

From austerity measures to suicide bombers: developing a theory of sacrifice

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Austerity, martyrdom, and love all contain elements of sacrifice. But what does it mean exactly to put aside one's personal needs for the greater good? On Sacrifice addresses the meaning of the act and the implications for those who take part and for the rest of society. Catherine Hezser considers the author's theological examples and ultimately thinks the book offers a solid foundation for discussions of sacrifice-related terminology in political and economic discourse.



On Sacrifice. Moshe Halbertal. Princeton University Press. February 2012.

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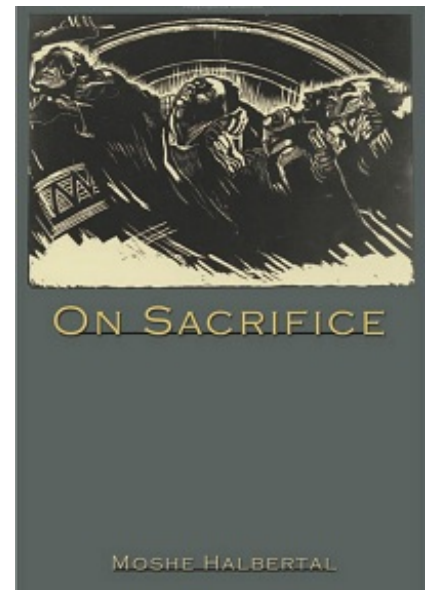
These meditations on the meaning of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and modern philosophy by Moshe Halbertal, professor of law at New York University and professor of Jewish thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, take on an increasing relevance in the context of David Cameron's and other European leaders' austerity measures. President Obama also calls for a sort of shared sacrifice to stabilize governmental budgets.

Each individual citizen is asked to "sacrifice" part of their property by accepting higher taxes, interest rates, and prices as well as cuts to benefits and pensions. This self-sacrifice is propagated as a contribution to the common good of the respective society, economy, and political system. The terminology of "sacrifice" has a distinct political significance besides its religious connotations in world religions including Judaism and Christianity.

Halbertal makes a categorical distinction between sacrificing *to* someone and sacrificing *for* something. Only the first type of sacrifice is represented in the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic, and Graeco-Roman literary sources. It involves a hierarchical relationship between giver and recipient, where the recipient can either refuse the offer or accept it and thereby initiate a gift cycle. In the Bible such sacrifices are offered to God through rituals and seen as tokens keeping the relationship between God and the community alive.

The second form of sacrifice constitutes an extension of the first meaning and appears in later Jewish and non-Jewish literary sources in social and political rather than religious contexts. When sacrificing one's own interest for someone else's or one's country's benefit, no transfer is involved. In war soldiers sacrifice their lives for their nation's victory. Halbertal suggests that the state can be seen as "a sacrificial bond".

The notions of sacrifice and violence are closely linked. Sacrifice involves violence but is also meant to halt violence and effect purification. A proper victim is chosen to serve as a scapegoat sacrificed on behalf of others to placate God or to prevent further retaliation by one's enemies. The victim serves as a substitute for those who initiated the sacrificial ritual. Sacrificing him is believed to bring about



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atonement. This idea found its foremost expression in the Christian sacrifice of the son of God to secure atonement for others: “That sacrifice eclipsed all previous ones, making them redundant and void”.

The connection between sacrifice and violence is also evident in the use of the same term for a sacrifice and a crime victim in Hebrew (*qorban*) and a number of other languages (e.g., German: *Opfer*; Arabic: *adcha*). In both cases, the (innocent) victim experiences violence at the hands of others. Early Christianity “merges the crime victim and the sacrifice into the same persona”.

In rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., other forms of substitution emerged: charity, suffering, and prayer. Rabbis suggested that by supporting the poor on behalf of God, who is seen as ultimately responsible for their well-being, the charity giver is “lending to God” and thereby reversing the dependence relationship between them. In a different way, suffering is seen to affect atonement, since it serves as “a symbolic substitute for the punishment itself”, says Halbertal. He goes on to say that daily prayer “was perceived to achieve the same goals: atonement, and thanking and appeasing God”.

The self-sacrifice of martyrdom constitutes the bridge between the notions of sacrificing to and sacrificing for. The martyr sacrifices his life for the love of God. This understanding of “the martyr as a sacrificial offering” emerged in Judaism from the seventh century onwards only. Sacrifice now also involved “giving up” one’s life (and/or property) for the sake of one’s religious – as well as ethical and political – convictions. A similar notion appears in modern philosophical writings which stress self-transcendence and sacrifice as the basis of morality in contrast to self-preservation and gratification.

Yet in war, this relationship is reversed: soldiers who are ready to sacrifice themselves evince “a form of moral self-deception” assuming “that sacrifice makes something into a good”. Halbertal argues that in certain situations, “self-sacrifice mobilizes crimes that in their magnitude are far greater than those motivated by self-interest”. He refers to the suicide bomber as an example for the connection between self-sacrifice and violence and the reversal of roles between aggressor and victim. Self-sacrifice is therefore potentially dangerous if it is misguided. It can be used towards the common good but also justify crimes and corrupt society. In religious parlance, misguided self-sacrifice constitutes idolatry.

The author finally asks what sort of self-sacrifice could be “rightly demanded of a citizen”: asking citizens to risk their own lives seems illegitimate, since it stands in opposition to the state’s goal of self-preservation, unless that self-preservation cuts “across generations”. Asking citizens to sacrifice a part of their wealth for the common good is legitimate since the political order should be based on cooperation rather than competition. Whether the current austerity measures will lead to more equality and solidarity amongst citizens is open to question, though.

The book presents a good basis for further discussion of the use of sacrifice-related terminology in political and economic discourse. Anyone interested in the continued significance of ancient concepts, ideas, and rituals in modern life and thinking would benefit from reading this book.

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