Blood Rites: The Case Against Animal Sacrifice

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Modern Paganism has more than a few bloody roots. The early Celts practiced both animal sacrifice and human ritual killing[i] and might well have engaged in ritual cannibalism under extreme circumstances, as historical and archaeological evidence attests.[ii] [iii] Elaborate human sacrifices were performed at the temple in Uppsala and elsewhere in Northern Europe as late as the 10th century AD, and there are well-documented accounts of animal sacrifice as well.[iv] [v] The early Greeks may have engaged in human sacrifice or human ritual killing and certainly engaged in animal sacrifice.[vi] These are only a few among many examples, as students of pre-Christian religion well know, and they

collectively represent a disquieting piece of theological history. However, while most Pagans will agree that cannibalism, human ritual killing and human sacrifice are better abandoned to history, the practice of animal sacrifice has been reconstructed by a few sects of the Pagan community.

A Hierarchy of Sacrifice

The reasoning behind this reconstruction is multifaceted and naturally draws to itself a host of tangential matters; the morality of various dietary choices, of factory farming and of hunting, among others. Any one of these topics leads naturally to the other in conversation, which often creates a tangled whole of their disparate, if related parts. Often the ethics of animal sacrifice are closely tied to the ethics of food consumption, which limits the discussion to the flesh of the animal in question. Yet Pagans do not sacrifice animals merely to consume their meat, so it can be useful to consider the matter from a theological perspective as well. In the case of animal sacrifice for the sake of communion with the Gods, where spiritual nourishment is the goal, there is a subtle interplay of relationships that bears addressing. By doing so, the metaphysical dynamic of the act is brought into sharper relief so that it, too, can inform the discussion.

The term 'sacrifice' carries a double definition, both as a noun meaning 'that which is offered in sacrifice; a victim immolated on the altar; anything (material or immaterial) offered to God or a deity as an act of propitiation or homage'[vii] and also as a verb meaning 'to surrender or give up, or permit injury or disadvantage to, for the sake of something else'.[viii] These definitions are important to any theological discussion of animal sacrifice because they help to identify the metaphysical transactions present in the act; the one between the animal and the priest, where the animal is the sacrifice, the one between the priest and the Gods, where the priest makes the sacrifice and the one between the Gods and the community, where it is hoped the Gods will respond favorably to the sacrifice.

Clearly these transactions are hierarchical. The animal surrenders its flesh to the priest, and the priest surrenders the spiritual product of that flesh to the Gods, who exist at the top of the hierarchy. This raises three important questions. First, what constitutes surrender, since the animal must surrender its flesh to the priest? Second, what is actually surrendered by the priest, since the spiritual product of that flesh is integral to the act? Third, what response should be expected of the Gods as a result of this activity?

What Is Sacrificed?

Since Pagan theology is at issue here, these questions are best addressed with Pagan examples. Moreover, as the practice of animal sacrifice has been reconstructed from historical material, these sources should be consulted. Of them, the *Heimskringla* contains one of the best surviving records of animal sacrifice in Northern Europe. In *Hacon the Good*, Snorre Sturlason writes:

> *"Sigurd, the Jarl of Lade, was a great sacrificer and so had been Hacon his father. Sigurd the Jarl upheld all the blood offerings for Trondlaw on the king's behalf. It was an old custom, when they made an offering, for all the bonders to come to the temple and bring their eatables which they would need as long as the offering lasted...There they also slew all kinds of cattle and horses, and all the blood which flowed from them was called laut, the bowls in which the blood stood were called laut-bowls and laut-teinar, which were made like a sprinkler; with all this they should stain the stalls red and likewise the temple walls inside and out and likewise sprinkle it on all the men; the flesh was cooked as meat for the guest feast. There should be fires in the midst of the temple floor and thereover should hang kettles; they should carry bowls*

to the fire and he who was making the offering and was chief should bless the bowl and all the flesh, but he should first bless Odin's bowl (which should be drunk for the king's victory and power) and afterwards the bowls of Niord and Frey for good seasons and peace."[ix]

Based on this narrative, the obvious answers to the aforementioned questions are that the cattle and horses offered surrender by way of their deaths, and Sigurd the Jarl surrendered their cooked flesh to the Gods in the hope that Odin, Niord and Frey would favor the king and the bonders with victory, power, good seasons and peace. However, these answers do not fully address the metaphysical transactions that took place at the gathering. They only address the portions pertaining to Sigurd the Jarl, the king and the bonders, since the sacrificial animals could not expound upon their participation, and the Gods did not expound upon Theirs.

To fully address these transactions then, it is necessary to look beyond the flesh of the cattle and horses to determine whether or not they might have surrendered anything else during the act of sacrifice. Once this determination has been made, it can be used to understand what spiritual product Sigurd the Jarl surrendered to Odin, Niord and Frey. Finally, while no person of faith can know the will of the Gods, it is possible to know how

a reasonable human being might respond to such an offering, which is the same 'gift for a gift' psychology applied in the above account.

A key to this determination may be found in the term 'surrender' itself, which is an act of yielding to the possession or power of another.[x] The act of yielding requires consciousness on the part of all parties involved in the exchange. For example, a bolt of cloth cannot surrender to a needle, but a weaver can surrender a bolt of cloth to a tailor. With this in mind, the conscious awareness of sacrificial animals is called into question, which includes their emotional, intellectual and spiritual capacity for participation in the metaphysical transaction of sacrifice.

Consciousness and Suffering

Modern animal science offers insight into the minds of livestock facing slaughter, which is as close as we may come to understanding the minds of sacrificial animals. Dr. Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University and a designer of livestock handling facilities, has contributed a great deal to this topic. In her seminal book *Animals in Translation*, she writes:

"If all you had to do to eliminate suffering was

to make sure the animal died instantly, today almost all of our slaughterhouses would have to be considered humane.

But eliminating pain isn't enough. We have to think about animals' emotional lives, not just their physical lives...The single worst thing you can do to an animal emotionally is to make it feel afraid. Fear is so bad for animals I think it's worse than pain."[xi]

In a 2002 paper presented at Harvard University, Grandin further explicates the cognitive ability of livestock animals:

"As nervous system and brain complexity increases the welfare needs of the animal increase and become more complex, but all animals that have sufficient nervous systems complexity to suffer from either pain or fear need basic welfare protections. Animals with complex brains also have greater social needs and a need for greater environmental enrichment.

...Human babies are given full (legal) protection even though a newborn's cognitive abilities are less than the abilities of mature farm animals...A mentally retarded child and a cow may have the same cognitive abilities."[xii]

Grandin makes three important points here. First, she

acknowledges that livestock animals have emotional lives and are capable of feeling fear when faced with death. Second, she states that this fear is worse than pain. Finally, she indicates that mature farm animals may have the same cognitive abilities as 'a mentally retarded child'. For a being to have an emotional life, it must first have consciousness. Further, for a being to express fear of death, it must first have an understanding of death and then wish to live. Most importantly, a being that may have the same cognitive ability as a mentally handicapped child may also have the same capacity for reason and, therefore, the same cognitive response to suffering.

Closer to home, many Pagan traditions both ancient and modern accord animals with spiritual independence in the form of totems, power animals and the like, as is abundantly apparent in historical and contemporary Pagan literature. So beyond any scientific estimation of the emotional and intellectual capacity of animals, many Pagans believe animals have spiritual lives and are capable of interacting with humans metaphysically. It is logical to conclude then that if this metaphysical interaction exists, it is evidence of spirituality on the part of animals. So unless the spiritual energies of sacrificial animals exist exclusively for human use in the same way their flesh and blood are used, there is a serious issue of cognitive dissonance

between the respect accorded their spirits and the respect accorded their bodies.

From a purely physical perspective then, the cattle and horses Sigurd the Jarl sacrificed were slaughtered for meat, and the spiritual product of that meat was shared with Odin, Niord and Frey. However, from a metaphysical perspective, their emotional, intellectual and possibly their spiritual understandings were subjected to that of Sigurd the Jarl, who then offered that energy to the Gods. So whether or not the animals were necessary for food, they were emotionally and intellectually traumatized, their spiritual contribution to the community was usurped and they were slaughtered against their will. This is what the sacrificial animals surrendered metaphysically in the account, and this is the spiritual product Sigurd the Jarl in turn surrendered to the Gods. Using the 'gift for a gift' psychology mentioned above then, he should not have expected the Gods to reward the community with victory, power, good seasons and peace. Rather, he should have expected emotional and intellectual trauma, spiritual disenfranchisement and death by violence, since whether or not the flesh of the animals was his to sacrifice, their cognitive and spiritual abilities were not.

A Willing Sacrifice?

By contrast, there are several pre-Christian examples of sacrifice wherein the victim and the priest are the same person, which ensures the spiritual product of the offering belongs legitimately to the individual who makes it. From Northern European mythology there is the sacrifice of Odin, 'Himself to Himself' on Yggdrasil in order that He might gain the wisdom of the runes. There is also the example of Týr, who sacrifices His hand to Fenrir in order that the wolf might be bound for the protection of the community. The *History of the Danes* provides the example of King Hadding (Hadingus), who is especially beloved of Odin and who hangs himself in an apparent sacrifice to the same.[xiii] From Greek mythology, there is the tale of the Boeotian maids Metioche and Menippe, who willingly offer themselves to rid their city of pestilence and the youth Molpis, who volunteers to be sacrificed to Zeus in order that it might rain.[xiv] These are only a few among many such examples that, while clearly mythical, do act as a neat counterpoint to the three-part metaphysical transaction discussed above. Here there are no victims dragged to the altar against their will. There is only a voluntary sacrifice to the Gods. Naturally, these examples are not provided as evidence that Pagans who sacrifice should do harm to themselves but rather to illustrate that there are

other, less victimizing paradigms they might turn to for insight into sacrificial practice.

A Useless or Corrupt Gesture

Beyond any doubt then, animal sacrifice is an unequal metaphysical transaction that subjugates one consciousness to propitiate another. As such, it cannot hope to have the theological result intended. It can, however, have the opposite effect, because the spiritual product of that sacrifice is the conscious suffering of the animal itself and the scapegoating energy of the priest and community, who force the animal to die on their behalf. This is the core problem of animal sacrifice in Paganism, that whether or not the priest and the community are meat eaters, and whether or not the sacrificial animal has been purchased and raised by the priest who slaughters it, the act itself victimizes a feeling, thinking, spiritual being, and the energy of that victimization is inseparable from its flesh. In short, the animal either matters to the sacrifice or it does not. If it does matter, then its flesh, feelings, thoughts and spirit matter together, and all of them are part of the spiritual product created by its death. If it does not matter, then the sacrifice is pointless. In either case, the act of animal sacrifice is intrinsically corrupt.

What then, is an appropriate sacrifice to the Gods? Whatever legitimately belongs to the priest and the community, of course; the energy and product of craftsmanship, commitment to some spiritual, environmental, intellectual or social cause, personal effort of any variety that spends time and energy on a worthy goal in the name of the Gods in question. If They receive the energy of sacrifice, then let Them partake of these; spiritual products free of betrayal, terror, suffering and death. In this way, if the 'gift for a gift' psychology holds, Their response will indeed be the gifts of victory, power, good seasons and peace.

[i] Kyle, Donald G. Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome. (London: Routledge, 1998) 36-37. Kyle offers a particularly insightful definition of the differences between human sacrifice and human ritual killing. In brief, human sacrifice was a regular custom thought to be demanded by the Gods, while human ritual killing was usually reactionary and performed to restore order in a chaotic situation.

[ii] Mallory, J. P., and Douglas Q. Adams. Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture. (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997) 278. This account specifically discusses the well-attested practice of mare sacrifice upon the inauguration of a king of Ulster, first recorded by Geraldus Cambrensis, in the context of other Indo-European horse sacrifices. The mare was seen as a representation of the goddess or of the land itself, which was viewed as a goddess by Irish Celts until well after the Middle Ages.

[iii] "Druids Committed Human Sacrifice, Cannibalism?" National Geographic News. National Geographic Society. 20 Jul. 2009. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/03/090320-druids-sacrifice-cannibalism.html> This is a companion article to the National Geographic documentary Secrets of the Druids, which dramatizes the findings discussed in it.

[iv] Saxo Grammaticus, Hilda Ellis Davidson, and Peter Fisher. The History of the Danes: Books I - IX. (Woodbridge [u.a.]: D. S. Brewer, 2002) 73. A brief mention of human sacrifice at Uppsala, noted here to corroborate Dowden's assertions in European Paganism.

[v] Dowden, Ken. European Paganism. (London: Routledge, 1999) 286-287. The author ranges widely in the preceding and following pages across cultures, discussing both human and animal sacrifice in early Pagan religion.

[vi] Hughes, Dennis D. Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece. (London: Routledge, 1991) 71-138. Hughes actually argues that most, if not all of the historical accounts of human sacrifice he discusses are mythical, even those represented as factual by early authors. However, he grants that evidence to the contrary has merit, and the sheer number of documented instances of human sacrifice or human ritual killing indicate the early Greeks at least believed their ancestors took part in the practice. Therefore, this article leaves the question open but points the reader to this excellent, if apologetic resource on the topic.

[vii] "sacrifice." Simpson, J. A., and E. S. C. Weiner. The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

[viii] "sacrifice." Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 26 Jul. 2009. <Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sacrifice>.

[ix] Snorre Sturlason, Erling Monsen, and A. H. Smith. Heimskringla, or The Lives of the Norse Kings. (New York: Dover, 1990) 87.

[x] "surrender." Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 17 Jul. 2009. <Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/surrender>.

[xi] Grandin, Temple, and Catherine Johnson. Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior. (New York: Scribner, 2005) 189. Grandin's discussion of the relationship between emotion and cognition in both humans and animals, especially where it relates to the use of fear to predict future events, is worthwhile reading.

[xii] Grandin, T. 2002. "Animals Are Not Things: A View on Animal Welfare Based on Neurological Complexity." 26 Jul 2009. <http://www.grandin.com/welfare/animals.are.not.things.html> Ultimately, Grandin's position is that those people who eat meat should be well-informed, responsible and compassionate caregivers to the animals they consume and even goes so far as to advocate social, intellectual and emotional enrichment for these animals and all others.

[xiii] Turville-Petre, Gabriel. Myth and Religion of the North; The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 213-217. Hadingus is credited with casting spells that could cause dead men to walk, of consorting with giants and of having direct interaction with Odin. Therefore, his life and the manner of his death should be viewed via the lens of myth. However, it is the example the myth sets, and not the myth itself, that is of interest here.

[xiv] Hughes, Dennis D. Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece. (London: Routledge, 1991) 73-74.