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Prayer and Sacrifice as Useless Self-Transcendence

The world knows only the usefulness of the useful,
but does not know the usefulness of the useless.¹

Being useless and silent in the presence of our God
belongs to the core of all prayer.²

8A. Prayer and Presence

We have seen religion conceived as celestial commerce, the attempt of mortals to control or win the favor of the Sacred Power for the increase of their earthly welfare.³ The believing soul prays for rain. We have also seen, with help from Zechariah, that human involvement with the Sacred also concerns itself with spiritual welfare. Josiah Royce has summarized the view of religion which corresponds to this aspect. "The gods, as man conceives the gods, live upon spiritual food; but, viewed in the light of history, they appear as beings who must earn their bread by supplying, in their turn, the equally spiritual sustenance which their worshippers need."⁴ Finally, we have seen religion claim to rise above self-interest in both its material and spiritual forms. Before turning to the religious life itself to see whether or not this claim can be validated, we looked outside the religious life for clues about what to look for if the skeletal hints of Otto, Underhill, Luther, Socrates, and Krishna are to be fleshed out. Two such clues have emerged from that look at the moral life, at aesthetic contemplation, and at play. Religion can be viewed as something more than a means for dealing with our various needs to the degree that it consists of (1) "terminal" activities, valued for their own sake, and (2) activities in which the self's attention is directed away from itself and thus from its own needs. We can call such ac-

activities Useless Self-Transcendence. Of course, by using the term "useless" to highlight the non-instrumental character of the activities in question, it is not meant that they are worthless. The frequent identification of useless with worthless expresses the attitude that only what can be used has worth. By describing the religious life as consisting in part of "useless" activities, we are reminded that the believing soul, like the child at play, does not share this viewpoint.

Otto's notion of celebration and Underhill's of adoration, both rooted in the sense of the Sacred as present, refer to activities of useless self-transcendence. What is especially noteworthy, however, is the degree to which these structures inform prayer and sacrifice. It is noteworthy because these are the religious acts where the believing soul is most clearly instrumentally self-concerned. Prayer is praying for this or that benefit. It is asking and receiving. And sacrifice consists in giving gifts to the gods in hope that they will give blessings material and spiritual in return. It was prayer and sacrifice that Euthyphro had in mind when he described piety as commerce with the gods, and it was against the commercializing of prayer and sacrifice that Plato protests in *Republic* Book II. But it was also prayer and sacrifice that Otto and Underhill explicitly mention in rejecting this reduction. If prayer should consist significantly of adoration and sacrifice become celebration and not simply commerce, this would indicate most dramatically the degree to which the religious life is an end in itself and not just a means of meeting needs.

Consider the three following prayers, not without stature in their respective traditions. The Lord's Prayer is, of course, the most familiar prayer of Christendom. The second prayer, often called the Lord's Prayer of Islam, is the opening text of the Koran, and is prayed by the Muslim faithful at least twenty times a day. The third prayer is from Shankara, the Hindu philosopher-saint, an Indian St. Thomas Aquinas.

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.
Amen.⁵

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being.
the All-merciful, the All-Compassionate,
the Master of the Day of Doom

Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.
Guide us in the straight path,
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not of those against whom Thou art wrathful,
nor of those who are astray.⁶

A Mahadeva! O Thou Auspicious One, with the moon shining in Thy
crest!

Slayer of Madana! Wielder of the trident! Unmoving One! Lord of
the Himalayas!

O Consort of Durga! Lord of all creatures! Thou who scatterest the
distress of the fearful!

Rescue me, helpless as I am, from the trackless forest of this miserable
world. . . .

Lord of the universe! Refuge of the whole world! O Thou of infinite
forms!

Soul of the universe! O Thou in whom repose the infinite virtues of
the world!

O Thou adored by all! Compassionate One! O Friend of the poor!
Rescue me, helpless as I am, from the trackless forest of this miserable
world.⁷

Each prayer involves at least one petition for the spiritual or material benefit of the one who prays. The Hindu prays for salvation in the form of liberation from samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth. The Muslim prays for guidance and help in living a right life, almost as if thinking of Ivan Ilich. And the Christian adds to the prayer for guidance away from evil a request for forgiveness and for daily bread. So far prayer is simply the means of winning these favors from God by asking for them.

But each prayer begins on a very different note. The believing soul is directed away from personal needs to the majesty and greatness of God. The deeds, character, and worth of God are brought into focus through praise. In the case of the Lord's Prayer, the petition for God's kingdom to come has already come to our attention in connection with Socrates' suggestion that true piety consists in ded-

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ication to purposes other than our own. The believing soul looks away from self-preoccupation to consider God and his kingdom, and at the end of the prayer, having made the other petitions, comes back to these thoughts.

There are times when the elements of awe and adoration take over completely. The result is the hymn of praise, a liturgical form for private and public prayer entirely free from self-interest. Many of the Psalms of ancient Israel have this character, and hymns to the gods are widespread throughout theistic and polytheistic religions.⁸

The cynical eye of suspicion will see nothing but flattery in all this, buttering up the deity so as to win more divine favors. There is nothing to guarantee that adoration will not degenerate into adulation. But the believing soul protests that prayer has been unfaithful to its own truest nature whenever this happens. The faithful are encouraged to "Praise, laud, and bless His name always, For it is seemly so to do."⁹ Thus, when St. John of the Cross asks one of his penitents in what her prayer consists, she replies, "In considering the Beauty of God, and in rejoicing that He has such beauty," and Evelyn Underhill comments, "Such disinterested delight is the perfection of worship."¹⁰ Another believing soul sat alone each day in the dark of a church. When asked by a friend what he did there, he replied, "I just look at Him and He looks at me."¹¹

These last two items come from the tradition of contemplative prayer in which prayer, meditation, and contemplation are blended into one. Henri Nouwen, writing out of that tradition, takes note of the possibility that prayer is merely self-seeking. "Prayer is often considered a weakness, a support system, which is used when we can no longer help ourselves. But this is only true when the God of our prayers is created in our own image and adapted to our own needs and concerns. When, however, prayer makes us reach out to God, not on our own but on his terms, then prayer pulls us away from self-preoccupations. . . . The movement from illusion to prayer is hard to make since it leads us . . . from an easy support system to a risky surrender."¹²

Thomas Merton similarly stresses the theme of prayer as surrender and submission rather than self-seeking.¹³ As he sees it, it is just the transcendence of self-interest that keeps the surrender of the self to God from being servile. "If we remain in our ego, clenched upon ourselves, trying to draw down to ourselves gifts which we then incorporate in our own limited selfish life, then prayer does remain servile. Servility has its root in self-serving. Servility, in a strange way, really consists in trying to make God serve our own needs . . . au-

thentic prayer enables us to emerge from our servility into freedom in God, because it no longer strives to manipulate him by superstitious 'deals.' " It is not that we deny our neediness. Rather we acknowledge it "at the beginning of prayer in order to rise above it. . . ." ¹⁴

This freedom of self-surrendering praise of which the Christian monk speaks would be instantly understood by the Hindu saint, Ramakrishna. It comes to expression in this hymn which he loved.

Upon the sea of the world unfolds the lotus of the New Day.
And there the Mother sits enshrined in blissful majesty.
See how the bees are mad with joy, sipping the nectar there.

Behold the Mother's radiant face, which so enchants the heart
and captivates the universe. About Her Lotus Feet
Bands of ecstatic holy men are dancing in delight.

What matchless loveliness is Hers! What infinite content
Pervades the heart when She appears! O brothers, says Premdas,
I humbly beg you one and all, to sing the Mother's praise. ¹⁵

But the freedom that comes from rising above our neediness is not restricted to moments of ecstatic, dancing praise. It also transforms the other moment of prayer, as Underhill has noted. Prayer is not wholly disinterested; it asks for blessings. "But as the genuine religious impulse becomes dominant, adoration more and more takes charge . . . whenever the envisaged end is not man's comfort, security, or personal success, but His glory and purpose, the more perfect doing of His Will, then the prayer of petition itself . . . becomes a true 'hallowing of the Name'." ¹⁶ Thus it is that the Sioux Indian, who prays to Wakan-Tanka for good crops and good hunting, "that I may live" or "that my people may live," also makes this kind of petition. "Wakan-Tanka, You are everything, and yet above everything! You are first. You have always been. . . . O Wakan-Tanka, You are the truth. The two-legged peoples who put their mouths to this pipe will become the truth itself; there will be in them nothing impure. Help us to walk the sacred path of life without difficulty, with our minds and hearts continually fixed on You." ¹⁷

Even the prayer of confession, in which the believing soul's interest in forgiveness is patent, gains a new dimension as "adoration more and more takes charge." "In the worshipper's view that ultimate purpose of the recognition of sin is to be sought in the first place not in his own person but in God. The purpose which the recognition

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of sin must serve is that God is known to be God, and that he is acknowledged as such. . . ."¹⁸

The believing soul is committed to a radical form of self-transcendence in this notion that prayer reaches its perfection in asking for daily bread and the forgiveness of sins for the sake of God and his kingdom and not simply to satisfy our own stomach or psyche. Sometimes this is expressed as the need to "make God our only thought," or to "fill the mind with God alone."¹⁹ In the words of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "A naked intention directed to God, and himself alone, is wholly sufficient."²⁰ That is easier said than done. One exercise prescribed as preparatory training in contemplative prayer is the following: "Choose something in the created order and for 10 minutes each day practice the outpouring of yourself toward it. It does not matter what you choose—a cup of water, a slice of bread, a leaf, a tree, a building, a piece of machinery. Then, using your will, energy and powers of concentration defend the object chosen against all other claims for your attention."²¹

The purpose of such an exercise is clear. It is to relax the self from its anxious grasping so it can be open to reality, at first the reality of finite things, but ultimately the reality of the Sacred. The transition from eros to openness involves the paradoxical notion that even the desire for God is to be left behind. "Only when we are able to 'let go' of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionize our entire inner life." This has an important consequence. "In proportion as meditation takes on a more contemplative character, we see that it is not only a *means* to an end, but also has something of the nature of an *end*. Hence monastic prayer, especially meditation and contemplative prayer, is not so much a way to find God as a way of *resting* in him whom we have *found*, who loves us, who is *near* to us, who comes to us to draw us to himself."²²

It is precisely because self-transcendence in prayer culminates in openness to the divine presence that it can be called useless. Adoration and self-surrender are "the practice of the presence of God."²³ As such they are "terminal" activities with no goal beyond themselves. Contemplative prayer is the antithesis of calculative planning. As desire gives place to openness, striving gives place to rest.

It has been said that as prayer is the heartbeat of Christianity, so meditation is the heartbeat of Buddhism.²⁴ It might be more to the point to describe prayer as the heartbeat of monotheism, for it is no less important to Jewish, Muslim, or Sioux piety than to Christian.

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But the comparison is important. What has been said about prayer presupposes that the Sacred is a personal being (or beings in the case of polytheism) with whom mortals can speak. The grammar of prayer is second person singular. What about a religion like Buddhism which views reality as ultimately being not only impersonal but unsubstantial? Nothing is permanent. Everything is empty. In the final analysis there can be no God or gods to pray to.

But this is only in the final analysis. Though the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are not strictly speaking gods, they are prayed to for help and assistance in gaining Enlightenment. In fact, faith is the first of the five cardinal virtues of Buddhism, and the faithful are to live full of faith in the Buddha, the Dharma (law, teaching, doctrine, norm), and the Sangha (order, community, "church").²⁵ The beginning of faith for the Buddhist is the simple prayer

I go to the Buddha for refuge.
I go to the Dharma for refuge.
I go to the Sangha for refuge.

But faith for the Buddhist means more than turning to the "three treasures" for refuge and praying to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for help. It also involves worshipful meditation on the supreme excellence and worth of the three. Thus Buddhist meditation begins with devotional exercises which consist in considering the beauty of the treasures and in rejoicing that they have it. In quiet seclusion adoration takes on words.

This Lord is truly the Arahāt, fully enlightened, perfect in his knowledge and conduct, well-gone, world-knower, supreme, leader of men to be tamed, teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Lord. . . . (I) Well-behaved is the Community of the Lord's disciples, straight is their behavior, proper and correct. (II) The four pairs of men, the eight persons,—these are the Community of the Lord's disciples. (III) Worthy they are of offerings, worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts, worthy of respectful salutation, they, the world's peerless field of merit.²⁶

Exercises such as these play a role similar to meditation on some finite object in Christian meditation. Just as neither alp nor insect is God, so no object of meditation is ultimate for the Buddhist, since every thing is like a bubble or mirage, empty. "Concentration on an object naturally forms the starting point of the process which leads to the abolition of the object in trance."²⁷ This includes the object of faith. Yet the purpose of these preliminary exercises is clear.

Buddhism, is, if anything, more radical than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in viewing self-interest as the fatal flaw in human existence. As the Christian is encouraged to "pour yourself out" and "surrender yourself" to a finite object, so the Buddhist is taught to worship and adore realities which are empty. In this way the self begins to be removed from center stage, while the greed and anger, desire and aversion which express the self's infatuation with itself, begin to melt away.

The last three of the five cardinal virtues of Buddhism all have to do with meditation which seeks to go beyond faith to the full realization (seeing and feeling, not merely believing) of the emptiness of all things. This Gestalt switch in consciousness extinguishes the flame of self and desire. It is Nirvana. The subtle differences between Mindfulness, Concentration, and Wisdom are not as important in this context as their common character, lessening and finally eliminating the sense of I and mine.²⁸ All Buddhist meditation, whether devotional or not, moves toward the wisdom of Nagasena. When King Milinda asked his name, he gave it as follows. "Your majesty, I am called Nagasena . . . it is, nevertheless, your majesty, but a way of counting, a term, an appellation, a convenient designation, a mere name, this Nagasena; for this is no ego here to be found . . . in the absolute sense there is no ego here to be found."²⁹

There can be no question that Buddhist meditation, in spite of metaphysical differences with the monotheistic traditions, is an exercise in self-transcendence. There remains the question whether it is viewed as intrinsically valuable or as a means to an end. The latter seems at first the obvious answer, since the goal of Nirvana, both as bliss itself and as permanent release from Samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth according to the law of Karma, is central. This is the Buddhist equivalent to being religious in this life in hopes of heaven, the happy hunting grounds, or the Elysian fields in the life to come. It is solving the problems of guilt and death, and Buddhism presents itself precisely as the solution to these human needs.

But the believing soul resists seeing the religious life exclusively in these terms in the Buddhist tradition too and seeks to go beyond them. The metaphysics of emptiness becomes helpful here. "The Path exists, but not the traveler on it,"³⁰ and Nagarjuna teaches that "samsara and nirvana have no real substance," which means that

There is no difference at all
Between *nirvana* and *samsara*.
There is no difference at all
Between *samsara* and *nirvana*.³¹

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If there is a Path but neither traveler nor point of departure nor destination, then the Path cannot be the means or instrument by which the traveler gets from one place to another. In the process of seeking salvation, the believer is taught that the very framework of a self in need of salvation and making use of the "means of grace" to that end is an illusion. To the degree that this wisdom becomes experience and not merely doctrine, the journey along the Path loses its future, goal-oriented character and each moment is absolute unto itself.

Within the Buddhist tradition it is Zen which has developed this possibility most systematically. Like other forms of Buddhism it includes petitionary prayer to the Buddhas and worship of them as "a way of horizontalizing the mast of ego."³² And like them it gives central importance to overcoming the egocentric perspective on the world.³³ But it tends to give stronger emphasis to Nirvana in Samsara, to redeeming the here and now. Thus Dogen, who founded the Soto school of Zen in Japan after thirteenth-century travels in China, "emphasized both the complete adequacy of 'just sitting in Zen fashion'—what he called *shikantaza*—and the oneness of practice and achievement. In his statement that 'in Buddhism practice and enlightenment are one and the same,' Dogen eliminates all notions of Zazen or Zen-sitting as 'means' to an end apart from itself—Satori or enlightenment—and expresses something in total harmony with his principle that there is complete fullness in every moment rather than the utilization of one moment to gain the benefits in another one."³⁴ Just as the Christian is taught to give up the desire for God in order to be genuinely open to Him, the Buddhist is here taught to abandon the search for Enlightenment and to rest in the moment.

When the Buddhist tradition of meditation is taken as a whole, we can probably say that in comparison with the monotheistic traditions of contemplative prayer the element of self-transcendence is more radical while that of its uselessness is less pronounced. The point is not that prayer and meditation are identical; it is rather that in both cases it is just where the religious life is most obviously a means to various ends that it shows itself also to be an end in itself.

8B. Sacrifice and Love

The same can be said about sacrifice, a phenomenon ever so closely linked to prayer. Not only is the sacrificial rite virtually inconceivable without accompanying prayer; the two acts are all but interchangeable. Sacrifice can be viewed as "a prayer which is acted."³⁵ On the

other hand, prayers can be viewed as sacrifices, as both the Rig Veda and the Hebrew Psalms attest.

Oh Daughter of the Sky, I have offered my hymn as a cow is offered.
Oh Night, accept my sacrifice as praise to my conqueror.³⁶

Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee,
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!³⁷

Sacrifice further resembles prayer in bringing the believing soul's self-interest to unconstrained expression. "Here is the butter; where are your gifts?"³⁸ Giving something to the gods in hopes of getting something from them is what sacrifice seems to be all about. "The sacrificer gives up something of himself but he does not give himself. Prudently, he sets himself aside. This is because if he gives, it is partly in order to receive. Thus sacrifice shows itself in a dual light; it is a useful act and it is an obligation. Disinterestedness is mingled with self-interest. That is why it has so frequently been conceived of as a form of contract. Fundamentally there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element."³⁹

In this passage from their important study of sacrifice, Hubert and Mauss acknowledge the disinterested element in sacrifice but place emphasis on its *do ut des* character. Our purpose is the opposite. Without in any way denying or diminishing the interested nature of sacrifice, we want to take note of the way in which the religious life seeks to protect itself from becoming nothing more than this.

The three most prominent ideas in discussions of the nature of sacrifice are gift, communion, and expiation or propitiation. The gift theory of sacrifice is associated especially with the name of Sir Edward B. Tylor.⁴⁰ As Tylor himself noted, the giving of a gift to the gods sometimes involved the expectation of some blessing in return. But it could also be an act of giving homage to the gods and renouncing the self's claim to be primary with no expectation of any benefit beyond the act itself. Of course, these two types of giving, while conceptually distinct enough, are not always easily distinguished in practice. The distance in reality between "honoraria" and "bribes" is not all that great.⁴¹ From our own experience of Christmas- and birthday-giving we all understand this relationship between giving in hopes of receiving and giving for the sheer joy of giving.

W. Robertson Smith developed the communion theory of sacrifice, focused on the notion that sacrifice was a meal shared by the divine recipient and the worshippers.⁴² Again our own experience leads us to a ready understanding of the two elements residing in sacrifices

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having the character of shared feasts. We sometimes invite dinner guests (the boss, business clients) primarily because of the benefits we hope to attain from socializing with them. On other occasions we entertain simply for the sake of fellowship with those whose presence we value. Similarly, sacrifice as communal meal can be an attempt to gain personal or tribal benefit from closeness to the Sacred; or, in the language of Walter Otto, it can be the celebration of a presence which is loved for its own sake.

Finally, there is the notion of expiation or propitiation. No single theorist has been necessary to call attention to a feature of sacrifice as prominent as this. Piacular sacrifices, as they are also called, are clearly means to the end of getting rid of the guilt which accompanies fault, or of the punishment which accompanies guilt, or both. Here the offering of sacrifice is all but inescapably seen as the paying of a fine or even a bribe so as to get the cosmic court off my back in spite of some offense I have committed. Yet, just as the prayer of confession in the context of adoration can be more than merely self-interested, so the sacrifice of expiation has the possibility of being as much the acknowledgment of the rightness of the divine order and a celebration of its supremacy as it is a device for getting out of a jam.

By looking at these three elements of sacrifice we have only encountered understandable possibilities for the believing soul to transcend the level of celestial commerce in sacrifice. What we need to do now is see how this possibility comes to fruition in ritual life.

Among the most carefully studied pre-literate peoples who practice sacrifice are the Nuer, a cattle-breeding people of the upper Nile. They are said to spend "nearly all their waking time in acts of worship," and sacrifice is the most fundamental of these acts of worship.⁴³

The language in which the Nuer talk about their sacrifices is that of contract. "The ideas of purchase, redemption, indemnification, ransom, exchange, bargain, and payment are very evident in Nuer sacrifices." They use the same word for sacrifice that they use for making a purchase from an Arab merchant; and while they also use language which suggests the payment of a debt, they view the sacrifice as placing the recipient in their debt. Thus the Nuer woman says, "God, take thy cow and give me a child."⁴⁴

Among primitive peoples who sacrifice, it is often assumed that supernatural beings "covet the same things which men consider desirable" and even that the gods "catch" people in order to receive these goods in the form of sacrifice.⁴⁵ When dealing with the lesser spirits, the Nuer acknowledge they operate at this level. The result

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is that their sacrifices represent a totally shameless bargaining and "huckstering."⁴⁶ But when they are dealing with the God they consider to be the Supreme Being, there is a difference. Contractuality in the sense of reciprocal giving and receiving does not by any means disappear. But "if they include, they go beyond, the dialectic of exchange and contract . . . for we can hardly speak of simple exchange or contract when one side in reality gets nothing and the other side may get nothing too."⁴⁷

What can this mean? It is the divine side which can be said to get nothing. It is true that some gift is offered to him, but he gains nothing thereby, for the Nuer recognize all things as already belonging rightfully to him. Thus they offer him "thy cow" and not "my cow" or "our cow." The side which may gain nothing is the human side. While sacrifice may place the lesser spirits under a kind of contractual obligation, this is not true of the supreme spirit, God. For "apart from there being no means by which bargaining with God can be conducted, it is no use trying to haggle with him, because he is master of everything and can want nothing. Nor is there any idea that God is at fault if he does not give what is asked for in sacrifice; in his dealings with man he always has the *cuong*, is in the right."⁴⁸

It becomes necessary, then, to interpret sacrifice not so much in terms of what the two parties gain, but in terms of what the human party loses. One element of this loss is already before us. Sacrifice for the Nuer is the acknowledgment that God is supreme, that everything is properly his, that "we give Thee but Thine own, whate'er the gift may be," and that "as against God we are always in the wrong."⁴⁹ In the act of sacrifice the believing soul loses by freely giving up that Cartesian centrality of self which defines the secular life.

The other human loss is the literal one, the cow, the cucumber, or whatever, that is sacrificed. Should the value of the sacrifice then be determined by the value of the gift? Not at all. The Nuer are clear that what matters is the intention of the heart. "All gifts are symbols of inner states, and in this sense *one can only give oneself*; there is no other kind of giving. . . . When Nuer give their cattle in sacrifice they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving part of themselves."⁵⁰ Thus it seems to be less than the whole truth when Hubert and Mauss say that the sacrificer "does not give himself. Prudently, he sets himself aside." At one level this is clearly true. The Nuer do not spear their own sides or slit their own throats. But at another level just the opposite is the case. Through the symbolism of identification with the sacrificed gift, the Nuer give themselves to God,

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placing themselves at his disposal and acknowledging his supremacy over all they are and have. Thus the two aspects of loss are not really separable. The material loss is the symbolization or incarnation of the spiritual loss, of self-abnegation before the Sacred. Like the mystics one can use sacrificial language itself here and speak of self-oblation.

We are talking here about piacular sacrifices. This means that sacrifice is made in the hope of receiving a benefit. But the language with which the Nuer talk about their sacrifices makes it clear that there is another motivation. They give themselves to God in this way because it is right to do so and because the beliefs expressed in these acts are true. It is fitting so to do (and it may be helpful as well). Sacrificial self-transcendence is both a useful and a useless activity. This is perhaps only a first step but it is nevertheless a real step along the path Underhill calls "the most significant development in human religion . . . the movement of the idea of sacrifice from propitiation to love."⁵¹

If we look for another religious context as thoroughly focused on sacrifice as Nuer religion, Vedic India would surely have as strong a claim as any. From the hymns which accompany the sacrificial rites we gain further (scarcely needed) indications of the interested and instrumental nature of sacrifice.

Grant us great riches, fair in form, of all good things, wealth which
light labour may attain. . . .

So grant thou us a dwelling wide and free from foes.

O goddess, give us food with kine.

Bring us wealth abundant, sent in every shape. . . .

May that for which we desiring have invoked thee be ours.
May we become lords of wealth.

Make me immortal in that realm where they move even as they list. . . .

Make me immortal in that realm of eager wish and strong desire. . . .

Make me immortal in that realm where happiness and transports, where
Joys and felicities combine, and longing wishes are fulfilled.⁵²

It is not surprising to find Vedic religion described as "a scientific method of acquiring immortality as well as temporal blessings . . . a system of authorized magic or sacred science controlling all worlds, if properly understood."⁵³

Yet the same author insists that already in the period of the Brahmanas, Vedic sacrifice moved beyond the *do ut des* principle. The

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Brahmanas represent the total triumph of sacrifice and the Brahmin or priestly class (eventually caste) in the Hindu religion. But this very fact affects the meaning of the rituals. "In this period of the Brahmanas, beginning approximately in the tenth century B.C., the gods of the Samhitas have lost their former significance. Instead, the sacrifice now takes the place of the ruling powers in the universe. 'The sacrifice is here no longer the means to an end, but it is an aim in itself, indeed, the highest aim of existence.'"⁵⁴

The process by which sacrificial ritual gains importance at the expense of the gods is one in which sacrifice becomes the root metaphor for viewing all reality. "The universe appeared to the Vedic Aryan as a constant ritual of sacrifice."⁵⁵ Both the original creation of the universe and its ongoing processes come to be viewed as a sacrifice in which life is maintained through the consumption of food and drink. This "cosmic sacrifice" finds its microcosmic re-enactment or imitation in sacrifice as a human ritual. Thus it can be said that "through the voluntary ritual of sacrifice man takes his place in the cosmic symphony as an equal. The main purpose of his existence is the performance of this ritual."⁵⁶ The status of equal comes from the fact that the gods, too, are viewed as offering sacrifice and even as the sacrificial victim.⁵⁷ There is a shift away from seeing them as the sovereign dispensers of good or ill fortune to viewing them as co-workers with mortals in the task of maintaining the cosmic order through imitative re-enactment. That these sacrifices could be thought of as the main purpose of human existence, and thus an end in themselves, stems from viewing them less as techniques for gaining benefits from the gods and more as acts by which the faithful attune themselves to the sacred cosmic order, *Rta*, and put themselves at its service. Since this impersonal order, like the Chinese *Tao* and the Egyptian *Maat*, has moral as well as physical connotations, and since it is often viewed as the ultimate power and authority to which even the gods are subordinate, it is not inappropriate to call it a sacred order. Maintaining and imitating such an order is but fitting and seemly.

But the same texts in which these ideas can be found include the much less subtle interpretation of sacrifice we noted earlier: "Here is the butter; where are your gifts." Given the ease of viewing sacrifice in this way, it is not surprising that there should be reactions against the notion of sacrifice itself. In India the Nastika (heterodox) religions of Buddhism and Jainism repudiate sacrifice altogether. There is no doubt a socio-political factor at work here, a protest against the Brahmins' sacerdotal monopoly over the whole of society. But there is a religious factor as well, and these "protestant" movements are

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Soul → Personal Identity

testimony to the believing soul's unwillingness to reduce the religious life to the search for personal profit. They are not, however, pertinent to our immediate task, which is to discover that refusal within the practice of sacrifice itself. Within the orthodox tradition the same tendencies which led Buddhism and Jainism to abandon sacrifice completely turn up in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. But since orthodoxy in India is not defined by this or that doctrinal content but by recognition of the Vedas as authoritative scripture, and since the earliest strata of the Vedas make sacrifice central to the religious life, sacrifice will have to be transformed rather than abolished.

The "sublimation" of sacrifice in the Upanishads is not consistently sustained, for they are very complex and diverse texts.⁵⁸ One finds in them the idea of sacrifice to please the gods and win favors from them, as well as the broader notion of the cosmic sacrifice of which human sacrifices are imitations. There are even passages which sound like Nastika attacks on sacrifice and the Brahmins.⁵⁹ The theme central to the "sublimation" of sacrifice is the superiority of knowledge to sacrifice.⁶⁰ The knowledge in question here is that of Atman-Brahman, the absolute one beyond duality. It can be taught doctrinally through teachings such as the Upanishads, but like the related Buddhist notion of emptiness, it can be realized only through meditation. The famous Upanishadic formula, "that art thou," means that Atman-Brahman is not some being distinct from the human self which knows it. The two are actually identical. But this metaphysics involves a radical self-transcendence. For the self which is one with the Absolute is not the finite self in its empirical discreteness. The realization of oneness with Atman-Brahman is the realization that the finite, everyday self is not fully real, and consequently, that it finds its fulfillment not in the satisfaction of its desires as a finite self, but in its identity with the infinite, non-erotic One.

Consistent with this view, the Upanishads teach that sacrifice in its original form cannot be ultimate since it presupposes the duality of gods and mortals and it fails to take seriously the priority of the heart over external reality.⁶¹ Further, the grounds for *do ut des* sacrifice are undercut by the teaching that we should not desire wealth and that all finite goods are to be treasured "for the love of Atman."⁶² It follows that "one should not offer sacrifice [merely] to secure a wish."⁶³ Sacrifice itself has its source in Atman and is to be viewed as offered to Atman. Thus "Brahminhood has deserted him who knows Brahminhood in aught else than Atman."⁶⁴

Sacrifice is not to be repudiated; but neither can it be left to run its own course. The rites are to continue, but they are to be inter-

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interpreted in a new way. Sacrifice is not to be viewed simply as a device for gaining material and spiritual benefits from the gods. It is rather an act in which the self symbolically offers itself up to the Self (*Atman*), forsaking its own desires for the sake of the Sacred. It seems as if the sophisticated Upanishadic seers share with the simple Nuer people a sense that "one can only give oneself."

The tolerance of orthodox Hinduism for both sacrifice as self-interest and sacrifice as disinterested self-transcendence is nowhere more dramatically expressed than in the portion of the *Bhagavad-Gita* we considered in Section 7A. There we read:

In ancient days the Lord of creatures created men along with sacrifice, and said, By this shall ye bring forth and this shall be unto you that which will yield the milk of your desires.

By this foster ye the gods and let the gods foster you; thus fostering each other you shall attain to the supreme good.

Fostered by sacrifice, the gods will give the enjoyments you desire.

He who enjoys these gifts without giving to them in return is verily a thief.⁶⁵

Without any suggestion of there being a debate or conflict, this passage is immediately preceded by the suggestion that all work is to be done as a sacrifice, that is, free from attachment. Here an entirely different conception of sacrifice is presupposed, one familiar from the Upanishads, and extended to be the model for all of human activities. It reappears almost immediately after the verses cited above:

But the man whose delight is in the Self [*Atman*] alone, who is content with the Self, who is satisfied with the Self—for him there exists no work that needs to be done.

Similarly, in this world he has no interest whatever to gain by the actions that he has done. . . .⁶⁶

The logician's mind may complain that the *Gita* is confused, or even wishy-washy. But it faithfully reflects the believing soul, who on the issue of sacrifice as on that of prayer is never wholly free from Euthyphro's view of piety and never too far from Socrates'.

A very similar story can be told from China. There it was sacrifice to ancestors which was the center of the cult, and the liturgy is familiar.

We make wine and sweet spirits
And offer them to our ancestors, male and female,
Thus to fulfill at the rites,
And bring down blessings to all.⁶⁷

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Mo Tzu and the Mohists following him repudiated these practices. But the Confucian tradition sought to sublimate them.

Confucius himself sacrificed to ancestors and other spirits, testifying that when he did so he felt as if they were actually present. He taught his followers to do the same as an act of filial piety. And when Tzu-kung wanted to abolish a monthly sacrifice to the ancestors, Confucius replied, "You love the lamb but I love the ceremony."⁶⁸ But he placed the ceremony, along with all human acts, within the framework of ethical principles quite contrary to any sacrifice-is-the-best-policy mentality.

The first principle of this ethics concerns motivation. Actions are to be done because they are proper and right, not because they are personally beneficial. Hence the essential antithesis between *yi* (righteousness) and *li* (profit). "The superior man understands righteousness, the inferior man understands profit."⁶⁹

The second principle concerns the content of action. It is the principle of humanity (*jen*). Asked to define it, Confucius replied, "It is to love men" and "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you."⁷⁰ The great neo-Confucian Chu Hsi puts the two principles together and teaches, "*Jen* is uncalculating and has nothing in view."⁷¹

In short, proper action is useless self-transcendence. It is useless because it is not done with an eye to its results. And it is self-transcendent because it focuses on the welfare of the other rather than on my own. Sacrifices should be maintained as an act of filial obedience. But like all human action, ritual should consist of acts of *yi* and *jen* rather than *li*.⁷²

Turning finally to the biblical tradition, which is likely to be the most familiar, we find that sacrifice was the central cultic act of ancient Judaism until the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. Some of the sacrifices had a rather directly *do ut des* character. The burnt offering or holocaust and the sin offering were both expiatory sacrifices whose purpose was the atonement of sins.⁷³ In addition, there was the peace offering (also called the communion sacrifice, the shared offering, or the fellowship offering), a meal shared among God, the priest, and the sacrificer, along with his family and any guests he may wish to bring. This sacrifice could be offered as a votive offering, the payment of vow, in which case it had a kind of retroactively instrumental character; for it arose from a solemn promise of the form, If you will help me out of this mess, I'll offer you a sacrifice.

But the two other types of peace offering have a different motivation.⁷⁴ This sacrifice may be offered as a freewill offering or as an act of thanksgiving. The former "is an example of a free act of homage, which voices man's humble recognition of and submission to his divine Lord," while the latter "springs spontaneously from man's need to give public and material expression to his gratitude for some deliverance or marvelous benefit. . . . The ideas which actuated these sacrificial rites are the very ones to be found in the hymns and thanksgivings of the Psalter, which may indeed for the most part have been composed for just these occasions and which form some of the most beautiful expressions of Old Testament piety."⁷⁵

Closely related to these forms of peace offering is the offering of the firstfruits (the firstborn of the livestock and the earliest grain, olives, wine to be produced each year). The motive for such a sacrifice "may be either to obtain God's blessing and sanctification of all one's property, or else to acknowledge that God is the real owner of all things. . . ."⁷⁶ The sense that God is the owner of all things and in need of nothing is strong in Hebrew piety.⁷⁷ The offering of firstfruits serves to acknowledge Israel's dependence on God and to thank him for their freedom, for the original gift of their land, and for its current fruitfulness.⁷⁸ These examples should suffice to indicate that both the interested and the disinterested aspects of sacrifice we have been tracing elsewhere are built into the Israelite cult.

At least as prominent in the Jewish scriptures as prescriptions for sacrifice are polemics against it. This protest is associated especially with the pre-exilic writing prophets, but it predates them and is not found exclusively in the books attributed to them. Unlike the Buddhist and Mohist rejection of sacrifice and like the Upanishadic and Confucian reinterpretations, the prophetic protest does not aim at eliminating the ritual altogether, though sometimes the rhetoric is so strong as to suggest that.⁷⁹

The paradigm for the critique of sacrifice is the story of King Saul and the Amalekites. God had commanded him to destroy them completely. But he couldn't resist bringing back some booty with him, so he spared the lives of King Agag and the best of the enemy's livestock. When challenged by the prophet Samuel, Saul replied that he had brought the sheep and oxen to sacrifice to God. To which Samuel replied

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.⁸⁰

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Samuel's answer echoed throughout Israel's subsequent history. The form of the anti-sacrifice strains in the Jewish Bible is always to point to something which is more important to God than sacrifice. Sometimes it is the same things Samuel mentioned, an open receptiveness to the voice of God and a willingness to obey it.⁸¹ Often it is economic justice for the poor and oppressed.⁸² On other occasions it is attitudes of praise and thanksgiving or of contrition and humility.⁸³ Hosea may be said to summarize it in these words of the Lord

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.⁸⁴

Speaking of this last passage, Martin Buber summarizes the prophetic protest. "It is for the prophet to plead unremittingly against the degenerate sacrificial cult, in which the offering is changed from being a sign of the extreme self-devotion and becomes a ransom from all true self-devotion."⁸⁵ Buber rightly sees that one must be more specific than to talk simply about the difference between external act and internal attitude. The question is whether the giving of animal or plant life to God truthfully signifies the giving of oneself to him. "But he who accumulates at his altar offering upon offering devoid of intention, without the will to offer himself, offends Him."⁸⁶ It seems that the Jewish believing soul wants to join the Nuer believing soul in telling Hubert and Mauss they are wrong in claiming that those who sacrifice withhold themselves in giving something else.

Hubert and Mauss acknowledge an exception to their claim. "There is, however, one case from which all selfish calculation is absent. This is the case of the sacrifice of the god, for the god who sacrifices himself gives himself irrevocably."⁸⁷ The Christian faith takes this as the central theme in its understanding of sacrifice. In drawing on the Old Testament theology of sacrifice it does not only interpret the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin, presenting him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" and announcing that "Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed." It also goes back to the Old Testament picture of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh who "makes himself an offering for sin" and presents Christ as the one who "has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."⁸⁸

That the sacrificial death of Christ to atone for sin was a "once for all" event, permanently ending the need for animal sacrifices, might suggest that for the Christian sacrifice has a role only in mem-

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ory. But this is not the case at all. It is precisely as the one who voluntarily sacrificed himself that Christ is seen as a model and example for his followers.⁸⁹ "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple."⁹⁰ This does not mean that Christ's followers are to try to put away sin by the sacrifice of themselves. That would be to push imitation to the point of identification and deny the once-for-all efficacy of Christ's own sacrifice. It does not even necessarily mean that they are to die an unnatural death; for they are called upon to present themselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."⁹¹ It is in life that self-sacrifice primarily occurs.

Already in the Epistles it is suggested that it is the life of love and praise which does this.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.⁹²

Through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.⁹³

Subsequent Christian tradition has continued to use the language of sacrifice to understand various aspects of the life of faith. Roman Catholics, for example, call their celebration of the Eucharist the Sacrifice of the Mass. The sacramental act is a sacrificial act. As such it has an interested, instrumental dimension, for it is as much an act of receiving as of giving. In the act of communion the faithful acknowledge their need of divine grace and come to receive it from the hand of God. But there is a further dimension, since sacrifice is as much a giving as a receiving. "The same Jesus is here present who dies on the Cross. The whole congregation unites itself with His holy sacrificial will, and through Jesus present before it consecrates itself to the heavenly Father as a living oblation."⁹⁴ By receiving God's gift to them the faithful offer themselves to God.

Protestantism has always been skittish about viewing the Eucharist, Communion, or Lord's Supper as a sacrifice, lest there be misunderstanding about the finality of the death of Christ. But this is Martin Luther speaking: "When I declare the Word of God I offer sacrifice; when thou hearest the Word of God with all thy heart, thou dost offer sacrifice. When we pray, and when we give in charity to our neighbor, we offer sacrifice. So, too, when I receive the Sacrament,

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I offer sacrifice—that is to say, I accomplish the will and service of God, I confess Him, and I give him thanks. This is not a sacrifice for sin, but a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.”⁹⁵

From the mystical tradition comes the idea of “a speechless self-offering, a total oblation of personality . . . as the apex of contemplative prayer.” So the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes, “Thou ghostly friend in God, look that, leaving all curious seeking in thy natural wits, thou do wholly worship thy Lord God with thy substance, offering up unto Him plainly and wholly thine only self, all that thou art and such as thou art . . . and say thus: ‘That I am and how that I am, as in nature and in grace, all I have it of Thee Lord, and Thou it art. And all I offer it unto Thee, principally to the praising of Thee, for the help of all mine even-Christians and of me.’”⁹⁶

From the free-church tradition (churches supported by their members rather than by tax subsidies) comes the idea of financial contributions to the church as sacrifice. Here the levitical notion of the sacrifice that is a free-will offering is reversed and a free-will (monetary) offering is seen as sacrifice. Not that every gift counts as a sacrifice. In the background is Jesus’ comparison of the rich who contributed large sums to the Temple treasury with the widow who gave but two coins: “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.”⁹⁷ In this context giving becomes “sacrificial giving” only when we give “till it hurts.” The point of giving “till it hurts” is not masochistic; what is at work here is an understanding that what we give to God in sacrifice is finally ourselves and that the giving of money becomes in fact the giving of ourselves only when we give enough to really feel it.⁹⁸

Finally, from the Anabaptist tradition within Protestantism comes the idea that the self-sacrifice by which Jesus’ disciples follow the way of the cross is less a matter of public worship or private devotion than of one’s daily life in the everyday world. The personal and especially political non-conformity involved in imitating the non-violent, non-power seeking service through self-giving life and teachings of Jesus is the sacrifice by which we give ourselves to God and neighbor.⁹⁹

In view of earlier discussions it should not be hard to see sacrifice in the Christian tradition as useless self-transcendence. And as in several of the other traditions we’ve been considering, we can see how useless self-transcendence pushes from the merely privative no-

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tion of disinterestedness to the positive concept of love. The displacement of myself from center stage becomes intrinsically valuable as my heart is drawn out in thanks, adoration, imitation, and celebration of an Other. As Augustine has put it, sacrifices are "the things which we do for the purpose of drawing near to God."¹⁰⁰