Introduction: Sacrifice and Self-Sacrifice: 
A Religious Concept under Transformation

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Abstract

Sacrifice, originally a religious-cultic concept, has become highly secularized and used in various instances for different social phenomena. The current issue puts forward a selection of papers that offer insights into sacrifice and self-sacrifice and focus on the process of transformation of the sacrificial individual. Three main axes put the concrete papers into a dialogue with one another: first, there is the philosophical-theological and gender reflection of the experience of the paradigmatic sacrificial story of the western tradition, i.e., the Akedah (Gen 22); second, the existential-phenomenological interpretation of self-sacrifice in the secular world which nevertheless aims to reveal a higher good – Freedom, Love, or the Good; third, the gender and feminist reflection of the motherly sacrifice of childbirth both in the religious-cultic context and in the secular context which presents childbirth both as a moment of autonomy loss and submission and a moment of women self-emancipation.

Keywords

sacrifice – self-sacrifice – gender – Binding of Isaac (Akedah, Gen 22) – existential phenomenology – feminism

Sacrifice is a troublesome concept that brings various pre-understandings and plenty of biases to the scholarly debate; however, to cover the whole spectrum of its possible meanings would go far beyond the possibilities of the current issue. The goal of this introduction is to outline the basic contours of sacrificial discourses included within the issue and to help the reader navigate these particular contributions. The term sacrifice developed in the cultic-religious
environment, but it became secularised over time. It is no longer obvious in general usage that sacrifice has a religious origin. The secularisation process, together with the neo-liberal understanding of the self and its agency, brought about different ways of talking about sacrifice, including ways of discussing “sacrificial acting” without using the term sacrifice at all.\footnote{Among the most well-known “substitutes” for sacrifice belongs the concept of the “gift”. See, for example, Derrida, The Gift of Death; or Marion, The Reason of a Gift.} However, a conscious avoidance of the term, which has become for various reasons popular in current philosophical, theological and socio-political debates, does not change the fact that the Jewish and Christian roots of our culture and civilization are built on the logic of sacrifice.\footnote{Derrida, The Gift of Death, p. 69 et seq.}

The basic understanding of sacrifice (be it secular or religious) is the economy of exchange – I give up something to receive something (ideally more valuable) in return. This is the general form (despite all the potential nuances)\footnote{James Watt suggests that “every attempt to describe and explain ‘sacrifice’ always fails to encompass the whole range of ritual and nonritual behavior called sacrifice”, and, therefore, that it would ultimately be best to abandon the "label" of sacrifice altogether. Watt, Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus, p. 174; there are indeed strong arguments for Watt’s theory – the fact that we do not actually find the term “sacrifice” in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the fact that the intentions, forms and contexts of the behaviour which we are accustomed to call “sacrifice” differ significantly. Nevertheless, I opt for keeping sacrifice in our discourse because it has been used throughout the centuries, and its removal from our philosophical/theological discussions or substitution with another term, for example, “gift” (thus, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, or Jacques Derrida), does not change the nature of the debate. Moreover, the basic intention – that is, communication with the deity – remains valid in all the different forms of “sacrifice”.} that is depicted by anthropologists of religion and theorists of sacrifice, such as Robertson Smith, Bataille, Burkett, Hubert and Mauss,\footnote{Bataille, Theory of Religion; Burkert, Homo Necans; Hubert and Mauss, Sacrifice; Robertson Smith, The Religion of the Semites.} and with which they introduce ways that people communicated with their deity, the so-called do ut des model. Another influential theory of sacrifice, which is formulated from the perspective of social theory of violence and religion, is brought by the French literary theorist and social anthropologist René Girard.\footnote{Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Things Hidden.} Girard is convinced that sacrifice developed as a function of society needing to rid itself of accumulated violence and therefore generating the so-called sacrificial scapegoat (typically a foreigner, a captive or some other person incompatible with the community). Sacrifice, in Girard’s system, is a ritual which includes an “appointed scapegoat” who takes upon herself or himself all the sins, sicknesses, and impurities of the whole community to restore peace. The ritual
includes chasing away and/or killing the scapegoat during an ecstatic cultic ritual. The scapegoat is deified after death and is therefore able to exercise magical atoning power over the community. The cycle repeats itself when the community needs another reconciliation process.\(^6\)

The present issue, even though its contributions refer here and there to the “economy of exchange” or “violence as a social phenomenon which is to be channelled away”, is based, however, on the sacrificial/self-sacrificial experience of the individual. A leitmotif running through almost all the articles is the story of the \textit{Binding of Isaac}, the so-called Akedah in Gen 22. The most prominent interpretation referenced in the articles is of course that of the Danish master of existentialism Søren Kierkegaard, along with reflections on Kierkegaard by Franz Kafka, Jan Patočka or Jacques Derrida; the articles seek to embrace the efforts of various philosophers and theologians to depict the transformation of the self in the liminal situation of sacrifice. Special attention is paid to questions of gender. Among the authors who notice the importance of gender within the sacrificial discourse are Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Yvonne Sherwood. What is the role of gender in sacrifice? Does the experience of the feminine sacrificial self differ from the masculine sacrificial self? Is there any unique feminine sacrifice which is totally untranslatable, for example, childbirth and the experience of motherhood in the broader sense? Does the role of victim fall to women more often than to men? And is our society irredeemably built on sacrifice? The current issue is woven from these and other questions related to sacrifice and the transformation of the self within the process of self-sacrifice.

Despite the diversity of the contributions, there are significant links which bind them together. One of the most important links is undoubtedly the emphasis on the moment of transformation of the self within the sacrificial experience. The order of contributions follows a twofold logic: first, the chronological order and, second, the level of engagement of particular papers with the question of gender.

Anna Sjöberg, in her article “Other Abrahams: Sacrificing Faith. Augustine – Kierkegaard – Kafka”, explores sacrifice as a function of what she calls “the circle of faith”, including call (from God) and act (human response). Looking at Augustine, Kierkegaard and Kafka, she addresses three different approaches to the circle of faith and the role of sacrifice contained therein. Augustine, she believes, sacrifices those outside the circle of faith (unbelievers). In Kierkegaard, sacrifice stands for the internal struggle of those who do not accept religion in the aesthetic or ethical sense, a struggle which transforms them into solitary

\(^6\) Girard, \textit{Violence and the Sacred}, p. 15.
“knights of faith”. Kafka introduces doubt about the circle of faith in a highly secularised world, pointing out that not only our response but also the calling itself cannot be taken for granted. Victims of “sacrifice in service of faith” are to be found on all fronts, religious and non-religious alike. Sjöberg concludes: “If it is true that the circle of faith always demands a sacrifice in order to safeguard an interior space of faith, we all, believer and non-believer alike, find ourselves excluded from this interior perspective, sacrificed in order for the notion of faith to live on.”

Vivian Liska, in her contribution “Law and Sacrifice in Kafka and his Readers”, explores the relationship between the law, which is implicitly present and which penetrates all Kafka’s writings, and sacrifice, and asks if the law makes its subjects victims of sacrifice. Liska compares “important interpretations of Kafka’s relation to law and sacrifice, one by the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben […], the other by the German-Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin […].” Agamben, similarly to the Apostle Paul, Liska observes, argues that the law is always oppressive and must be overcome by the messianic form of self-sacrifice. Liska notes that Benjamin compares Kafka’s interpretations of the law to the Haggadic narrations that complement the Halakhic orders. These Haggadic narrations then suggest the deferral of the law (and therefore also of sacrifice). To make her argument about Kafka’s ultimate deferral of sacrifice crystal clear, Liska appeals to Kafka’s “other Abrahams”, who invent anything conceivable to postpone endlessly the divine order. Liska concludes: “Kafka imagines another Abraham, however, one who engages in an ongoing conversation with God and his commandments, who would not depart for Mount Moriah intending to sacrifice his beloved son.”

Clarissa Breu, in her “Exposure of Violence”, approaches the ever-repeating story of the Binding of Isaac as a performative reading of the passage alongside Judith Butler’s and Giorgio Agamben’s theories of gesture. Sacrifice in Breu’s article plays a functional role within an inherently violent society. Breu suggests that “violence is not abolished in the Aqeda, but exposed and thereby questioned.” She focuses on the moment of interruption: “[H]e [Abraham] reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (Gen 22:10). The sacrificial act is not completed, but neither it is negated. The question remains with us until today: What would have happened if the angel of God did not interrupt the sacrifice? Breu deliberately decides to put this question aside to focus rather on what we see happening in the text (and not on what we do not see). We see Abraham stretching out his hand but then yielding. We see God compelling but then interrupting. In the Girardian vein (used by Breu in another context), we observe sacrifice as a means of channeling away the accumulated
violence. Breu concludes: “The Aqeda is an example of a restrained violent act that is first interrupted and then redirected.”

Esther and Richard Heinrich, in their article “Sacrifice and Obedience: Simon Weil on the Binding of Isaac”, focus on the relationship between sacrifice and unconditional obedience to God. They point out the importance of the “void” created by Abraham (in other words, by Abraham's obedience towards God's command) twice during the story and which provided space for God to give Abraham his son back. Abraham's obedience is compared to the parallel story about Iphigenia in Aulis, in which Agamemnon's disobedience (killing Artemis's stag) not only brought misery upon the whole of Greece, but also culminated in his daughter Iphigenia being sacrificed. Violence is, in Weil's system, understood as a political and not as a philosophical category. Despite the problematic nature of categories such as sacrifice and obedience in the current philosophical debates, Heinrich suggest that “Weil's estimation of these conceptions as the very basics of moral acts could be read as a call for a kind of modesty, as a call not to put oneself above the world.”

Sandra Lehmann, in her contribution “Ways of Self-Transcendence: On Sacrifice for Nothing and Hyperbolic Ontology”, explores ways of transcending the category of Being in the extreme situation of self-sacrifice. Lehmann addresses the “concept of a transcendent Good and its impact on one's attitude towards life.” She remarks that “[i]n the ancient version, the Good is beyond all things, both sensible and intelligible, and exceeds them. This is why it enables those orienting themselves towards it to also exceed their worldly self.” In her friendly polemic with Jan Patočka, Lehmann remarks that Patočka's concept of sacrifice for nothing, that is, for nothing else but for pure Being in the sense of its ontological difference, is in fact too hollow to promise anything positive to turn to. Even if this “nothing” in Patočka's system means freedom from the instrumentalization of human beings, it is, Lehmann claims, too little. What Lehmann offers instead is the idea of the hyperbolic ontology, in other words, “transcending oneself” for the sake of pure Good, based on antique philosophy.

Martin Koci, in his article “Almost for Nothing: The Question of Sacrifice in Jan Patočka”, offers a different interpretation of Patočka's “sacrifice for nothing”. Koci is persuaded that the controversial and maybe somewhat misleading term “for nothing” is the best and in fact the only way to rescue Being from increasing instrumentalization and from misuse. If “there is nothing like sacrifice” (only utilization of human resources), then the elegant solution is, according to Koci, “sacrifice for nothing”. However, beyond defending the troublesome concept, Koci investigates Patočka's oeuvre and notices two slightly different aspects of the “sacrifice for nothing”: first, the so-called “heroic sacrifice” (one
could say the “active sacrifice”), which Koci illustrates with the figure of the Czech student who immolated himself in the protest against the Soviet occupation in 1968; second, the “kenotic/self-emptying sacrifice” (one could say the “more accepting sacrifice”), which, for Koci, is illustrated by the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross. To join these two aspects of “sacrifice for nothing”, Koci provides an example which is both heroic and kenotic, that of the sacrifice of a mother for her child.

René Rosfort, in his contribution entitled “Sacrificing Gender: Kierkegaard and the Traumatic Self”, enters a rather contested research field of “Kierkegaard and gender”. Rather than addressing the question of Kierkegaard’s misogyny, Rosfort instead investigates the role of gender in the key Kierkegaardian concept of “becoming Self”. He observes: “We are not simply free to choose who we are. Because of our gender we already are a self before we become a self. In becoming who we are we cannot escape what we are.” Following the complex dialectics of Kierkegaard’s self-denial and self-affirmation, Rosfort employs the same logic to discuss “sacrificing gender”. On the one hand, we have to “sacrifice” our gendered biases to embrace the universal and ethical self. On the other hand, to be true and loving human beings, we must embrace our gendered (that is, our human) self. Thus, Rosfort concludes: “To sacrifice gender is not and cannot be to cultivate an ungendered love. On the contrary, it is a radical love that sacrifices my sexual biases to make room for the individual otherness of gender differences that make me and other people the gendered selves that we are.”

Petr Vaškovic, in his account “Kierkegaard’s Existentialist Sacrifice”, asks whether the state of “reflective sorrow” (a phenomenon discussed in Kierkegaard’s Either/Or), which entraps one in the aesthetic stage by cyclical self-interrogation and prevents any advancement towards the ethical and religious stages, is or is not gendered. Analysing Kierkegaard’s portrayal of two fictitious female characters – Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira – and his interpretation of their inner state, Vaškovic concludes that the gendered state of both characters demonstrates pre-Romantic conceptions of women’s role in society and gender essentialism, rather than a gendering of “reflective sorrow” itself. Similarly to Rosfort, Vaškovic is convinced that despite its clear misogynistic traces, Kierkegaard’s oeuvre is multi-layered with regard to gender-related questions. Furthermore, Vaškovic contends, Kierkegaard’s depiction of the state of reflective sorrow is highly influenced by his own experience of the break up with his fiancé Regine Olsen. Vaškovic is convinced that, after peeling away layers of context and other miscellaneous factors, the phenomenon of reflective sorrow proves to be gender neutral.
Caecile Varslev Pedersen, in her contribution “Mothers and Melancholia: Sacrifice in Søren Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling”, juxtaposes four alternative interpretations of the Binding of Isaac that represent the image of the religious/fatherly love and four ways of weaning the infant that stand for the aesthetic/motherly love. Borrowing Freudian terminology, Pedersen points out that mourning is temporary and promises both transformation and a way forward (weaning of the infant), whereas melancholia is timeless and does not promise any advancement (Abraham’s loss of Isaac). Pedersen observes: “Motherly love is an image of a sacrifice that is only relative, and of a loss that is acknowledged so that a new beginning can ensue. Thus, the weaning images lead us to a story about sacrifice in Fear and Trembling that not only concerns pain, violence, and death, but also mourning, birth, transition, and mothering new possibilities.” Despite the hopeful image of positive and transformative motherly sacrifice, Pedersen fears that the predominant model of sacrifice in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre is the fatherly sacrifice which leaves the scar on one’s soul forever – that is, the self-sacrifice which is the prerequisite for becoming the “knight of faith”.

My own article, entitled “All the Rest Is Commentary: Being for the Other as the Way to Break the Sacrificial Logic”, compares the woman’s sacrifice in childbirth with what feminist scholars have labelled the “patriarchal sacrifice” in the story of the Binding of Isaac. I present both events as potentially self-emptying, transformative and identity-dividing moments that empower the individual to break the sacrificial logic constituting the roots of our Jewish and Christian society. Even if we deconstruct the gender stereotypes in the story of the Binding of Isaac, the sacrifice of childbirth remains undeniably gendered. However, thanks to the account of Julia Kristeva, who introduces the so-called Third Party (or the pre-oedipal father) into the otherwise enclosed and dialectical relationship of the mother and her child, we are invited to think of this utterly gendered sacrifice in a less gender-biased way.

Sara Cohen Shabot, in the closing article “From Women’s Sacrifice to Feminist Sacrifice: Medicalized Birth and ‘Natural’ Birth versus Woman-Centered Birth”, critiques long-standing birthing practices and asks whether it is possible to talk about such a thing as “feminist sacrifice”. Cohen Shabot argues that two typical forms of childbirth – medicalized birth and natural birth – objectify women, rob them of agency, and make them, in fact, instruments of others’ ideology. To fight these practices, Cohen Shabot suggests simply seeing the woman as the centre of the childbirth event, during which she decides what is best for her and her child. In this way, Cohen Shabot suggests that we may talk about the “feminist sacrifice” and not about “sacrifice of a woman”.

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Articles included in the current issue have its origin in the papers presented at the international workshop entitled “Doomed to Sacrifice? Existential and Phenomenological Perspectives on Sacrifice and Gender”, held at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna in October 2021. This event took place as part of the research project “Woman without a Name: Gender Identity in Sacrificial Stories”, supported by the Centre for Religion and Transformation (University of Vienna) and the Institute for Human Sciences. Particular authors of these articles had a unique opportunity to include ideas, remarks and comments of their fellow presenters and develop their papers in vivid exchange with other authors. Thus, I would like to invite the reader not only to immerse herself to the article of her selection or interest but also to read such an article within the broader context of this special issue. The common effort of the articles presents a mosaic of perspectives which create together an image of experience of self-sacrifice in the process of transformation of the individual with a special regard to gender.

Biography

Katerina Koci is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Austria, and a laureate of the Lise Meitner Fellowship funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for the project entitled Woman without a Name: Gender Identity in Sacrificial Stories (M2947-G). After defending her doctoral dissertation from KU Leuven, Belgium, in 2017, Katerina held a fellowship at Charles University, Prague. She has recently completed the project The Land without Promise: The Roots and Afterlife of One Biblical Allusion, which resulted in a monograph of the same title (published by Bloomsbury, August 2021). Katerina’s research focus is biblical, feminist and philosophical-theological hermeneutics, the afterlife of biblical motifs in Christian culture, and the existentialism and phenomenology of sacrificial experience.

Bibliography


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