

SACRIFICE
AND THE
DEATH OF
CHRIST

FRANCES YOUNG

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Foreword

How can the ordinary Christian today make sense of ideas that come from the very different world of Greece or Palestine some two thousand years ago? How also can he assimilate the very technical work of theological scholarship in his own day? These are two very real problems of communication of which the thoughtful Christian is acutely aware. This book makes a valuable contribution to both of them.

'Sacrifice' is a concept deeply embedded in the ancient world. To understand its significance in Christian thought and worship calls for detailed scholarly work. Dr Young wears her scholarship lightly but it is a very thorough knowledge of the meaning of sacrifice in the ancient world on which she draws. But it is not enough simply to be provided with scholarly knowledge about sacrifice in the ancient world in a readable form. We need also to consider what role, if any, such ideas can be expected to play in the life of the Church today, what equivalents they may have in our contemporary society. The book seeks to probe this further theme also. Few books that I know deal with either of these themes as carefully or as sensitively in so short a compass—let alone both. I am very happy to recommend it as the kind of book that is so often asked for and so seldom written.

MAURICE WILES

Author's Preface

This brief study grew out of an attempt to present to a popular audience in five lectures the findings of my PhD dissertation. The detailed evidence and scholarly discussions on which Part I is based will now be found in the published version of that thesis, *Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers*, Patristic Monograph Series no. 5 (Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Cambridge, Mass. 1979). Inevitably many points are not fully documented or justified in this shorter version; however, in Part II, interpretative material has been added which found no place in the original academic work. This endeavour to summarize and interpret research findings for today has met with an interested response in its published form – hence this re-issue.

Needless to say, one's thinking does not stand still, and there are certain ways in which I would not perhaps present the subject in the same way now as I did ten years ago. For example, I suspect that my classification of the material into three basic types of sacrifice is a bit too schematic, and that the matter has to be regarded as much more complex, involving over-lapping and often unconscious motivations. Yet my basic point that one particular conception does not underlie every case of sacrificial language remains. Insofar as any major shift in emphasis has occurred, it can be detected in the article on 'Sacrifice' I have recently written for *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (SCM Press 1983), and in Chapter 4 of *Can these Dry Bones Live?* (SCM Press 1982). Those essays are complimentary to this book rather than substitutes for it.

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My debt to my research supervisors remains: to Dr R. M. Grant of the University of Chicago, and Professor Maurice Wiles whose encouragement and friendship I continue to value greatly. Dr Michael Wilson contributed much to the material in Chapter 6 through informal discussion; he is a colleague whose retirement will leave a considerable gap in the life of Birmingham's Theology Department. What someone in the scholarly tradition so often lacks is practical experience, and his assistance with this work revealed how important collaboration can be in achieving a wider perspective. Thanks are also due to my father, who not only set my feet on an academic path, but gave valuable hours to the preparation of the index for its original publication.

As I look back I realize the appropriateness of the rather cryptic dedication of this book. A. T. stands for Arthur Thomas, my eldest son. He will never know that this book was written, but it represented a major stage in his mother's progress towards understanding and accepting his severe handicap. I am now able to feel and acknowledge my gratitude for his contribution to my theological pilgrimage. This preface is written on his sixteenth birthday.

It simply remains for me to express my gratitude to John Bowden of SCM Press for pursuing the idea of re-issuing this book.

1 June 1983

Frances Young

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INTRODUCTION

Why discuss sacrifice?

Why discuss sacrifice?

Why discuss sacrifice? A good question, it may be felt. Sacrificial images are hardly those which arrest the attention of most people today. It might well seem that the subject of this book is irrelevant in the context of modern culture and the twentieth-century Church. Sacrifice does not appear at first sight to be a potential 'growth-point' for interpreting the gospel now. It conjures up memories of warm appeals to wash in the blood of the Lamb or cold requirements to give up meat for Lent. Indeed for some of the more radical theologians old-fashioned ideas like sacrifice are not merely irrelevant, but part of a religious system that must be rejected, along with anything else that smells of outmoded ritualism or religiosity. The love and brotherhood of Christ must be set free from the distortions of 'religion' and be rediscovered in the midst of secular society, they say. For such thinkers, sacrifice is too closely linked with conventional images of God as a supernatural figure who is just, demanding, and loving by turns, a figure that is 'dead' in the modern world.

Such an attitude is understandable, but it has unfortunate consequences. By deliberately enlarging the gulf between contemporary expressions of Christianity and the traditional language of the Scriptures and the Church, it makes it more difficult for the average churchgoer to understand the religious language he uses in worship; it makes it almost impossible for him to see the continuity of his responses and religious experiences with those of Christians of the past. This is a high price to pay while still in fact failing to make intelligible contact with non-churchgoers. To shout the irrelevance of religion and the death of God

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does nothing to make Christ relevant to this generation, and ignores the fundamental religious impulses of human beings (indeed, sociologists tell us that the majority of people confess to believing in God, and many still pray in difficulties, even though most no longer participate in church activities). Besides, this radical rejection of the past and concentration on worries about whether traditional notions of God are still credible has obscured the fundamentally distinctive and characteristic claim of Christianity, the real gospel of the Church, which is a gospel of salvation and redemption. Of course, this aspect is never entirely absent from the discussion, and theological expositions inevitably betray, consciously or unconsciously, a certain understanding of what salvation in Christ means. Indeed, concern with this point is revealed in the fact that the World Council of Churches has undertaken a wide-ranging discussion of the subject 'Salvation today'. Yet it is so easy to put the cart before the horse, to 'theologize' without first articulating the experience which gave it initial impetus, to criticize without acknowledging the value of what one has inherited. The standard works on the history of atonement doctrine and the meaning of sacrifice all date from the early years of this century; yet new historical insights and changes in theological thinking would make a considerable difference to any modern work of that kind. Do we not need to consider again the classic expositions of what salvation and atonement mean, before we have any hope of translating the gospel into relevant contemporary categories? This is not to underestimate the recent work of F. R. Barry and F. W. Dillistone,¹ but rather to stress the importance of more debate and discussion in this area. Christianity surely stands or falls in the last analysis on its gospel of redemption, and we cannot ignore the need to give that gospel rational expression as the basis for theological definition.

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Historically speaking, it is in fact the case that response and experience preceded attempts to articulate and explain; christological categories and theological definitions were subsequent upon profoundly felt reactions to Jesus Christ within a particular cultural context. The classic example is perhaps that of Athanasius, the fourth-century bishop of Alexandria. His *De Incarnatione* could be described as the first attempt to expound the doctrine of atonement. In the history of doctrine, however, Athanasius is chiefly remembered for having forced the Church to make an unequivocal statement about the divinity of Jesus Christ. He did this precisely because of his understanding of what salvation in Christ meant, and argued his christological position from the natural presuppositions induced by his sense of Christ's saving work. For him, Jesus Christ had released frail mankind from ignorance, sinfulness, and mortality, and endowed it with the principle of God's life and perfection; therefore, Athanasius argued, he must have been the fullness of God in man. This argument presupposes an underlying experience of release from bondage, followed by an articulation of that experience in terms of what seemed, in that particular cultural situation, the most oppressive of human weaknesses. In other words, the experience of redemption and its expression were primary, theological conclusions only secondary.

We can in fact discern the same process in contemporary theology. One cannot help wanting to ask modern radical theologians why they should bother with theology at all. Why not just go to the logical extreme and abandon it altogether, along with the Church and the paraphernalia of Christianity? What is the point of 're-expressing' in a way that leaves little distinctive role for theology at all? The answer of course is that, for them, there is *something* in it. Through the medium of Christian theology—indeed, whether they like it or not, ultimately through the insti-

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tutions of the Church—they have found something of such value that they cannot merely discard it. Nor is this simply a fear of losing their jobs and livelihood. Their verbal contortions and paradoxical utterances about waiting on a God who is dead,² and celebrating the death of God as an epiphany of the eschatological Christ, present in the fullness of the history before us, betray their reluctance to abandon something that gives hope, value, and meaning to their lives. They are trying to preserve in contemporary language the 'redemption' they have sensed in the creaking ecclesiastical structures and the outmoded language of Christianity. The image of Christ informs their faith and their ethics. Of course, there is also a strong element of reaction against the past; there is passionate impatience with the vehicle of the message. But there is some response to its content. They may assert that modern man has come of age, is religionless, that an end has come to any system of thought or action in which God or gods serve as a fulfiller of needs or solver of problems. But they recognize in Christ a way of responding to the darkness of suffering and the enigmas of human existence, a way of finding true liberation. They may refuse to accept a 'God-shaped blank' within man, but they assume the need for an ethic and a freedom which is Christ-shaped. Indeed, their very rejection of God is partly a recognition of the damage done to the liberating force of Christ by the fact that he has been institutionalized and dogmatized. Thus, even in this radical case, my point holds: response to the gospel of redemption is primary, and expositions of this in theological terms are secondary.

In fact the New Testament itself is one of the clearest witnesses to this sequence of development. Christological ideas developed because of the experience of salvation in Christ. The New Testament was produced by various people in various circumstances to meet the various needs of the Christian community. The New Testament is not a book

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but many books, and the different authors present us with theologies which are in various ways different from one another. Indeed, by the methods of form criticism, it is possible to see different view-points preserved alongside one another in a single Gospel. The New Testament is not homogeneous in its ideas; it bears the marks of its time and is written from several contemporary religious and philosophical standpoints. Nevertheless, underlying its variety of expression, there is a common experience of redemption, a fact which illustrates the primacy of the sense of salvation over subsequent 'theologizing'. The early Christians were searching for categories, for means of stating their beliefs about the person who was at the centre of their experience. No single category was adequate. In the early Christian writings we find a multiplicity of titles and ideas drawn from the available cultural background, differently emphasized, variously used, but producing in combination a radically new type of claim about this person, a claim that was intimately linked to the experience of him as the solution to their needs and concerns. What has the Synoptic message concerning the coming of the kingdom in common with Paul's elaborate metaphor of justification or with the transformed Gnosticism of the Johannine literature? The answer lies in the fact that all these different ways of expressing it reflect a common experience, a common reaction to Jesus, a reaction which demands extraordinary expression and for which no single type of approach was adequate. The fundamental reality is the effect of Jesus on a wide range of characters whose association together under any other circumstances would appear improbable. The Hellenizer and the Rabbi, the conservative and the liberal, the priest and the nationalist, the fisherman and the Pharisee, the Jew and ultimately the Gentile also, apparently experienced something which each could express in his own terms as being ultimate. Thus,

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for the early Palestinian community, steeped in the hopes and imagery of Jewish apocalyptic and messianic expectation, to understand Jesus as Son of Man or Messiah was meaningful; it was relevant to their deepest needs and concerns; such titles expressed their sense of fulfilment in him, however much he had disappointed their preconceived ideas of the Coming One. For the Gentile churches, a more meaningful understanding was found in the title 'Lord'; it expressed for them his unique status and authority over their lives, compared with all other authorities, political or religious. For Paul, obsessed with the claims of the Jewish law, Jesus Christ was above all the fulfilment and end of all moral endeavour, the solution to moral incapacity. For the writer to the Hebrews, the title which made Christ existentially relevant was 'High Priest'; it was because he answered the search for a ritual solution to sin and guilt, the need for mediation with a holy God—indeed answered it so superlatively as to render any other solution utterly inadequate. To the more philosophically inclined author of John's Gospel, he was the Logos of God, the ground and purpose of the universe, the light which overcame the darkness of the world, and the Way, the Truth, and the Life for the believer; in him the solution of the gnostic quest was given gratis to those who responded. We could enumerate further examples, but this will suffice to make the point. It was only because they could say, 'He means this to me' that they went on to say, 'He must be so-and-so'. The remarkable thing is that so many different people all said essentially the same thing: that he was the solution to their deepest needs and concerns. The multiplicity of ideas and theologies is a testimony to the extraordinary effect of the events surrounding this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Ultimately this is the heart of the matter. This is what Christianity is all about. The expression of the experience,

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the proclamation of this gospel, is the central matter of Christian concern.

Now if this is so, it is clear that the perennial question concerns this redemption: how is the experience to be articulated in a way that makes it relevant to the ultimate concerns of contemporary mankind? But if this is our task, why embark upon it by discussing such an obviously irrelevant idea as sacrifice?

The question is natural enough, but is it not short-sighted? We have seen that the characteristically Christian claims developed because of the articulation of an experience of salvation within various cultural contexts. This articulation led to many different ways of expression, but because of the cultural environment, sacrifice was by far the most important of the images used. Christianity was born into an age and culture saturated with religion, and if it is true to say that there is hardly a religion of man which has not involved the practice of sacrifice, this general statement is even more applicable to the period and culture in which Christianity grew up. The offering of sacrifice was a universal rite in all the religions of the ancient world. The various tribes and nations which made up the Roman Empire all had traditional cults, in all of which sacrifice played a central part. It was not merely the practice of less civilized people, like the tribes of North Africa, Spain, Gaul (France), and Britain; it was the normal mode of worship in the sophisticated culture of the Jews, the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Romans up to the time when the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity.

So in the world in which Christianity developed, sacrifice was assumed, and it is hardly surprising that the early Church had to work out its attitude towards it. In speaking of the early Church, we refer not merely to the New Testament period, but to the first three or four centuries