



**Rituals that celebrate this blood sacrifice give expression and witness to faith. Sacrificial death thus defines both sectarian and national identity. This is the first sense in which both are species of religion. On the whole, we misunderstand the genuinely religious character of American patriotism and the violent character of genuine religion.** What distinguishes nationalism from sectarianism is not group logic, for both are religions of blood sacrifice. What distinguishes them is historical location.

In the West Christianity once could kill and ask others to die in the name of its particular god. In some places it does this still. But **in general in the West the power to compel believers to die passed from Christianity to the nation-state, where it largely remains.** Christianity has no authorized guns within the boundaries of the United States, nor does any other denominational sect. **In our religiously pluralist society sectarian faith is optional for citizens, as everyone knows.** Though denominations are permitted to exist, they are not permitted to kill, for they are not officially true, which is a way of suggesting they are false. **Only the true god, whose agent is the nation-state, may kill.** The state allows whoever accepts these terms to exist, to pursue their own beliefs, and to call themselves what they like in the process.

But **only the deity may kill our own.** Whoever competes with the true god, the nation-state, may be punished at the cost of his life. This was the fate of David Koresh for exercising power that not only belongs exclusively to the national god but defines him. Koresh's sin was heresy. **Americans traditionally regard the nation-state as the domain of unassailable force and religion as the domain of unassailable truth. This separation of faith and force is markedly unstable and collapses completely in wartime.** The more usual arrangement elsewhere has been strongly forged links between spiritual and political power. This is because the only religion that can truly deliver the goods must have visible agency, worldly power. Jesus' disciples felt it, and a Weberian Protestant ethic suggests it. **Wherever religion is fervently embraced, it follows in the minds of many believers that it is entitled to glory in missions of conquest that reflect God's will.**

**If nationalism is religious, why do we deny it?** Because what is obligatory for group members must be separated, as holy things are, from what is contestable. To concede that nationalism is a religion is to expose it to challenge, to make it just the same as sectarian religion. By explicitly denying that our national symbols and duties are sacred, we shield them from competition with sectarian symbols. In so doing, we embrace the ancient command not to speak the sacred, ineffable name of god. That god is inexpressible, unsayable, unknowable, beyond language. But that god may not be refused when it calls for sacrifice.

**Carlton Hayes argued that Western nationalism adapted many features of Christianity, in the shadow of which it first appeared.** Citizens are born into the nation-state, Hayes observed, just as supplicants once were born into the Church. They have no choice but to be citizens, just as medieval Christians were compelled to embrace the faith of their birth. **Wilbur Zelinsky observes that the contemporary American flag has a visual power and presence for its believers that is comparable to the medieval crucifix (243). We agree. The flag in high patriotic ritual is treated with an awe and deference that marks it as the sacred object of the religion of patriotism.** The flag is the skin of the totem ancestor held high. It represents the sacrificed bodies of its devotees just as the cross, the sacred object of Christianity, represents the body sacrificed to a Christian god. The soldier carries his flag into battle as a sign of his willingness to die, just as Jesus carried his cross to show his willingness to die. **Both the cross and the flag mark the border, the transformative point at which the believer crosses over into death.** In both Christianity and nationalism the violently sacrificed body becomes the god renewed--in Durkheimian terms, the transformed totem.

**In Christianity the revived totem is the risen Christ. In American nationalism the transformed totem is the soldier resurrected in the raised flag.** On the basis of his sacrifice the nation is rejuvenated. **As the embodiment of sacrifice, the flag has transforming power.** Certain acts cannot be performed except in its presence. It must be kept whole and perfect, as holy things are, and ceremonially disposed of when it is no

longer fit to perform the functions of the totem object. Some citizens openly speak of the American flag as sacred.

**Roy Rappaport** distinguishes ritual gesture from language, which is always other than that which it signifies. By contrast, gestures express what cannot be denied. What counts for the survival of the group is what we will do in public on its behalf while congregants bear witness. **This is what group maintenance requires: that we publicly execute our obligations. The sanctity of national symbols is protected by treating them gesturally as sacred, even while we insist in language that they are not.** And when the god commands it, we must perform the ritual sacrifice, war, that sustains the group.

**To understand how war is ritual sacrifice, recall that the raw material of society is bodies.** Organizing and disposing of them is the fundamental task of all societies. The social is quite literally constructed from the body and from specific bodies that are dedicated and used up for the purpose. The enduringness of any group depends at least partly on the willingness of its members to sacrifice themselves for the continuing life of the group. **The creation of national or sectarian religious sentiment depends on a common secret, which is that the underlying cost of all society is the violent death of some portion of its members.**

**Our deepest secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge that society depends on the death of this sacrificial group *at the hands of the group itself.*** This is the totem principle concretized. According to Durkheim, the group becomes a group by agreeing not to disagree about the group-making principle...**the totem principle by which the group constitutes itself is manifested in collective victimage. Why is it necessary to kill our own, and why can't we admit it?** It is necessary, and we cannot admit it because violence poses the greatest threat to the group from within as well as without. It is never eradicated. Like sex, it can only be channeled. When violence begins, it can be prevented from spreading only if someone is willing to submit. Submission is the sacrificial principle. To keep violence from escalating and killing every member of the group,

either by invasion from without or contagion within, *group members agree to submit to a violent authority who punishes all who do not honor the totem's exclusive right to kill its own.***(5)**

Even when the enemy kills us, his transgression is not so much that he *kills* as that he kills *us*. Only totem authority--the group deity in sectarian terms, the group itself in Durkheimian terms--is so entitled. If the totem may kill us, we are all at risk and all killers. This knowledge must be set apart from the group, for it suggests the frailty of group cohesion. **We use the term *taboo* to describe the tension between the violent sacrificial mechanism that sustains enduring groups and the reluctance of group members to accept responsibility for enacting it.**

**To protect themselves from acknowledging the source of group unity, citizens render totem violence and its symbols sacred. The knowledge that the group must sacrifice its own to survive is a secret. We keep it by treating violence as primitive and morally suspect, a failure of social structure rather than an elemental component.****(6)**

Where violence exists, it is presented as a last resort, a challenge to civilized modernity as the hallmark of the nation-state. Thus, we avoid acknowledging in a thousand ways the true nature and object of totem power. For example, we tell ourselves that the purpose of war is to kill the enemy. And it is. **But what keeps the group together and makes us feel unified is not the sacrifice of the enemy but the sacrifice of our own.** During the Persian Gulf war, notable for the ephemerality of its unifying effect, only 147 Americans died, a poor totem sacrifice. **The two most unifying bloodlettings in American history, the Civil War and World War II, sacrificed the largest number of the nation's own, both absolutely and in proportion to the total population.**

**We construct our identity from the bodies of group members. All enduring groups, national or otherwise, rely on just such a sacrificial identity. The doctrine that provides the central experience of Christian faith is the sacrifice of an irreplaceable son by an all-powerful father**

**whose will it was that the son should die violently.** Ritually speaking, the sacrificial promise is that the father's desire for blood revenge against those who offend his power will be satisfied for all time. Because history begins anew with this sacrifice, there need never be another. It has not turned out that way.

The measure of the Christian believer's devotion to the faith remains his willingness to do as Jesus did and sacrifice himself. Willingness to sacrifice oneself, the ultimate sign of faith in social existence, is also the sign of the patriot, the proven and true member of the nation- group. We declare that we don't want death, that only the most compelling need justifies the death of our own. (And this is true. The compelling need is the survival of the group.) **Through successful sacrifice, internal hostilities are discharged, the group is unified. Then the cycle begins again.**

**In both sectarian and national religion the son's willing sacrifice is much admired, while the father's decision to sacrifice him is hidden.** To say that Christians worship a violent father who sacrificed his own son may appear blasphemous to believers. The claim articulates the unspeakable totem principle.

**... religions that counsel non-violence as a strategy are indistinguishable from those that do not.** Both counsel the willing sacrifice of their followers to violence. Both are willing that devotees should die to demonstrate the viability and integrity of the totem principle that only their own god has the right to kill their own. Both understand that violence will not stop until someone is willing to submit.

**In the case of American nationalism, that god is the group symbolized in the totem fetish, the flag, and embodied in the totem leader, the President.** The claim that violence, and only violence, produces enduring group unity is at odds with arguments that enlightened modern nations maintain order not chiefly by force but by other means...Surveillance without coercion would be toothless. Where surveillance compels response, its targets recognize explicitly or implicitly the physical force behind it.

Second, not textual communities but communities of blood unite their members sacrificially. **The holiest of religious holidays do not celebrate literature but blood symbolically framed as birth or death.** Texts may *describe* blood sacrifice and may be useful instruments in the formation of national consciousness for that reason. **But textual communities do not physically fight for their members. Only communities bound in blood do this.**

**What precipitates the large-scale ritual sacrifice we call war?** Totem crisis, a term we adapt from **Rene Girard's** notion of sacrificial crisis, sets it in motion (39-67). **A totem crisis occurs when there is uncertainty about any of the essential borders that demarcate our group.** When territorial borders are breached and no longer differentiate Us from Them, there may be a totem crisis. Or there may be uncertainty because persons inside or outside the territorial border usurp the prerogative of the totem god and kill our own. In both conditions totem legitimacy is re-established only by sacrificing our own--in the successful case, enough of us to make an offering of real value.

**Sacrifice restores totem authority and reconsolidates the group. This is why we die *for the flag* and commit our children to do so.** To resolve totem crisis, the totem must re-create its exclusive killing authority out of the very flesh of its members. Blood is the group bond. **Blood sacrifice at the border, or war, is the holiest ritual of the nation-state.(7)** To admit that we kill our own is unacceptable, for if there is not shared agreement about who will be sacrificed, violence may become chaotic instead of ordered; the group may be destroyed.

To keep the sacrificial secret, an acceptable pretext to slaughter group members must be created. What Girard calls the *ritual victim* constitutes this pretext. In the nation-group context, this is the enemy. In addition to a ritual victim, a second or *surrogate victim* must stand in for members of our group against whom we have real grievances.(8) As a group we agree to kill members of a **surrogate-victim sacrificial class expressly created for the purpose.** Upon it we displace our anger at

**other members of our group.**

**The ritual victim gives us an acceptable reason to kill our own. The surrogate victim is constituted in the portion of our group that we kill. The priestly class that trains for sacrifice at the hands of the American nation-group is the military.** Soldiers live apart in monastic orders that discipline and purify themselves for ultimate sacrifice. The knowledge that the true object of sacrificial violence is ourselves is separated from devotees, as sacred things are, whenever it threatens to surface explicitly.

**What does successful ritual sacrifice accomplish?** After enough bloodletting, the slate of internal hostilities is wiped clean. The group begins again. The external threat is met. Our bad feelings toward one another are purged. **Time begins anew, space is re-consecrated. The group basks for a while in the unanimity of its effort, until internal hostilities accumulate once more, and the entire cycle must be repeated.**

**Thus, what constitutes the nation in any moment is the memory of the last successful blood sacrifice that counts for living group members.** In the United States this is World War II, fast receding in its effect as a national unifier as those who carry its body memory become a smaller and smaller proportion of the population. **Lacking that memory, we must search for new sacrifices, while agonizing over our internal disunity.**

**Not all wars are successful blood sacrifice rituals. Some imperil rather than consolidate the group bond. Blood sacrifice rituals that give rise to enduring unity within the group must satisfy the following conditions. Since most do not, their success is qualified to that extent.**

1. **Blood sacrifice must touch or seem to touch every member of the group.** It must be large enough for group members to recognize the cost to the group and to feel the pain of loss at a personal level.
2. **The sacrifice must be willing.** Unwilling sacrifices may be reconstructed in death as having been willing, but the most useful sacrifice to the group declares in advance of leaving that he faces

- death willingly. Thus we say that soldiers "gave" their lives for the country.
3. **Victimage must be unanimous. This means that war must be popular.** The entire group must collude in the secret that group unity comes from killing our own. Thus, Vietnam was not a successful ritual sacrifice. The totem secret could not be kept.
  4. **Only undertakings that pose a serious risk to group survival have magical force for believers. At the outset the outcome of ritual effort must be genuinely uncertain.** Great ritual uncertainty requires the most potent magic, which is blood.
  5. **Win or lose, the outcome of ritual effort must be clear and definite.** Time and space must be redefined. History begins from this moment; territorial borders are re-created or reaffirmed. Time and space are consecrated anew, as if for the first time. **This moment becomes the new beginning of the group,** as World War II was for the generation of Americans now passing from the scene.
  6. **Only another ritual can repair a failed ritual.** It could be argued, for example, that the ritual failure of the Vietnam War precipitated the sacrifice of Richard Nixon as a sitting president in the Watergate scandal that resulted in his resignation.

## Media Ritual

**All important things in society are ritualized.** The prototype ritual of nation-state cohesion is popular war, though other rituals count. These include presidential elections, sending soldiers off to war, and welcoming them home again. These national rituals also organize and express group identity, but blood sacrifice is the most potent. This is because it is body-transforming.

**In the system of nationalism mass media perform the same functions that sacred and priestly texts perform in other religious systems.** They recall central moments of group identity, rehearse ritual and mythic structures for believers, and pull from the flux of daily life what is grist for

the mill of religious nationalism. The view that media are a reduced or corrupted ritual form is mistaken insofar as this is a claim that media rituals have replaced, badly, something else. The something else is blood sacrifice, the central rite of nation-groups. Media are instrumental in reporting blood sacrifice and assembling congregations who acquire knowledge of group threats and sacrificial occasions, and are socialized into the proper execution of ritual forms by media. Nationalism is the religion; among the vehicles available to ritualize it are media. **Our central points about ritual as it pertains to nationalism are these:**

1. **The purpose of ritual is to sustain the group by repeating (at various levels of intensity) the act of group creation. A successful ritual stops time at the perfect creation moment.** It repeats and freezes the retrospectively golden event when the group was created out of sacrifice. In this moment the debt to the bloodthirsty god was paid. The group was pristine. This was the moment when sacrifice was truly enough, when we were delivered from time and death.
2. **Rituals may be *contrived* or *opportunistic*.** The most powerful rituals of nation-group solidarity are opportunistic responses, such as war, to group threat. But opportunistic rituals are unreliable in their occurrence and expensive in their prosecution. Their magic is great precisely because they are risky and costly. **Contrived or pre-planned seasonal rituals fill in the intervals between opportunistic group-forging rituals by rehearsing the drama of sacrifice and regeneration. American presidential elections are prototypic contrived rituals of sacrifice and regeneration.**
3. **Rituals have two major dynamics. They create the world by transforming chaos into cosmos, to use Mircea Eliade's terms, or they re-model and recall the transformation of chaos into cosmos. All rituals model and transform to one degree or another, but rituals may be classified by whether they are primarily *transforming* or *commemorative*.** On the principle that the social is constructed out of the body, the most powerful rituals transform bodies directly. In relation to them **media rituals are representational and commemorative. They do not have the power of blood sacrifice, but they do have a critical function.** They re-

present blood sacrifice that has occurred or is occurring, and they scan the environment for events that lend themselves to future blood sacrifice. **Media preoccupation with violence speaks to their role in the ritual system of blood sacrifice.** We stay in shape as a group by imposing ritual form on events of the world, large and small, as they offer themselves.

**Imperfect sacrifice risks exposing the totem secret. The knowledge that the group cannibalizes itself to survive is group-threatening.**

On the surface, we deny nationalism's religious attributes and functions in order to keep the killing authority of the group from being challenged by sectarian faiths that have been stripped of the power to sacrifice the lives of devotees. When these faiths or others do challenge totem power, a totem that wishes to endure must fend them off decisively. This means by killing its own, if necessary. If it does not act, a new enforcer may overthrow it.

**The practice of non-violence does not avoid suffering or end violence; it redistributes both.** Answering violence with non-violence may be no less painful and destructive in its effects on individuals and groups. Similarly, benefits may accompany both violence and non-violence in the form of group unity and survival. It may be troubling to realize that there are no absolute formulas for achieving peace and goodness, such as total reliance on the precept never to act violently. In the language of sectarian religion, our dilemma is that we are never without sin, which is to say, violence, even when we give up our own bodies, or our children's, to the violence of others.

The traditional esteem in which we hold non-violent sacrifice to the forces of violence is misleading to this extent: **conventional interpretations of non-violence obscure and conceal the violent authority that demands sacrifice and perpetrates violence against supplicants or their perceived enemies, even when both parties offer themselves willingly.** We are meant not to notice. The secret keeps us together.

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