

No Worship Without Skin in the Game

–Symmetry, symmetry everywhere – Belief and worship requires an entry fee

The main theological flaw in Pascal's wager is that belief cannot be a free-option. It entails a symmetry between what pay and what you receive. Things otherwise would be too easy. So the skin in the game rules that hold between humans also hold in the rapport with the gods.

THE GODS DO NOT LIKE CHEAP SIGNALING



Figure 1 The altar with a drain for the blood of animals. Credit Elisabeth Thoburn.

Figure x shows a church altar in Saint Sergius (or, in the vernacular, *Mar Sarkis*) in the Aramaic speaking town of Maaloula. I visited it a few decades ago, sparking an obsession with that ancient and neglected language. The town still spoke at the time the version of Western Aramaic that was used by the Christ. Western Aramaic is the language of the Levant: for those into Talmud, it corresponds to “Yerushalmi” or “Palestinian Aramaic”, as opposed to the Babylonian Aramaic closer to what is now Syriac. It was mesmerizing to see children speak, tease each other, and do what children usually do, but in an ancient language. At

the time of Christ, the Levant spoke Greek in the coastal towns and Aramaic in the countryside.

The detail that I will always remember is that the altar has a drain for blood. It had been recycled from an earlier pre-Christian practice. The appurtenances of the church came from a reconverted pagan temple used by early Christians. Actually, at the risk of upsetting a few people, it was not *that* reconverted: early Christians were sort of pagans. The standard theory is that before the council of Nicea (4th Century), it was common for Christians to recycle pagan altars. But there turned out to be evidence for what I always suspected: Christians and Jews *in practice* were not too differentiated from other Semitic cult followers, and shared places of worship with one another. The presence of saints in Christianity comes from that mechanism of recycling. There was no telephone, fax machines, or websites financed by Saudi princes to homogenize religions.

Altar in spoken Levantine and Aramaic is still *madba7* from “DBH=ritual slaying by cutting the guttural vein”. It is an old tradition that left its mark on Islam: Halal food requires such a method for slaughter. And *qorban*, the Semitic word QRB for “getting closer (to God)”, hence via sacrifice, is still used as a word for sacrament.

So, in the Eastern Mediterranean pagan world (Greco-Semitic) no worship was done without sacrifice. The gods did not accept cheap talk. Also burnt offerings were precisely burnt so no human would consume them.

This even applied to the Temple of Jerusalem. And to even later Jews, or early Christians, the followers of Pauline Christianity. Hebrews 9:22: *Et omnia paene in sanguine mundantur secundum legem et sine sanguinis fusione non fit remissio.* " And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."

But Christianity ended up removing the idea of such sacrifice under the notion that the Christ sacrificed himself for others; but if you visit a Catholic or Orthodox church on Sunday service, you will see a simulacrum. It has wine representing blood, which, at the close of the ceremony flushed in the *piscina* (the drain). Exactly as in the Maaloula altar.

Christianity used the personality of the Christ for the simulacrum; he sacrificed himself for us.

"At the Last Supper, on the night when He was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again..."
[Sacrosanctum Concilium, 47]

And the end of sacrifice by making it metaphorical:

"I appeal to you therefore brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." [Romans 12:1]

As to Judaism, the same progression took place: after the destruction of the Second Temple in the first Century, animal sacrifices ended. Before that, the parable of Isaac and Abraham marks the notion of progressive departure from human sacrifice by the Abrahamic sects –as well as an insistence of skin-in-the game. But actual animal sacrifice continued for a while. Maimonides explains why God did not proscribe the then-common practice of animal sacrifice: the reason is that "to obey such a commandment would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used"; instead he "transferred to His service that which had served as a worship of created beings and of things imaginary and unreal." So animal sacrifice continued –largely voluntary—but, and that is the mark of Abrahamic religion, not the worship of animals, or the propitiation of deities thru bribery. The latter practice even extended to the bribery of other tribes and others' gods, as continued to be practiced in Arabia until the sixth century, with a central United Nations-like communal marketplace for various bilateral worship such as Mecca.

THE SCAPEGOAT

Sometimes such sacrifice can take a different form. The theory behind René Girard's scapegoat, the *bouc émissaire*, is also about sacrifice, but as a purge, like letting blood to improve one's health. For Girard, a contagious mass movement, reaching a paroxysm of violence, would select an arbitrary victim, developing a widespread hostility towards it

or him, and spreading by a process of "mimetism". The elimination of the scapegoat would assuage the violent tendencies of the group.

THE EVIDENCE

To summarize, in a Judeo-Christian place of worship, the focal point, where the priest stands, symbolizes Skin in the Game. The notion of belief without tangible proof is not existent in history.

The strength of a creed did not rest on "evidence" of the powers of its gods, but evidence of the skin in the game on the part of its worshippers.⁶

⁶ Thanks to Baruch Gotesman, Gil Friend, Mark Champlain, Aaron Elliott, Rod Ripamonti, Zlatan Hadzic