
THEOLOGY OF SACRIFICE

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Introduction

A scientist is an observer who places an object on the table and tries to study and describe it as thoroughly as possible. Scientists will ultimately be successful in this endeavor when they "see" and represent for themselves and others the observed object. Throughout history Christian theologians also have strived to represent in detail their observations about God. These theologians have written about the essence of God and its composite attributes. But, because God is not an object that can be set down before them and observed thoroughly, we can practically know nothing about Him. Common denominators found throughout the writings of these Christian theologians with regard to a description of God are focused on three of His attributes. These are ultimately reflected as negations of our human qualities: God is omnipotent, eternal, and, with respect to human reason, is unattainable. Therefore the logical conclusion of all the effort is the "realization", that we know nothing of God. And since we cannot say anything concrete about God, we accept the idea that God is completely different from any aspects of our human lives.

The word "theology" derives from the Latin word *theologia*, which itself is derived from the Greek. *Theología* is a word comprised of two Greek words, namely *Θεός*, meaning God, and *λόγος*, meaning speech, thought. The etymological interpretation of the term tells us that theology is systematic thinking, discussion, or knowledge of God, but in fact it is systematic thinking of faith. Speaking about the Theology of Sacrifice means speaking about Christian faith based on the Gospels. In other words the research object of theology is belief.

The Bible reads: "It is truly wonderful when relatives live together in peace" (Ps 133, 1). It is mutually beneficial when partners and brothers dwell together in understanding, collaboration, and peace. Many have

experienced and are experiencing the success of such in their families. Sociologists conversely find in modern society extensive breakdown of formerly staid units. Family and traditional values are in crisis too. The statistics are horrifying, reflecting the growing number of divorces, broken families, and dysfunctional families. In fact the essence of relationship itself is in crisis. That which should bind us together as individuals has plunged into desuetude. Why? Because modern humans no longer comprehend the essence of common life. In this paper we will show that “sacrifice”, as it is introduced in the Gospels, is of utmost importance for maintaining a high-quality life for those who elect to live in community with others. Even more, evangelical sacrifice is of utmost importance for maintaining a human life and a human civilization. In fact we would like to show the importance of Christian faith in general for humanity’s survival.

The place of religion in the modern world

Many ideologists in the 20th century wanted to eradicate religion, or they were convinced that faith would disappear by itself as soon as people had “scientifically” changed their outlook. Marx viewed religion as an illusion that alleviated the suffering caused by exploitation and oppression. Communism proclaimed that religion was opium for the suffering, which distorted reality and offered many deceptions, which thus form the basis of the ideology of the ruling class and a false class consciousness. Religion does not do anything to solve problems but is just an “irrational” attempt at making life more bearable. Marx maintained that most religious movements appear first among oppressed classes, which embrace such movements in the hope that they will alleviate the pains of their oppression. Marxists thus proclaimed religious beliefs as opium, i.e. a noxious narcotic that brings no benefit, something similar to smoking. There are many who like smoking and cannot give it up. Yet everybody knows that smoking is harmful to smokers as well as to non-smokers, who have to breathe in cigarette smoke. And this is how they saw religious beliefs – as harmful. Sigmund Freud defined religion as a mental disturbance. According to a Pew Research Center demographic analysis, today about 85 percent of the world’s

population is religious, i.e. adheres to institutionalized religions. Does that mean that a great majority of people are mentally disturbed? Yet also among those 15 percent that count themselves as non-believers, some show certain signs of religiosity. The situation has not been any different throughout history.¹

Religion is not disappearing. Quite the opposite, in the first years of the new millennium the world strongly felt, in a rather painful way, that religion is still – or increasingly so – an important factor in today’s world. Also among scientists many can be found who oppose Marx’s and Freud’s assertions. It is true that for some time it seemed that science would supersede religion because the Church stubbornly insisted on assertions that were not in accordance with scientific findings. The best-known example of a meaningless insistence of religion contrary to scientific facts is the assertion of the Church that the Sun rotates around the Earth and not vice versa. Yet some very prominent scientists have had a rather positive attitude towards religion, e.g. Newton. Albert Einstein shared the opinion of numerous other scientists that the world was ruled by a certain higher order, whose absence would make existence itself impossible. Stephen Hawking considers God as the incarnation of physical laws.²

“Science has discovered several new facts about faith. The most important finding about faith is that people (also atheists) have a part of brain pre-specialized for believing/faith and that processes of faith have their own chemistry, their chemical-biological processes. Some interesting conclusions and analyses follow therefrom. Thus, it is generally accepted today that certain parts of the brain are pre-prepared for their function, e.g. for sight or for speech. Man is not a “blank slate” completely determined by the world around him. Of course, the final embodiment of man/brain comprises inborn as well as acquired features, yet during the last decades the importance of genetics and of predispo-

¹ Conrad Hackett and David McClendon, “Christians remain world’s largest religious group, but they are declining in Europe,” accessed December 18, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>.

² Cf. Stephen Hawking, Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (London: Bantam books, 2010).

sitions of the human brain has been emphasized. Among the first to put up this thesis for linguistics on the basis of experiments and at an abstract level was Noam Chomsky (who was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Ljubljana in 2005). Since the abilities of the brain are of key importance for the success of humanity and since a part of the brain is specialized for faith – and not, e.g. for better mathematics, faith is evidently one of the key features for the evolutionary success of man. If, in an abstract manner, one imagines two peoples in the past, one religious and one unbelieving, evolution chose the religious people as the winner. It should also be considered that the brain uses up about 20 percent of the energy, which makes the religiosity part of the brain an additional burden. Yet it has definitely been worth it! It can be said that the claim about the usefulness of religion is an historical and evolutionary fact”³.

Humans are religious because they are connected with others

It is a fact that a vast majority of Earth’s population has always been religious and has expressed its faith. Wherever archaeologists find remains of civilizations that had disappeared, they also find proof of religious activity. We dare claim that we will be religious as long as the human species exists. What is the foundation of this claim?

People have various reasons for believing, one of them being the promise of life after death, of meeting their beloved ones who have already died, and of their happy eternal life together in Heaven. Others are healed by their faith, which gives sense to their lives. Some believe because they are afraid of death and of suffering in hell and others because of the consolation and peace faith brings. Again others believe because they have been educated in this sense and do not look for other reasons. Some believe because of moral norms and values founded in faith, and others because they have had an experience with the supernatural, or simply because humans have a need for spirituality. All these reasons are justified.

³ Matjaž Gams, “Znanost o verovanju (*Science about Faith*)” *Information society IS 2005, Proceeding of the 8th Multiconference. Institut »Jožef Stefan«, Ljubljana, 43–47.*

Our thesis is, however, that humans believe because they are relational beings, i.e. because they are connected with others. This is the deepest and the first reason for humankind's faith. Humans first experience transcendence within a relationship, and just in a relationship do humans meet what they have called God. Only a being in a relationship can be a religious being. And since we are all "beings in a relationship", we all believe in a certain way. How should this be understood? Faith is often imagined by people as "conviction about God's existence", but it is more rightly a relationship. Many have an idea about God, many philosophers and wise men speak about God, yet this is not yet faith. Everyone is a believer, but not everyone immediately gets to know God. Actually the verb "know" is not suitable here because faith is not just knowledge. It is much more. It is a relationship. The field of faith is not the world of objects, but the world of relationships, where one does not speak "about God" but "meets" God when one finds oneself in the world of relationships. Since the objective of believing is not knowledge, believing is outside the context of scientific research. What brings one closer to God is not knowledge, but faith. To believe does not mean to understand. Therefore God "escapes" science, which is bent on getting to know things. Namely we get to know what is equal or similar to us. God, however, is different, so much so that we cannot get to know Him. Yet thanks to the fact that He is "the Other", we can communicate with Him.

Interpersonal relationships are for faith what humus is for a plant. A plant cannot help but sprout, bloom, and bear fruit when it is planted in fertile soil. In the same way also humans cannot help but believe since they live together with the other, in a relationship. To be in a relationship does not mean just to talk "about somebody", but especially to talk "with somebody". To put it simpler, it means to pronounce the word "you". As long as I do not pronounce this word, I cannot pronounce the word "I" either! Thus the first act of faith is to pronounce the word "you". The pronounced word "you" is the guarantee of my existence. Yet I can only pronounce it when I find myself in a relationship with you. It should not be said "until I form a relationship with you", but "when I find myself in a relationship with you", or even better, when I become aware that I am in a relationship with you. Namely, I

cannot enter a relationship, I can only become aware that I am already in it because the relationship was there before me. Similarly, I cannot enter life, I can only become aware that I live.

The relationship is a condition, a guarantee, and a basis of the existence of the two of us because it was there before me and before you. If the relationship exists before the subjects, a subject cannot create it. On the contrary, it follows from what has been said that the relationship generates and enables subjects. When “you” and “I” exist, the second act of faith can occur when I recognize God’s face in you. Then I recognize something more than just you in “you”; I find myself in faith and I call God that which I recognize. Faith was there before me. Faith is the condition that I can call “God”. Faith has generated a believer out of me. And faith is a gift. The credit is not mine. Saint Augustine wrote in his Confessions: “I would not have sought you if you had not found me before.” What does that mean? Humans would not seek God if they already believed in Him. Only when one feels that they believe does one start seeking God. And as long as one seeks God, one believes. Once you stop seeking or once you believe that you have found Him, you do not believe any more. You find yourself in faith and, when you become aware of it, you start seeking God and start to call Him “you, my God”. Actually faith is a relationship with a partner whom you do not know but whom you nevertheless call “you”. And when you call Him “you”, god becomes “your God”. And then you start to believe. You find yourself in faith when your relationship with God becomes a covenant, whereby you are committed to permanent religious activity and religious practice.

Thus, humans believe because we are beings of “relationships” and we are aware of it. And maybe believing is just the ability that distinguishes humans from other living beings. As long as humans have existed and will exist, faith will exist too, not as one of our shortcomings, but as a quality, a value that will help us develop and make our existence meaningful, thus also contributing to the development of society.

Faith encourages seeking the other

Faith means seeking the (O)ther and, since we are all in a relationship, we all need and long for seeking the (O)ther and desire to realize this relationship with the (O)ther. Since the relationship is transcendent, the longing for the other is essentially a longing for the transcendent, a longing for God. As has been said before, faith is a relationship with a partner we do not know. Neither is there a need for it. The objective of believing is to maintain the relationship with the Unknowable, wherefore we can now ask ourselves: does to believe mean to maintain a relationship only with Him? And the answer is: not just with Him; to believe means to maintain a relationship with “any other”.

It was said above that humans believe because we are connected with others. Now these words can be reversed: since humans believe, we can be connected with others, or the more we believe, the more we are connected with others. The more humans realize that we were generated in a relationship and that such relationship keeps us alive, the more we long for the transcendent and the more we realize our relationships with others.

For humans believing is like breathing. One dies without air. The development and the expression of faith, however, also depend on other factors. It can be said that a relationship is human's first experience of transcendence. The transcendent is that which humans experience, but do not understand. So we people also live in relationships that connect us, but we do not understand them. Objects from the material world can be described and explained. The relationships in which we find ourselves, however, cannot be defined because they transcend knowledge.

We all simultaneously live in the material world and the spiritual one. We are aware that life is not just food and drink, but that life is made possible by the relationships that connect us with one another. These relationships leave a much stronger mark on our existence than the property we possess. Interpersonal relationships do not extend into the realm of knowledge, but into the realm of faith where all people find themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously. Since our knowledge of the other is very limited, life without faith is impossible. To believe means to trust.

One receives life in its fullness when one is not worried about objects of knowledge any more, but communicates with "the other" without knowing the other. Therefore the knowledge and profession of God is not decisive either: when a person finds themselves in a relationship with Him, when they no longer speak "about Him", but "with Him", they become a believer. When you are prepared to extend your hand to the other without knowing the other at all, but you want to be with that other and to live for them, when the other does not interest you any more as an object, but you communicate with them as with a subject, then you find yourself in faith. To find ourselves in a relationship with other means to sacrifice ourselves for the other.

Sacrifice in the Bible

The English word "sacrifice", derived from Latin *sacrificare*, that is, *sacrum facere*, means performing a holy act. The etymological meaning of sacrifice therefore is to perform an act that makes the performer closer to God and assures that they will be loved by God. In all religions throughout the history of humankind we find sacrifice as an expression of human penance, a sign of human humility before God. The goal of sacrifice is regaining God's favor or avoiding His punishment. The generic word for sacrifice in the Old Testament is *qorban*, which means "approach". The etymological meaning of the Hebrew root (*qrb*) "is to be close to someone/something"; other meanings from the root include "close" and "relatives." These meanings underscore our affirmation that believers in the Old Testament made sacrifices in order to be closer to God and to express their faith in God.

The fourth chapter of Genesis has a narrative on the sacrifice made by Adam's sons (cf. Gen 4, 3-5). Each offered God the fruits of his labor: Cain, the farmer, the harvest of the earth; Abel, the shepherd, a first-born lamb. They lived each in his own culture, from whence comes a typical offering for sacrifice. Another culture conditioned Abraham's sacrifice of his son. Herein we readers of the Old Testament are awestruck at Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac to God (cf. Gen 22, 9-10). Exegetes of the biblical texts often emphasize God's intervention (cf. Gen 22, 11-13). Because God prevented the execution of the

sacrifice of Abraham, the exegetes conclude that God prohibited this sacrifice of human life. However, in biblical history, we can find after Abraham another case of human sacrifice. The Book of Judges, for example, tells us how Jephthah sacrificed his beloved daughter to God in gratitude for a victory (cf. Judg 11, 29-40).

Mosaic Law prohibited human sacrifice in Leviticus: "Don't sacrifice your children on the altar fires to the god Molech" (Lev 18, 21). However, Mosaic Law allowed making a payment to the priests in lieu of the human sacrifice promised: "If you have promised to give someone to me and can't afford to pay the full amount for that person's release, you will be taken to a priest, and he will decide how much you can afford" (Lev 27, 1-8). Let us proceed to New Testament references of sacrifice and finally define the importance of sacrifice in human relationships.

The Old Testament doctrine "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" matured in the New Testament into the unconditional commandment of love for one's neighbor. Christ reveals God's will, which leads us to survive by forgiving the wicked and doing the wicked well (cf. Mt 5, 39). As Christians we thus recognize God's will in the Gospel text. Moreover we can see that even Jesus requires of his disciples a sacrifice; He does not demand the sacrifice of a son or daughter, but the sacrifice of one's self. He said to his disciples: "If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find it" (Mt 16, 24). If we compare God's orders from the Old and New Testaments, we quickly realize that in both cases our gift to God must be impeccable. Believers must sacrifice the best of what they have, denying themselves the best of what they have. The word "sacrifice" in the Gospel text expresses this directly. Evangelical doctrine emphasizes the crux of sacrifice as renunciation. When we say that a believer in the Old Testament had to give up that which they considered the most precious, we then learn that renunciation will be taken a step further in the New Testament. Here Jesus does not require renunciation of a believer's property or loved ones, but renunciation of oneself.

We have seen the importance of the sacrifice in the Bible. Now let us pass to a deeper understanding of why God requires such renunciation

from humankind. Our reflection will be based on the Theology of Relationship, formulated by French theologian Guy Lafon.

A relationship is an ongoing reaching out to others
in the human community.

A person enters the material world following the union of two cells. They then start to live as a person when someone, the mother, addresses them as “you”, in a verbal way or non-verbal ways. Called by “you”, a human being is born as “I”, as a person. This personal identity, their existence, can only be maintained when “I”, the person, continues to look for “you”, that is, “I” interact with the “you”. To call another by “you” is an ongoing searching for “you”. “You” become my responsibility, and “I” begin, in turn, to give up myself. Responsibility and sacrifice are key to understanding a relationship. This interpersonal relationship is the first human experience of transcendence⁴; so it is possible that the person in this relationship with another person at the same time seeks God and enters simultaneously into this relationship. We might say that, in relationship to other humans, we can and do experience a yearning for a relationship that goes beyond us.

The nature of a dynamic relationship is change. “Partners” in a relationship thus always experience each other in a new light, always different. A husband may recognize his wife every day in a new light. His wife could be today pleasant to him; tomorrow she will change completely and they will be at odds with each other. Then family life could require real sacrifice. However, we read in the Gospel that Jesus invites his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. What does this invitation imply for those disciples and today’s members in family who may be contemplating options to restart their conjugal and familial life?

Sacrifice is an integral element of every human relationship.

We shall answer the question of “why God requires us to give up father, mother, son or daughter, even to renounce ourselves”. First, we

⁴ Guy Lafon, *Le Dieu commun* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 43.

must define life itself. Materialist philosophy defines life as the growth and death of body cells, while the Theology of Relationship argues that to live means to be in a relationship. This theology asserts that there is no life outside of relationships. Given this theory of what constitutes living, we will arrive at an understanding of renunciation in the theological theory of relationships, which argues that renunciation is the voluntary acceptance of absence. What is absence? This question will be answered by exploring the fundamental workings of relationships.

A relationship consists of two dimensions: presence and absence. These two dimensions work at the same time in a relationship between two individuals. Their rapport is changing all the time. Let's use geometry to imagine a meter-long line. We can split this line into two parts infinitely. We find an infinite number of possible ratios between the two segments of the line: 50:50, 40:60, 80:20, 99:1, etc. The simultaneous operation of presence and absence between two subjects forms a relationship and the subjects find themselves within this relationship. Anyone who wants to stay in a relationship must accept this variance. If the presence eliminates the absence, two subjects would be but one and the same to each other; but if the absence overcomes the presence, the subjects would not know each other and would not be able to communicate. The essence of the relationship is the diversity of the subjects, who find themselves linked through a dynamic rapport. At one point presence dominates; later absence may prevail over presence. Constant change is the overarching constitutional element of relationship. Because of the constant changing of the rapport between presence and absence, the relationship is always new. We can say that the relationship produces at every moment new subjects within itself. In a family members always recognize others as changed or new persons. To remain together they must accept their absence in the sense that they acknowledge the new differences of others as necessary and renounce their own desires for presence. The Gospel narrative of the return of the Prodigal Son will underscore the meaning of acceptance of absence through the homecoming extended by the father.

Forgiveness allows a new creation.

The Gospel of Luke tells a story of a father who warmly welcomes home a son who had strayed: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again" (Lk 15.11 to 32). How then was the prodigal son "revived"? The father forgave him, accepted him, and embraced him, and the son lived once again in this paternal relationship. The father's pardon created a new son, who then again had the opportunity to justify his father's confidence in him. Here is a wonderful example that recognizes a new creation through forgiveness. Moreover, to help us understand the full importance of forgiveness, the parable introduces the older son, who does not share his father's enthusiasm at his brother's return. Why not? The condition for extending forgiveness to another is willingness to give up oneself. In forgiving his son the father renounced all that he had in order to be able to give over everything to his son once again. The sibling, conversely, did not forgive his brother upon his return to the household because he could not forgo any of his belongings, including himself. To forgive, and then to welcome someone, means to give up property, rights, will, and even sovereignty. Through the act of forgiveness we are reborn as another. In fact every relationship with others means the renunciation of one's own sovereignty. In contrast the older brother turned his back on his younger brother, and refused to be overjoyed, like his father, with his prodigal sibling's reinstatement into the family. He preferred that his brother remain "dead". The elder son could not concede to a new birth under his father's roof for he was not prepared to give up himself or he has the idea that he alone had earned his father's love being the good and ever-faithful child.

When we are strongly offended by someone, our attitude toward them may change abruptly. We can say that this party does not exist for us anymore. They have become different. In fact they move into absence; and yet we cannot accept their absence. We would like them to be the same relationship as before, pleasant, congenial. What does the shift in attitude mean? If we cannot accept the distancing of the second subject in this change of rapport, then we do not accept said subject's absence. How then might we accept their absence, that is, the personal differences of the brother, spouse, or child? Christ suggests to us that

forgiveness is the way of accepting the differences of others living together. Moreover, because one's brother in a relationship is changing constantly, Christ commands us to forgive him seven times seven, meaning forever. Forgiveness leads us closer again to those who had been living as a unit, because today they are different from who they were yesterday.

Forgiveness changes attitudes and thus allows the rebirth of individuals in a relationship. We have indicated that a human starts to live as a person when someone addresses them as "you", in a verbal way or non-verbal ways. Called "you", a human being is born as "I", as a person. To forgive someone, in fact, means to call them "you" again. To be willing to address that person who offended as "you" you is not so easy. It is quite hard to again call a husband by name, saying to him: "Dear, I accept you, let's stay together!" To be able to move in the direction of the other it is necessary to give up the totality of who we are as a person. It means to sacrifice my own individuality. Forgiveness will permit the continuation of the relationship (life) because of the renunciation of one's self-sufficiency. Because a relationship implies reaching out to another, someone who forgives knows the other in a new light. In fact it is possible only through forgiving the other to see that other in a new light. Forgiveness allows the partner to change or to be reborn. The Gospel teaches us through the parable of the prodigal son that a good father is waiting, is seeking the son, and welcomes him home with a warm embrace. The father's forgiveness allows his progeny to be "born again"! In this Gospel passage Jesus demonstrates for us that forgiveness is the means by which we can return to each other, reborn in our relationship.

In this context we can even speak of cases where there is no insult, no offense. To accept anyone who is different from us in a relationship is also a kind of forgiveness; in fact, this acknowledgment of the other is a new creation. Forgiveness and acceptance of diversity (absence) are very necessary in a family. When we accept a partner or a child, we give them a new life. Over time changes impact these relationships, we age, experience both good and bad moments, even perhaps a crisis. If we do not support a relative for the long term, we begin to disavow their new birth and eventually leave them for "dead". But in such cases we

essentially disavow what constitutes living our life. For our very existence we depend on our brothers and sisters. Forgiveness and acceptance of others allow the continuation of life for all, especially for those who forgive others and then fully welcome them back.

To forgive does not mean to forget. People have memories, and it is useful to remember the mistakes and bitter moments from their past. These thoughts will help us avoid repeating the pitfalls of before. To forgive means to accept another such as they are, even with their weaknesses, which may have negatively affected the relationship. Even harder is to forgive a person who has turned their back on us, and, in spite of their faults and handicaps, still seek them and “call them by name”! God always forgives humankind despite our wickedness; He inevitably reaches out to the sinner, calling them by name; His love engulfs His children. A good example is found in the first pages of the Bible, when Adam chooses not to follow the order of God. “Lord God called to the man and said to him: Where you are?” (Gen 3, 9). God is looking for Adam, who had turned from Him. The word of God found in scriptures encourages humans to become like God. Similarly the person who forgives their brother, spouse, or child must seek out the one who had offended them while they wait in anticipation for the other’s return.

Conclusion

Life, like a relationship itself, is a gift. As humans themselves have no prospects to be born to life, so also a Christian will be accepted into the Church and experience a rebirth in the Christian community only through a calling from God. In this light we can understand the words of the Apostle Paul when he says: “Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new. God has done it all! He sent Christ to make peace between himself and us, and he has given us the work of making peace between himself and others. What we mean is that God was in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world. And He has given us the work of sharing His message about peace. We were sent to speak for Christ, and God is begging you to listen to our message. We speak for Christ and sincerely ask you to make peace with God. Christ never sinned! But God treated

him as a sinner, so that Christ could make us acceptable to God” (2 Cor 5, 17-21). We could say that whoever is accepted and whoever accepts a Christian life is a new creation! Being a new person means realizing that one cannot live alone: it means accepting everyone as brother or sister. In this way we can also understand Jesus' answer to Nicodemus that a man must be born again; the first is the person's birth as an individual and the second their being born in communion with others, that is, in a relationship.

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