



Reviews

SACRIFICE AND MODERN THOUGHT edited by Julia Meszaros & Johannes Zachhuber, *Oxford University Press*, Oxford, 2013, pp. viii + 279, £65.00, hbk

Like almost all collections of essays, this volume is of uneven quality and usefulness, but taken as a whole it provides a valuable and often extremely helpful overview of the approaches to what Philip McCosker describes as a 'riotously polyvalent term' (p. 133). Principally the concerns expressed are theological: whether 'sacrifice' is a helpful term for understanding the death of Christ; in what sense(s) is the Eucharist a sacrifice; and so on. Later chapters, however, direct our minds to wider cultural considerations, including a fascinating if somewhat tangential essay by Jon Pahl on 'Apocalypse and Sacrifice in Modern Film'.

Over the book, especially the first nine of the fifteen essays, inevitably looms the figure of René Girard. Those not familiar with his vital but controversial approach to sacrifice and its relationship to Christianity would be well-advised to begin with the essays by Zachhuber and then Paul Fiddes – in fact, in one paragraph beginning on p. 53 the latter manages to encapsulate with exemplary clarity Girard's critique of sacrifice, which underpins the whole of his approach to theology. He then goes on to demonstrate the importance of the partial reversal of his position that followed Girard's dialogue with the Jesuit theologian Raymund Schwager in the 1990s, explored more fully in a superb contribution by Wolfgang Palaver. Under the guise of a critique of John Lennon's religion-free idyll of *Imagine*, seen as of a piece with the anti-religionism of Dawkins *et al.*, Palaver uses the later Girard, sensitively complemented by the thought of Simone Weil, to mount a powerful defence of sacrifice – the paradoxical Christian form of which is self-sacrifice – as the key to the transformation of individuals and society.

Not all are convinced, however: for Pamela Sue Anderson the sacrificial conception of religion is often imposed by the male upon the female, such that it is 'often a problem for women in religious institutions that a destructive form of love has been enforced by practices of self-sacrifice without 'principled autonomy' (p. 34). Yet Fiddes is able to find surprising points of contact between Balthasar's embrace of sacrifice as central to the 'theodrama' and the feminist approaches of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray; he does this by opposing Girard's continued equation of sacrifice with scapegoating. Even the later Girard understands the violent and *substitutionary* death of the victim as of the very nature of sacrifice, albeit latterly a death that can be willingly undergone in a paradoxical subversion of the human violence that undergirds sacrificial religiosity. Yet this understanding stands at one end of a spectrum to which McCosker and others draw our attention, a spectrum stretching between immolationist and oblationist definitions of sacrifice. In the former, it is indeed the death or destruction of the victim that is emphasised; in the latter, the focus is rather on the offering, whether by the priest within the ritual or by the 'owner' of the victim, be it a nomadic pastoralist offering of his flock as in the Old Testament, or a victorious general offering his prisoners of war in pre-colonial Mexico – or even the widow's mite.

As Fiddes shows, this oblationist approach largely overlooked by Girard, and by some of the other contributors in this volume, in fact predominates both in the Old Testament and in the application of sacrificial imagery to the death of

Christ in the New. He notes rightly, for example, that the *Letter to the Hebrews* (which Girard saw as a piece of dangerous backsliding on the part of the Christian scriptures, vis-à-vis Paul and the Gospels), though it portrays Christ's death-and-exaltation as the fulfilment of the Day of Atonement ritual, completely overlooks that day's scapegoat ritual which is paradigmatic for Girard.

Old Testament sacrifice, indeed, is not, or at least not only and not straightforwardly, about death and the shedding of blood: it is about gift, communion and/or expiation. Moreover, this expiation is not a penalty imposed by an angry God upon his sinful people, but rather an act of God in which he permits his holy people to participate symbolically in his *real* work of atonement. McCosker's article builds helpfully on these insights to explore the ways in which twentieth-century Catholic theologians – concentrating on Vonier, Chauvet and Ratzinger – have interpreted the Eucharist as sacrifice.

I have concentrated thus far on the essays by Fiddes and McCosker simply because for me as a Catholic biblical theologian they offer easily the most helpful insights. Perhaps not coincidentally they are also the least burdened by what seems in some of the other contributions like an excessively polysyllabic obscurantism. Nevertheless there is plenty of other material that will reward the reader: Jessica Frazier's 'From Slaughtered Lambs to Dedicated Lives' opposes Girard, in all his phases, with what seems to me to be a more plausible and profound take on the nature of human desire, while Nick Allen offers an intriguing and refreshingly straightforward *apologia* for the Durkheimian-anthropological study of sacrifice by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, published in 1899.

The final third of the book is perhaps of less immediate relevance to the theologian, including as it does a learned exposition of *Dr Strangelove* and two chapters on Aztec and other Mesoamerican human sacrificial practices. Yet these chapters are fascinating: in the second of them, David Brown asks whether such practices might pose some helpful if probing questions to Christian theology (rather than simply being subject to critique *by* Christianity) and in the course of the essay makes important contributions to the debate about the interpretation of difficult passages such as *Deuteronomy 7*, demanding total destruction of the Canaanites, and the near-sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis 22*. In Laura Rival's preceding essay, a plausible, if unprovable, analysis is offered of the anthropology and cosmology that lay at the heart of the Aztec 'sacrificial complex'. There are, in fact, fascinating parallels between this analysis and the relationship between cosmology and sacrificial cult discernible in later pre-Christian Jewish writings such as the *Book of Jubilees* and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls; if there is anything missing from this volume, it is an examination of whether the complex thought-world of late Second-Temple Judaism, centred as it was upon one of human history's most remarkable places of sacrifice, might have any light to shed upon the meaning of sacrifice for modern Christian theology.

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RENAISSANCE TRUTHS: HUMANISM, SCHOLASTICISM AND THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT LANGUAGE by Alan R. Perreiah, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2014, pp. x + 209, £65.00, hbk

This is a book which is difficult for an intellectual historian to review fairly. It is full of interest, but in the end it lacks a satisfactory coordination of its ideas. The reader is left in some uncertainty as to whether it is primarily about the late medieval or the modern scholarly debates about its main subject or subjects. And those subjects sometimes seem to be shaken into new patterns with the randomness of a kaleidoscope.