

KEVIN S. GRANE

University of Denver / Iliff School of Theology

RELIGIOUS SACRIFICIAL SYMPATHY:

HOW MAN BECAME MORE VALUABLE THAN BEAST

The religious attitude of the West today demonstrates a consumerist ethos that would have been deeply foreign to the religious discourse of old. Perhaps one of the earliest forms of religion, Shamanism, provides the modern critic with a unique insight into the ethos of the spiritual man of the ancient world. Compared with the post-modern religious consumer, significant changes may be observed in environmental ethics. Beginning with Shamanism, it is by identifying changes in dietary practices and animal sacrifice that we observe the development of a growing indifference for non-human life, which contradicts one of the most prominent pillars of ancient religiosity, empathy, and respect for life regardless of form. Such a gradual loss of sympathy for the object of sacrifice for nourishment or divine intervention is but a microcosm of the religious man's indifference and even abuse of the world around him.

### *Shamanism*

Some of the first evidence of religious practice in human history comes from the cave of Lascaux in the Dordogne, France, dated between 15,000 and 20,000 BCE. This artwork is pictured below:<sup>1</sup>



The scene is typically interpreted as a hunting scene showing an eviscerated bison beside the hunter who mimicked or shared in the same wounds he inflicted upon the animal.<sup>2</sup> This evidence points to a profound sympathy and concern for the subject of the hunt. Such sympathy, as demonstrated above and practiced through the popularization of the shaman, is partially but significantly tied to how these communities thought about the afterlife and reincarnation. The earliest understanding of

---

<sup>1</sup> Wallis, Robert J. "Art and shamanism: From cave painting to the white cube." *Religions* 10, no. 1 (2019): 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

reincarnation was that life did not exist in one permanent category, meaning the essence of life may be found in a man for one lifetime and an animal in the next. The system of hierarchical structure of these life forms came about thousands of years later in Hindu texts such as Purusha Sukta (1500-1200 BCE).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, little consideration was given to the form in which one's essence or the spark of life would find itself.

Given the potentiality of one's essence to be embodied as an animal in the next life, community members relying on the shaman were so concerned with the process of the hunt that the shaman predominantly dictated the location of the hunt. The shaman functioned as an intermediary between the community and the divine, enacting a spiritual flight from the temporal to the transcendent. This flight took different forms across traditions, with some shamans experiencing an ecstatic experience or dream. In contrast, others seemed to believe shamans took a physical flight from Siberia to Tierra del Fuego.<sup>4</sup> At his return, the shaman conveyed the insight from the divine to guide the hunting efforts of the community so as only to kill those elected by the divine. Belief systems surrounding the God known as the "Animal Master" evidence a symbiotic relationship between man and animal wherein the divine regularly sends flocks to be killed and eaten by man. In return, man assures the divine that the rights necessary for a posthumous life will be conducted. Some of these practices included hunters sharing in the sorrow of animals until their time of death, donning animal costumes, ritualistically laying out bones and pelt, and proper burial.<sup>5</sup>

Shamans were both hereditary and spontaneously selected for this responsibility, yet both were accompanied by morbid phenomena furthering the association with death and the divine.<sup>6</sup> This association is principally reiterated in the common practice of shaman candidates' death and resurrection at some point during the initiation process.<sup>7</sup> As candidates dawn the death itself, they become interconnected with the divine. As they

---

<sup>3</sup> Later narratives such as this describe a cosmogeny of value structured chiefly around the veneration of the human form. Unique nuances exist within the human form, with Brahmins or priests at the top of this hierarchy and Sudras or servants at the bottom. Nevertheless, any human form has been understood as superior to even the most privileged animal form.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. *The power of myth*. Anchor, 2011, 85-87.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans; the anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth*, trans-Peter Bing, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1983, 16-22.

<sup>6</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Princeton University Press, (2024). 21.

<sup>7</sup> Elkin, Adolphus Peter. "The rainbow-serpent myth in North-West Australia." *Oceania* 1, no. 3 (1930): 349-352.

rise again, this experience was believed to naturally embed a connection between the new shaman and the divine, which could be called upon again. This connection was often associated with natural imagery, such as the shaman's symbolic climbing of a tree or a rainbow the shaman would ride.

### *Animal Sacrifice*

As anthropologist Walter Burkert has pointed out, men in the Paleolithic period felt a deep sympathy with the animals they slaughtered for nourishment, so much so that they relied on the shaman and their divine insight. The introduction of ritual sacrifice seen as early as the 4th Millennium BCE in Mesopotamia prompted animal commodification and religious distancing from animals. Animals were offered to gods to intrigue them to influence temporal affairs such as weather, fertility, and moral absolution. By offering animals as sacrifices, man asserted dominance over animals, suggesting their lives were justly taken to improve the lives of man because the lives of man were of more excellent value. Ritual sacrifice also profoundly affected the development of early reincarnation hierarchical structures such as in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh traditions. Where previously there had been a more sporadic understanding of reincarnation where one may be reincarnated as any creature at random, the assertion of man's value over animals led to a hierarchal development where it was more desirable to be human than animal.

British anthropologist Edward Tylor's evolution of animal sacrifice proposed that animal sacrifice was initially intended to appease the ferocity of gods toward humans.<sup>8</sup> Such a view seemed to validate the view of tribes relying on the shaman, namely that their consumption of non-ordained animals was offensive to the gods as they understood them. However, causes for displeasure with humanity were as numerous as the stars, yet immensely important for primitive cultures to ascertain in hopes of influencing cosmic agents favorably, thereby delivering them from trials such as natural disasters and famine. Nevertheless, it is pretty clear that as the practice of animal sacrifice became more commonplace, animals were commodified and became assets to be offered for the appeasement of humanity's violation of the virtuous ethic. What is not clear is why so many ancient religious communities concluded that their violation of the divine was more likely attributed to other practices than the unordained

---

<sup>8</sup>Tylor, Edward Burnett. *Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*. Vol. 2. J. Murray, 1871.

taking of life. We see in the Yajurveda (1200 BCE) ritual practices a preference for offerings of grain or milk rather than meat, demonstrating a hesitance to adopt animal sacrifice and a lasting reverence for the sanctity of non-human life. However, this shift must have occurred, for if it had not occurred, it would have been necessary to atone for the very means of atonement. Alongside the depreciating value of non-human life was the depreciation of the divine's perceived interest in posthumous rituals for the deceased. Had the divine's demand for posthumous ritual been viewed as significant by the divine, animal sacrifice could never have been considered a viable means of evocation.

Tyler goes on to suggest how, over time, societies questioned the efficacy of animal sacrifice when it did not achieve their desired outcomes. Such an enduring desire for divine intercession contributed significantly to the evolution of sacrifice from animal to symbolic. These rituals were seen early on as substituting animals for grain or other produce as the subject of the offering. Examples of this shift can be seen in the historical evolution of rituals such as Navaratri, Pongal, and the Passover Seder. This made offerings more affordable, yet the flexibility of ritual sacrifice demonstrates the dysfunctionality with the previous practices of animal sacrifice Tyler referred to. Should the desired outcome of divine intercession be achieved, evoking the divine would have remained the same, regardless of the price, due to the immense value of the outcome.

As animal sacrifice fell from widespread practice, an ideological shift took place that further devalued the sanctity of non-human life as it was no longer enough even to rouse the interest of the divine. Functionally, less non-human life was being taken, yet it was not for the inherent or economic value of non-human lives that animal sacrifice fell from widespread practice. This shift brought about a further commodification and value depreciation of non-human life as it lost significant value in the eyes of these communities. Previously, the divine valued this life so highly that its sacrifice was believed to be enough to rouse the divine. With the shift to symbolic sacrifice, non-human loss was no longer believed to be valuable enough to rouse the divine. Examples of this shift include the early Christian movement, which not only confronted the practice of animal sacrifice (see Hebrews 10:1-18, Matthew 9:13, Mark 12:33, and Romans 3:21-26) but also challenged dietary restrictions of non-human carnivorous consumption, specifically the scene in Mark 7:14 where Jesus stated: "Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing

outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (see also Acts 10:9-16).<sup>9</sup>

Other examples of Tyler's progressive shift away from animal sacrifice and further devaluing the sanctity of non-human life include the Hindu Ashvamedha Yajna, or horse sacrifice, which gradually shifted away from the killing of an actual animal in place of a symbolic sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> Other examples of this shift can be seen in the historical evolution of rituals such as Navaratri, Pongal, and the Passover Seder.

### *Dietary Restriction*

It is no surprise to find codified dietary restrictions early on in religious practice. We see dietary restrictions as early as 1500 BCE in the Rigveda expressing reverence for various animals and a preference for vegetarianism. Similar ideological orientations wherein meat consumption is discouraged can be seen in early Buddhist movements such as in the Jivaka Sutta (number 55) of the Majjhima Nikaya. In this text, readers are privy to a teaching of the Buddha wherein he states that consumption of meat is ethically acceptable under the condition that the animal is not killed specifically for the person who intends to consume its flesh. Furthermore, there should be no suspicion of the animals killing for personal consumption. Otherwise stated, meat consumption was permissible only in the instance that the death had occurred by natural causes, not intentionally for consumption by the consumer or an outside party.

Dietary restrictions further support Tyler's evolutionary progression as we see the emergence of more lenient doctrines of meat consumption over time. For example, while Theravada Buddhism highly encouraged non-carnivorous dietary practices, later practices like Mahayana Buddhism were less concerned with meat consumption.

The same sentiment of early concern for restrictive consumption of animals can be seen in Leviticus 11, which discusses the distinction between kosher and non-kosher animals.

Interestingly, it seems that even from the earliest scriptures of Judaism, killing and consumption of at least some animals was a foundational practice that would place Judaism as one of the pioneering traditions opposed to exclusively vegetarian diets catalyzing progressively de-valuing the sanctity of non-human

---

<sup>9</sup> Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol Ann Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Landrus, Mallica Kumbera. "Vijayanagara Art: A Political and Historical Metaphor." *Editorial Board* (1999): 77.

life regardless of its intention to do so or not. Validation for meat consumption is first seen in Genesis 9:3, which states: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything."<sup>11</sup> Given Judaism's progressive ideology on the consumption of meat, it is not surprising to find animal sacrifice also prevalent even in its earliest scriptures. For example, early descriptions of animal sacrifice may be found in Exodus 20:24, Leviticus 1-7, 17:11, and Numbers 28-29.

Judaism's early ideologies on the consumption of meat and animal sacrifice are likely due to its theological understanding of the soul's stasis. Disbelief in reincarnation supposed there is no possibility of man's soul being embodied by an animal; therefore, the motivation to exercise empathetic consideration for animals based on the possibility of one's embodiment as such was null. The Jewish motivation for the sacrality of non-human life was instead founded in its production by divine means and man's responsibility to care for the earth. This theological orientation allowed for a distinct division between the life of man and the life of animals, allowing for a much easier process of hierarchal imposition of man's life as more valuable than that of animals.

### *Contemporary Context*

This division between man and animal has grown exponentially as we approach the modern day. Today, very few religious communities practice animal sacrifice, such as Santería and Vodou communities, select Hindu and Chinese folk traditions, and traditional African traditions. However, the practice of animal sacrifice has fallen out of widespread practice significantly today instead of symbolic sacrifices or fasting practices are used instead. Rather than interpreting this change as a shift toward the sanctity of non-human life, this demonstrates an even further devaluation of non-human life as expressed by religious communities, as the sacrifice of non-human life is no longer sufficient to evoke intercession of divine agency.

Dietary restrictions remain theologically relevant in today's contemporary context. Muslims and Jews are forbidden to eat pork, Hindus are generally averse to eating beef, and Buddhists belonging to certain branches should refrain from meat-eating

---

<sup>11</sup> Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol Ann Newsom, and PHEME Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.

altogether. However, in a recent study by the Pew Research Center, eight in ten Indians limit meat in their diets, and four in ten consider themselves vegetarian.<sup>12</sup> In a 2020 study, the Pew Research Center found that only 17% of Jews keep kosher in their homes.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, 90 percent of Muslims surveyed said they abjure pork. Finally, only 4% of Buddhists abide by a vegetarian diet.<sup>14</sup> Though to be fair, the Buddha only recommends vegetarianism or those of a higher path, not everyone.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Christian theology expresses no concern for the restriction of meat and even goes so far as to condone it in Mark 7:18-19 expressly.

So why is the demand for meat in the United States today so high? According to the USDA, U.S. consumers, on average, ate about 227 pounds of poultry, beef, and pork in 2022, despite 81% claiming theistic belief. Furthermore, the booming industrial farming industry exemplifies this cognitive dissonance as animals are treated as no more than possessed capital whose lives may be forfeited for profit. Matthew C. Halteman further expands on the varieties of serious harm to animals that are pervasive in industrial farming systems by highlighting procedural harm and institutional oppression as further areas of immorality.<sup>16</sup>

For the religious populations in America, the religious man has traveled a long way from their roots of weeping with their dinner as it gave its life for man's nourishment. Even with the theological assertion of animals' uncleanliness or sacrality, religious populations are unwilling to restrict themselves from asserting their superiority over animals as they divvy death to their fellow life-bearers regularly. The religious man of America today highlights how far man has come in his perceived superiority and subjugation of nature and how hard his heart has

---

<sup>12</sup> Corichi, Manolo. "Eight-in-ten Indians limit meat in their diets, and four-in-ten consider themselves vegetarian." Pew Research Center, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/08/eight-in-ten-indians-limit-meat-in-their-diets-and-four-in-ten-consider-themselves-vegetarian/>

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, Travis. "Jewish Practices and Customs." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, May 11, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-practices-and-customs/>.

<sup>14</sup> Hussain, Grace. "Do Buddhists Eat Meat? What Did Buddha Say about Meat?" Sentient Media, November 1, 2022. <https://sentientmedia.org/do-buddhists-eat-meat/>

<sup>15</sup> *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*, Chapter 8.

<sup>16</sup> Halteman, Matthew C. "Varieties of harm to animals in industrial farming." *Journal of Animal Ethics* 1, no. 2 (2011): 122-131.

become. This is but a microcosm of the religious man's trend toward pillaging and abusing nature from which he emerged.

### *Conclusion*

As we have seen, some of the earliest religious traditions were profoundly concerned with meat consumption and the sanctity of non-human life. These views came partially from their understanding of the reincarnation process, and I argue simply a greater reverence for all life. This concern may be observed in Eliade's work documenting the function and purpose of the Shaman in early religious communities as the necessary intermediary between man and the divine, ordaining only the most specific instances of meat consumption as permissible. Early practices of dietary restriction and refrain from animal sacrifice further illustrate the origins of religious reverence for non-human life. However, the explosion of animal sacrifice demonstrates a process of de-sacrality of non-human life culminating in its gradual decline not to preserve non-human life but instead, because the value of non-human life was further devalued when it became apparent that its sacrifice was not enough to rouse the intercession of the divine. This shift was not only the result of a depreciating view of non-human life, but it also propagated it in the eyes of the community by clearly demonstrating the insufficiency of animal sacrifice to influence the divine. A similar trajectory may be observed in the initial fervor for dietary restrictions to today's context of varying adherence despite the endurance of doctrinal command. The conclusion leads us to believe that the value of non-human life has gradually lessened for many religious populations. This shift is symptomatic of the larger project demonstrating a depreciating concern of major religious traditions for environmental sanctity and preservation of non-human life.