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I believe that religion is inherently violent, especially with respect to sacrifice. This is an interesting, thought-provoking notion that Burkert presents in his writing “Sacrifice as an Act of Killing”. Burkert takes us through the ritual process of sacrifice, highlighting the elements of violence present in ritual. He also sheds light on the symbolic identification of the individual with the victim and with the group that occurs during sacrifice. The violent act of sacrifice is rationalized and validated through religion and thus religion itself is innately violent.

Burkert’s central argument is that violence is institutionalized in rituals. Burkert (1983) states that “all orders and forms of authority in human society are founded on institutionalized violence” (p. 1), including religious rituals. He argues that murder and violence are at the very core of religion and exemplifies this with the act of religious sacrifice (Burkert, 1983). Burkert believes that sacrifice functions to make a distinction between the realms where the community forbids and where the community requires violence (Alexandrin, 2015). In this sense violence in religion is necessary and functional for a society. During sacrifice each individual present identifies with the victim and with the group (Burkert, 1983: page number?). Identification with the victim allows for the development of empathy, guilt, and remorse, while the identification with the group that forms shows that sacrifice functions as a form of social bonding between group members (Alexandrin, 2015).

The sacrifice process begins with the marking off of the sacred space (Burkert, 1983). This is a symbolically pure space, separate from the community and from everyday life, where acts that are not ordinarily sanctioned can be committed (Alexandrin, 2015). Next comes the act of washing in which water is scattered on the

animal causing it to shake its head indicating its willingness to be the sacrifice (Burkert, 1983). This is followed by two stages of symbolic killing, the throwing of barley or stones at the animal and the revealing of the knife that is then used to physically mark the animal without bloodshed (Burkert, 1983: page number?). Finally the real killing is committed followed by expressions of shock and sorrow (Burkert, 1983). The animal that has been killed cannot be fully consumed by a single individual, therefore it is shared at a feast with everyone in the community (Burkert, 1983: page number?).

Each step in the process of sacrifice is either violent itself or necessary to justify the violent acts about to be done. Violence is justified during sacrifice because it is done in a sacred space. I believe that sacrifice helps to maintain social order within a society in that sanctioning violence only in the sacred space, prohibits violence within the community. Violence is a primary response of human beings and authorizing it in the sacred space allows for release of this response in an environment where it is accepted. “Animal sacrifice is the most universal human form of ritual” (Alexandrin, 2015); this may be because animals are often killed for food, doing so in a controlled environment like a ritual, allow for release of the human desire for violence.

Similar to the marking off of the sacred space, the washing of the animal is also done to help the individuals involved to justify the violence that is going to take place. The violent acts are justified in the reassurance that the animal is a willing sacrifice. The individuals identify with the victim and this is the first point at which empathy for the victim is shown.

True violence is now introduced to the ritual. The throwing of the barley grains or stones is a violent act perpetrated by the group. “The act of throwing simultaneously as

a group is an aggressive gesture, like beginning a fight, even if the most harmless projectiles are chosen" (Burkert, 1983, p. 5). Acting together in this part of the process creates social bonding in that it stimulates each individual to identify themselves as part of the group. Next comes the revealing of the knife; this is the first point at which the murder that is about to occur is acknowledged (Burkert, 1983). Anxiety and excitement levels rise in anticipation of the event.

The killing occurs, immediately followed by shock and horror (Burkert, 1983: page number?). Witnessing the violent act is a necessary experience in order for the individuals to gain empathy and to separate themselves from members of other communities. The mutual feeling of guilt and remorse that is felt throughout the group brings the group members closer together. These feelings confirm for the group why violent acts are prohibited outside of the sacred space. The ability to empathize with the victim is what makes humans human, therefore it is necessary for each individual to be present for the kill. While this is the peak of the ritual process it is not the most important nor the most interesting. Each element of sacrifice is vital to the process.

After the killing has been done there is a purifying fire and a feast to eliminate the remains (Burkert, 1983: page number?). The feast once again involves the entire community in the sacrifice. The feast creates social bonding within the group in that it is something shared with the community and not shared with members outside of the community. The sacrifice becomes like a secret that the community has joint interest in staying as such; this may cause individuals to feel as though outsiders would not understand them in quite the same way their community members do. The feasting of the sacrifice prohibits selfishness and fosters giving (Burkert, 1983). Giving is not innate in

humans but needs to be taught and the ritual process of sacrifice causes the individuals to renounce their egotism for the other members of their community (Burkert, 1983).

Everyone gets an equal share of the meal; distributing in such a way ensures that tensions do not build up within the group and maintains the social stability of the community (Alexandrin, 2015).

In the concluding line of the passage Burkert (1983) states, “the experience of death brought about by human violence... is nearly always connected with another human... namely, eating: the festive meal of those who share in the sacred” (p. 12). The social bonding that brings community members together during sacrifice is the core element to sacrifice. It makes sacrifice necessary for a community and gives it a function other than for religious purposes. It establishes rules within a community and separates members of the community from members outside. Sacrifice involves violence in the processes and acts it involves. The intense experiences of killing, feasting and the order of the process are all inherently violent and are collectively what make sacrifice religious. Therefore, sacrifice and the religion it serves are naturally violent.



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