

## Is a non-sacrificial Christianity possible?

† Robert Spaeman<sup>1</sup>

The act of sacrifice dates back to the earliest days of humanity. It owes nothing to rational thought. The concept of sacrifice does not precede sacrifice, and the justifications given to explain sacrifice came only afterwards. The relationship between these explanations and the object to be explained is identical to that of "derivatives" in relation to "residues" in Pareto. As A. Loisy writes, sacrifice is "par excellence the sacred action... and for that very reason the act in which man makes the supreme affirmation of his faith and eminently realises his religion"<sup>2</sup>. One could discuss at length whether the various phenomena summarised by the concept of sacrifice can truly be associated with each other. Insofar as these phenomena have common characteristics, we find a good definition of sacrifice in the encyclopaedia *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, according to which sacrifice is "a ritual action in which a living being or a being endowed with power is destroyed in order to influence invisible powers, to enter into contact or even communion with them, to hasten their action, to offer them satisfaction, honour them or neutralise their harmful influences. Sacrifice is not simply a gift, it is sanctified by a particular rite. There is no logical relationship between its supposed effectiveness and the means employed"<sup>3</sup>.

When offering a sacrifice, man enters into a relationship with the invisible world, which is considered to be the foundation of the visible world. The purpose of sacrifice is to maintain the creative and life-giving contact between the two. In the animist religions of Africa, there is talk of a flow of vital force that must not be interrupted. Sacrifices are a *sine qua non* condition of life. This is what we see in the book of Genesis: after God breathed in the "pleasant smell" of the animals sacrificed on Noah's altar, he promised never again to curse the earth because of man. He admitted that "the intentions of man's heart are evil from his youth". "As long as the earth remains, there will be sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night" (Genesis 8:21-22). This cosmic peace also forms the basis of human community: this is essentially achieved through the communal sacrificial meal. During these meals, divinity and humanity are united. As I have said, these sacrificial rites do not stem from any theoretical considerations. The explanations given for them are only *a posteriori* approaches, including René Girard's theory, which is currently the most important, although by no means satisfactory. This theory undoubtedly has the advantage of explaining its own *a posteriori* nature. According to René Girard, all sacrifices are based on the repression of the mechanism that underpins them: the need to control destructive social violence. This function is only effective as long as it remains latent; religious interpretation ignores the existence of foundational violence, but it is precisely in this that it fulfils its function.

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<sup>2</sup>A. LOISY: *Historical Essay on Sacrifice*, 1920, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>*Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1960, vol. IV, p. 1637.

On the other hand, for Girard, modern rationalist theories, which ridicule the ideology of sacrifice, are repressions that take no account of the persistence of "founding violence" and which, as a result, make the renewal of this rite indispensable. It was only when Christ assumed the role of scapegoat without resistance that the chain of violence was broken and the essence of this role was made explicit. Only then was the true God revealed, who has nothing to do with the prince of this world who demands sacrifices. It is only when the curtain of the Temple is torn that the sacred begins to reveal its dark secret and recede before the revelation of the true God. Thus, the death of Christ is the end of all sacrifices, not because it completes their secret meaning, but because it reveals their absurdity, their meaninglessness. In this sense, Girard follows in the great Gnostic tradition that began with Marcion and which places the God of the Old Covenant and the prince of this world, who must give way to the Father of Jesus Christ, on the same footing. It is true that, on the surface, before the appearance of Jesus, the image of God was tinged with a certain ambiguity: "You are of your father the devil" (Jn 8:44), Christ said to the Jews. And again: "You say, 'He is our God,' but you do not know him; but I know him" (Jn 8:55).

If some refuse to interpret Jesus' suffering and death as a sacrifice of atonement offered to the Father for the sins of the world, one reason is undoubtedly that they do not accept that this suffering and death can be classified in the general category of sacrifices, so laden with the many horrors and aberrations of humanity, whose origins are almost completely lost in darkness and which, according to René Girard, can only fear the light. But is it inevitable that this category should escape the light? St Thomas Aquinas already asked whether the sufferings of Jesus could be included in a concept that has completely different and ambiguous connotations; he replied, in essence, that this concept must be understood from its completion, that is, from the death of Jesus, and that all other sacrifices must be considered as more or less authentic realisations of this "true sacrifice". And once we accept that the sacrifices of humanity originate not from a concept but from an obscure premonition, we can then understand what was foreseen; this ultimate discovery is the *logikè thysia*, the *rationabilis oblatio* referred to in the canon of the Roman Mass liturgy.

The essence of sacrifice, which is central to Christianity, is that it brings together in a new synthesis both the idea of sacrifice and the intention that drove the prophets to criticise purely ritual sacrifices, as prophetically predicted in Psalm 50. After saying that God takes no pleasure in sacrifices or burnt offerings but wants a broken spirit and a contrite heart, the psalm continues without transition: *Benigne fac, Domine, in bona voluntate tua Sion, ut ædificentur muri Jerusalem! Tunc acceptabis sacrificium justitiæ, tunc imponent super altare tuum vitulos* - "In your good will, do good to Zion: rebuild the temples of Jerusalem! Then you will be pleased with sacrifices of justice - burnt offerings and total oblations - then young bulls will be offered on your altar". Of course, it is not impossible that this sentence was added later by Nehemiah. Nevertheless, as it stands, it is part of Holy Scripture, and must be read in the context of the sacrifice at Golgotha, in which both the intentions of the sacrifice and the intentions of those who criticise the sacrifice are fulfilled.

What is striking about sacrifice, and what disturbs normal human reason, is that in order to please God, something is destroyed, and not something bad, an instrument of evil or a disease, but

something good: an unblemished animal, the fruits of the field, a young virgin, an innocent child, or even, finally, the Son of God. In archaic sacrifices, the victim must be offered to the invisible power. How can something be offered to this power? By making that something itself invisible, that is, by destroying it. What is loss here must become gain there. This logic is incomprehensible in a paradisiacal world: there, God is glorified not by death but by life. Life itself is worship of God. And the fuller and more successful that life is, the more God is glorified. Thomas Aquinas writes that, in Paradise, sexual pleasure was greater than it has ever been since, because man's capacity for joy and human sensitivity exceeded those of fallen nature. In that world, there is no place for sacrifice. It is a successful life that is itself a sacrifice; it is that which constitutes the gift.

In fact, there is already an analogue of sacrifice in paradise: it is a renunciation imposed by God, that of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through this renunciation, men had to expressly recognise God's authority and, as St Thomas says, do something only because God commanded it. It took the serpent to awaken the desire for what was forbidden and to transform this renunciation into something resembling a sacrifice, namely the sacrifice of desire. Sacrifices proper only began after the Fall.

An old saying attributed to Anaximander says more about these relationships than many theologians of our time. The saying goes: "Where things come from, there they also disappear in their time. For they repair each other's evil." What does this saying mean? Every being exists at the expense of something else, reducing everything that exists with it to the status of mere environment. Being is violent by nature. Its fundamental tendency is not love but self-assertion. But this is also why, in the end, it pays the price with its own disappearance, and thus eternal *dikè*, cosmic justice, remains intact. Death is the price of self-assertion through violence. That is evil. But for Anaximander, it is a tragic, fatal evil. *Ecce, in iniquitatibus conceptus sum, et in peccatis concepit me mater mea*, says Psalm 50. Yet the psalmist knows more than Anaximander. For the latter, there is, on the one hand, the world of reciprocal evil. But since everyone suffers the same evil that they cause, and since they pay the price of their life with death, the order of the world as a whole is not disturbed and eternal justice remains unchanged. This is not a question of moral evil, for it is not at all a question of men but of things, of living beings, among which there are men.

The psalmist, on the other hand, sees man not as a being who blindly commits evil and blindly pays the price, but as a being who is directly confronted with the origin of things and therefore with the obligation to do good and regret evil when he has committed it. *Tibi soli peccavi et malum coram te feci* - this is the key phrase of this psalm, at the end of which the psalmist says that he would gladly bring offerings in order to be reinstated into the divine order, but that such substitutions are not pleasing to God. It is undoubtedly true for all men that "the wages of sin is death", but this death is only *objectively* the restoration of balance, the price of life, as biologists teach us. That is why death does not bring the one who dies back into the divine order. This order is restored without him. *Non mortui laudabunt te, Domine, neque qui descendant in infernum*, we read in another psalm. And that is why Psalm 50 continues: *Sacrificium Deo spiritus contribulatus. Cor contritum et humiliatum, Deus, non despicies*. The death that brings us back to God is an act that we must accomplish ourselves: it is "the death of the old man". Yet even this we cannot do by

ourselves. Repentance, a contrite heart, is itself a gift. Perfect repentance is not the condition for forgiveness but the sign of forgiveness already granted.

Jesus taught us this forgiveness, which precedes anything that man can do and is offered to all who desire it. If the prodigal son returns to his father, it is not out of pure love but because his situation is so desperate that he has no other solution. "Perfect repentance" only occurs when, instead of hiring him as a day labourer, the father embraces him as a son. Yet when the one who teaches this unconditional forgiveness is rejected by those who clearly believe they do not need it and who themselves do not want to forgive unconditionally, one might think that Jesus has exhausted the resources of his wisdom. But the resources of God's wisdom are infinite. His ultimate wisdom is the Cross: Jesus transforms the rejection of God's love into a sacrifice for those who reject that love. It is not they who offer this sacrifice, it is the Son who offers it to the Father for those who reject his love, because they "do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:24). Like Judas, they become actors in a drama whose meaning they do not understand. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:26). This is not a necessity by inference, as if God had no other choice. It is God who chose this means of our redemption. Its internal necessity is like that of a perfect masterpiece in which no element could be different from what it is without our being able to say that another masterpiece would not have been possible. In this divine masterpiece that is the history of salvation, sacrifice occupies a central place. The most extreme opposites come together here: on the one hand, the purification of the idea of sacrifice, the rejection of all sacrificial victims as substitutes—beginning with archaic human sacrifices—in favour of a perfect life; and on the other hand, the bloody human sacrifice, but in this case as the sacrifice that the God-man makes of himself, and as the completion of his perfect life.

The prophetic visions of the end of sacrifice could only be fulfilled when the perfect sacrifice became a reality. This was the only way to make possible a life whose moral character would no longer be simply an expression of spiritual pride but an expression of gratitude for this sacrifice. It is not without reason that the celebration of this sacrifice is called "Eucharist", thanksgiving.

According to the rationalist interpretation of Christianity given by the Enlightenment, the real drama that is the history of salvation does not exist; there is only a progressive teaching given to humanity. When Paul writes that, on the Cross, Christ broke down the wall that separated Jews from pagans, according to modern interpretation this simply means that we have thus learned that this wall was only imaginary. For modernists, to say that God has now truly abolished a boundary set by God is a matter of mythology. And, in this sense, we see that modernists accept the end of the superstitious belief in the effectiveness of sacrifice but not the doctrine of the ultimate sacrifice that replaced all other sacrifices. Only René Girard sees it as a real event, because he effectively attributes a real function to the sacrifices of the previous era. However, for Girard, this function is ultimately only a socio-psychological one. Nor can Girard explain why, since the death of Jesus, human society suddenly no longer needs this scapegoat mechanism to ensure its stability. Perhaps it will need it again, precisely when the memory of the sacrifice of Redemption is no longer celebrated.

In this context, it is interesting to note what Kant said: in his philosophy of law, Kant writes that a state that is dissolving has a duty to first carry out the death penalty against those who have earned it for murder so that, as he says, the blood debt remains unavenged and does not weigh on the citizens after their dispersal. Clearly, we see here the return of the Erinyes, the ancient goddesses of vengeance. The Christian Middle Ages no longer used this kind of mythical language: at that time, it was considered that expiation, in the metaphysical sense understood by Kant, had been achieved once and for all by Christ. This is why, in the works of St Thomas Aquinas, for example, criminal law is based exclusively on considerations arising from the necessities of the common good. But it is true that Kant rejected the idea of a sacrifice of redemption replacing all others, hence the reappearance in criminal law of the requirement for expiation in its mythical form. And is it really a coincidence that the technicalised genocide committed by the National Socialists was christened by the survivors as "holocaust", a term that characterised the sacrifices offered by the Israelites at the Temple? Never in history has a scapegoat ritual been celebrated to such extremes, a ritual celebrated this time by those who wanted nothing more to do with the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And, of course, this holocaust was no longer addressed to a deity - it only aggravated the sin of the world that the Lamb of God bore.

The idea of sacrifice is as old as humanity itself: for men, it has always been self-evident that life could only be sustained through sacrifice, and that a voluntary loss below was a gain above. But this obvious fact defies any attempt at rational explanation; which is why there are not only many theories of sacrifice, but also many theological theories about the sacrifice that accomplished our redemption. Yet it so happens that the deepest mystery of our faith has never been expressed in a clear dogmatic form. There is the doctrine of Saint Irenaeus or Saint Gregory of Nyssa, according to which Jesus paid tribute to Satan with his blood to free us from the slavery in which he held us; but there is also that of Saint Anselm, for whom Jesus shed his blood to satisfy God's justice, or that of Luther, according to which Jesus appeased the Father's wrath. All these theories are based on texts from the New Testament, so it should be possible to reconcile them in some way. Finally, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul exhorts his readers to deliver "the offender to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:5).

In Holy Scripture, all the devil's activity seems to be an activity which, despite himself, can only serve God's plan. The Church has never even defined in a dogma that Jesus' death was a sacrifice for our sins. It has never defined this because it has never been disputed: it was part of the teaching of the ordinary magisterium. It is true that it defined it indirectly at the Council of Trent, which declared that, as a re-enactment of the sacrifice of the Cross, the Mass is a real and true sacrifice. And it defined it in this way in reaction to Luther, for whom the sacrifice of the Mass threatened faith in the "once" and "once for all" nature of Christ's sacrifice. In reality, what we see today is that the sacrifice of the Mass is the true bulwark of this faith. Ever since, even within the Catholic Church, the fact that the Mass truly has the character of a sacrifice has been contested or pushed into the background, more and more theologians have been contesting that Jesus' death was a sacrifice. Ever since the altars of our churches have been replaced by tables, we no longer say that the Cross was an altar.

It was the philosophers of the Enlightenment who were favourable to religion, such as Rousseau and Kant, who rejected the idea that Jesus' death could be interpreted as a sacrifice of atonement. In their interpretation, Christianity was a "natural religion", which for them did not mean a religion of nature but, to quote Kant's phrase, "religion within the limits of pure reason"; and Jesus was its most important teacher and supreme model. True worship of God is a moral life, and nothing can replace it. Plato already taught this. In all the great religions of the world, there is a critical current towards sacrifice. Thus, the Upanishads criticise Vedic cultic sacrifices. And the prophets of Israel - Isaiah and Jeremiah - write that God abhors sacrifices. What God wants from us is to aspire to goodness, to help the oppressed, to do justice to widows and orphans. "Do not trust in lying words: 'This is the sanctuary of Yahweh!' But... truly improve your ways and your deeds" (2 Jr 7:4). In the ancient Roman liturgy, the Catholic Church did not hesitate, especially on Good Friday, to read the text of the prophet Hosea: *Misericordiam volui et non sacrificium, et scientiam Dei plus quam holocausta.*

Another reason why these philosophers refused to consider Jesus' death a sacrificial death was the concept of substitution. Substitution, it seems, exists only in the realm of material reparation and not in the moral realm. The Enlightenment held fast to the idea of a just God who rewards the good and punishes the wicked. To reject the idea of sacrifice, today's theologians use the exact opposite argument: being pure love, God forgives unconditionally. And this idea of unconditional love seems incompatible with the idea of God being satisfied by death. Recently, another, very unconvincing argument has been put forward by the theologian Eugen Biser: delivering a man to a violent death to save other men goes against Kant's categorical imperative that men must always be treated as an end in themselves. But this argument would require God to prevent the death of every man. Why it would be wrong to give the death of a man—a death caused not by God but by men—the infinite value of a redemptive sacrifice is Biser's secret. Furthermore, since God raises the dead, he does not reduce man to a mere means when he allows him to die. Acceptance of Christ's sacrifice is the Resurrection of Christ. And finally, implicitly, this objection is based on the assumption that the person of Jesus is a human person and not that of the eternal Son. But the person of Jesus does not cease to rest in the bosom of the Father. He includes all men in the eternal gift of himself that he makes to the Father. The fact that this takes the form of a hateful death reveals what sin is: man's rebellion against God. And it is because he is the Innocent One par excellence – who, as a substitute, "learned obedience through what he suffered", as the Epistle to the Hebrews says (Heb 5:8) – that his death is a sacrifice of Redemption that reverses the destiny of the world.

Is non-sacrificial Christianity possible? The question is not whether it is possible, but whether it is genuine. According to what the Holy Scriptures and Tradition teach us, it is not genuine. What is Christianity? For the Catholic Church, there is no generic term "Christianity" whose relationship to denominations would be identical to the relationship between genus and species. This is, of course, an "objective" sociological conception of Christianity, according to which all those who see Jesus as the reference point of their lives and their relationship with God are Christians. But who is Jesus? What did he really want? What does it mean in practical terms to

be inspired by Jesus? How do we know, when we say "Jesus", that we are not talking about a projection of ourselves? The Catholic answer is clear: there is only one community of Jesus' disciples, only one Church of God. In this world, it is visibly embodied by the Catholic Church. Even if, outside the Church, there are people and communities who want to follow Jesus and who, to varying degrees, share the faith of the Church and have a share in the goods of salvation that the Church possesses.

This is where the concept of the hierarchy of truths comes in, a concept which, for Catholics, is essentially irrelevant; on the other hand, it is an essential tool for determining the extent to which non-Catholics are closer or further away from the Catholic Church. In this hierarchy of values, the death of Jesus as a sacrifice of redemption occupies such a high place that, in reality, this belief is equivalent to being a Christian. When we say that "whoever believes in Him will receive, through His name, the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:43), we are referring to the confession that the apostles asked for as a baptismal confession. If this forgiveness had been proclaimed by Jesus only as a general truth, it would have nothing to do with the confession of his name. Once we had learned this lesson, we could forget the teacher; and, like Socrates, Jesus would say: "Do not concern yourselves with Jesus, concern yourselves with the truth." But the apostle says: *Ipse est remissio omnium peccatorum*. This sentence only makes sense if it is the death of Jesus that obtains this forgiveness, as all the apostles teach.

Holy Mass is not just another sacrifice; one could say that it is a "meta-sacrifice", the sacrifice of a sacrifice. The sacrifice of Golgotha is given to the Church as her own sacrifice. And if an event from the past becomes present in every Mass while remaining numerically identical, this is only possible because, as the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse say, in heaven it is the eternal present "since the beginning of the world". The eternal Son is now and forever the slain Lamb, who occupies the centre of the heavenly liturgy. The earthly liturgy can only be understood as participation in the heavenly liturgy; otherwise, it would be nothing more than a simple ceremony of remembrance. And this participation takes the form of a rite. It is precisely because it is the same thing that happened on Golgotha and was anticipated in the Upper Room that it is not identical. Whenever we try to copy the situation of the Last Supper – for the sake of historicity or actualisation – we see that faith in the real present of this event disappears. We do not celebrate the liturgy of the Mass at a table or on a cross. We celebrate it, as humanity did in the most distant times, on a stone, which represents both the Cross, the table and Christ the victim – on an altar.