

Though modern human beings belong to multiple groups that redound to their benefit, survival requires some level of membership in at least one primary group that takes responsibility for defending the (territorial) group nest and its members. Technological advances in communication and transportation have enabled primary groups once limited to bands of hunter-gatherers to manifest as large-scale primary groups sheltering smaller groups that consent to the primary group's Weberian monopoly on violence (or alliance with those who exercise this monopoly, as Europe in the case of NATO submits to the U.S.). Larger group size increases the possibilities for functional specialization among members, so that a smaller percentage of citizens have to be concerned with defending borders and the rest can get on with other aspects of the collective business of group flourishing.

In the contemporary world, such groups are usually nations, and their instruments are armies and police forces. In stable nations group members, or citizens, submit themselves to governance that rests on such killing authority. If some primary groups are large enough to shift the burden of policing group threats from most of their members, the tradeoff is that violence occurs on a far more destructive scale when it does happen. While liberal philosophy treats violence as a failure of morality and imagination that, remedied, would produce peace, it does not address how to organize generationally persisting primary groups absent a capacity to assert their existential interests with force internally and externally.

If religion is no stranger to violence, it shares this characteristic with nationalism, the distinctive group faith of modernity. Although Cavanaugh rightly questions the stereotype of confessional groups as the principal global perpetrators of violence, primary enduring groups that are confessional do sometimes organize and mobilize killing energies as a measure of their devotional commitment. Multigenerational groups have quite likely organized such energies at some time in their histories, or else accepted protection from groups that do. As Cavanaugh's

useful survey of the historiography of the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shows, national and confessional grievances are easily conflated. This is not because religion poorly describes human devotional practices, or because national and faith traditions are structurally distinct on this dimension. It is because national and faith traditions emerged as dominant social formations at different historical moments. That national and faith traditions are structurally similar is exactly why they so easily combine and compete with one another.

I have argued that this reading allows us to frame the separation of church and state in the United States as a long-time barrier to confessional appropriations of the sacrificial authority that underlies nation-state authority and power. A wall of separation authorizes citizens under the protection of the nation-state to believe anything they wish in return for their consent not to kill in the name of what they believe, nor to compel the sacrifice of believers or of non-believers to confessional ends. Any violation will cause the state to intervene and jealously assert its own sacrificial authority as it did in 1993 in the case of David Koresh and his followers in Waco, and against nineteenth-century Mormons who also attempted to usurp nation-state killing authority, the so-called state of exception.

Church-state separation is not the only pattern, of course. A second is state-sponsored churches (the pattern of the United Kingdom, Denmark and Thailand among others). State-sponsored churches embrace the principle of national killing authority and are thereby defanged. This is equivalent in effect to the U.S. pattern. Still another pattern is Lebanon, which distributes top state offices among competing religious factions. A fourth pattern is that a religious entity morally authorizes state power and may assist in exercising it, as in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Somewhat similar is the Jewish state of Israel, where the state claims legal primacy but where the advice of faith is energetically acknowledged, courted (by some administrations more than others), and called upon to justify national ends, indeed, conflated with them on occasion.

### **American Exceptionalism**

We are back to the mechanics of enduring groups. Where state and individual interests structurally conflict, how can individuals be convinced to sacrifice themselves for the cause?

Durkheim metaphorized the powerful mechanisms of cooperation that persisting groups require in the concept of the totem. He frankly acknowledged that the constant production of friction within families, political clans, cities, and nations require powerful ritual mechanisms to periodically restore a sense of

collective commitment. He did not examine violence as a necessary instrument of group solidarity and a threat to it. He spoke of the totem taboo, the symbolic embodiment of altruistic cooperation, about which, as a sign of devotion, members agree not to disagree. As it relates to violence, the totem taboo may be reconceived as the tacit but impossible-to-acknowledge agreement that group members must be sacrificed for the group to survive. This mobilization directs the killing energies of nations and religious groups away from and toward a larger external threat. It is this transformation of disruptive killing energy into group devotion instantiated in sacrifice that channels aggression away from the group and toward group enemies.

To mobilize believers, origin myths charter and authorize the tribe (religious or national) as the most righteous of groups. In the United States, this idea is contained in the myth of American exceptionalism and justified by a sacred history of conquest in the name of freedom. Doctrinally, persons are made fully human by the freedom (a spiritual quality in this vocabulary) they are permitted to exercise. Advancing freedom is a mission that gives meaning and cosmological purpose to lives sacrificed on behalf of the group. These meanings are elaborated in sacred symbols and rituals that are easily recognized as religious in character and tone. In the United States, the flag is the most emotionally potent totem of group identity and ritual activity. It is endowed with sacred liveness, and rhetorically and mythically cast as an agent that gathers the martyred fallen to itself. The archetypal extension of the origin myth tells of soldiers who exchange their own lives to preserve the flag and, by this means, the tribe it embodies.

Among eusocial groups generally and nation-states in particular, devotion to an all-powerful group idea can stimulate an altruistic shared commitment among group members that trumps the calculus of individual self interest and creates a moral obligation to serve the group imperative—whether for those who sacrifice themselves or those who love and offer them without complaint.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, nationalism can be rightly understood as the characteristic religion of modernity, doctrinally and emotionally suited to modern believers for whom the great traditional religions of axial age invention no longer command levels of self-sacrificing devotion.

Be that as it may, devoted nationalists often insist that patriotism is secular and not like religion at all. But this makes sense. Countenancing overt equivalence between patriotism and religion would render confessional faith entitled,

---

<sup>26</sup> The ritual obverse of sacrifice is fertility, which encompasses the sexual and fertile dimension of group cooperation that is its positive, furnishing side, where connections and unions among group members enlarge the group and make it materially and spiritually dense, the obverse of sacrifice, which separates members from the group.

theoretically at least, to exercise the privilege of killing authority. This challenges the self-described right of the nation-state to elevate its own killing power above that of religion which, in its own origin myth, it succeeds and replaces. By denying the religious character of patriotic devotion, contrary to its rhetoric and ritual form, the nation cements its monopoly on the command of sacrificial violence and keeps sectarian competitors for the loyalty of citizens at bay.

Can enduring groups fail? When the contemporary adaptations of an origin myth are no longer compelling to followers, belief in its protective powers and in the sacrificial obligation it enshrines will be at risk. Sooner or later, the group must disband, or be absorbed by, or seek the protection of, those with more urgent and convincing myths. While a more or less unified ideology is no guarantee of group dominance, willingness to compete cannot long be sustained in its absence. Not every member of the group need agree with every other about every point, or even with majority opinion. What is needed at times of collective threat is that everyone knows the obligations of tribal commitment and can persuade themselves of the necessity of group response.

This does not mean that dissent is meaningless, especially when a group is set to launch some calamity to its prospects for survival, or violate human rights that are felt to morally constrain both our own and other group members. Nor does it mean that dissent is never successful. But we engage with extraordinarily powerful group sentiments whenever nations contemplate sacrificing the flower of their youth, or Abraham gets ready to murder Isaac, when citizens protest repressive governments in the Arab spring, the Cultural Revolution roots out the wavering and even, on a milder level, when universities deny tenure to non-performing assistant professors in their competition for academic prestige, acquisition of resources, and the recruitment of new and talented members. Though social death is not physical death, it remains a powerful expression of group dynamics and may be traumatic or life transforming in its way.

Nor can the moral dilemmas of sacrifice be wished away by relying on the wisdom and benevolence of democratic regimes. In the competition for dominance, force is a resource for all enduring groups, including democratic ones. Amartya Sen and his followers have argued that democratic groups are better able to debate what counts as a threat and the level of volition or coercion to be exercised in response because they are morally and procedurally bound to seek the expressed approval of majorities.<sup>27</sup> Democratic regimes may sometimes be able to debate more fully what counts as a threat, who threatens, and the level of sacrifice

---

<sup>27</sup> Amartya Sen & J.H. Dreze, "Democracy as a Universal Value" in *Journal of Democracy* vol. 10, 3 1999B, 3-17.

to be exercised in response to threat. But the structural incommensurability of individual and group interests (never mind the welfare of non-believing others, those propagandized useful enemies) haunts all ideological colorings and every claim of democracy to liberate individuals.

To conclude: confessionalism and patriotism are different ways of binding multigenerational enduring groups. Both must answer to the moral paradox of group survival in which some members are sacrificed to save others. This is the fundamental moral challenge of group life. Are human groups doomed, therefore, to violently compete? The profane world will, of course, always be ours to live in. If past times were saturated with religiopolitical dilemmas, present times are no less fraught. Though it is futile to imagine that violence can entirely disappear from human affairs, our understanding of how it holds us in thrall may make us more humble in managing it. In that hope is meaning itself and, in the various ways we construe it, religion as we practice it in the world.

### **Bibliography**

- Agamben Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by: Danniell Heller-Roazen. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press; 1998.
- Cavanaugh William. *The Myth of Religious Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2009.
- Choi Jung-Kyoo, Bowles Samuel. The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War. *Science*. 2007; 318(5850): 636–40.
- Clendennin Inga. *The Aztecs: An Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1995.
- Durkheim Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by: Joseph Ward Swain. New York: Free Press; 1965.
- Geertz Clifford. Religion as a Cultural System. In: Michael Banton, editor. *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. London: Tavistock; 1963. p. 1–46.
- Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example. *American Anthropologist*. 1957; 59: 32–54.
- Lukes Steven. Political Ritual and Social Integration. *Sociology*. 1975; 9: 289–308.
- Marvin Carolyn, Ingle David. *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999.
- Rappaport Roy. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999.
- Schmitt Carl. *The Concept of the Political*, translated by: George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2007.

————— Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, translated by: George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1985.  
Sen Amartya, Dreze J.H. Democracy as a Universal Value. *Journal of Democracy*. 1999; 10(3): 3–17.  
Wilson Edward O. *The Social Conquest of Earth*. New York: Liveright; 2012.

**Notes on contributor**

Carolyn Marvin is the Frances Yates Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electrical Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988) and *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, 1999). Her published work addresses ritual form as group communication, the politics and semiotics of public space, and the cultural history of media technology.

Correspondence to: Carolyn Marvin, email [cmarvin@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:cmarvin@asc.upenn.edu)