

Sacrifice, Transcendence and 'Making Sacred'

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Varieties of Sacrifice

Despisers of religion throughout the centuries have poured scorn upon the idea of sacrifice, which they have targeted as an index of the irrational and wicked in religious practice. Lucretius saw the sacrifice of Iphigenia as an instance of the evils perpetrated by religion. But even religious reformers like Xenophanes or Empedocles rail against 'bloody sacrifice'.¹ What kind of God can demand sacrifice? Yet the language of sacrifice persists in a secular world. Nor does its secularised form seem much more appealing. One need only think of the appalling and grotesque cult of sacrifice in numerous totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. The perversion of the Jihad in radical Islam in contemporary Europe would provide another sombre instance. Throughout Europe in the last few years we have seen the revival of a classical Enlightenment atheism, a movement that, far removed from Nietzsche's pathos for the Death of God, pursues a vigorous and relentless policy of *Écrasez l'infâme!* Indeed, contemporary polemicists like Dawkins and Hitchens wish to emphasise precisely this dimension of Christianity: not just false but nasty! The modern cultured despisers of religion are the self confessed descendants of Hume and Voltaire. Religion is the product of the period of ignorance in the superstitious and terrified fearful infancy of humanity, and is the crude attempt to face the natural human longing for knowledge, consolation and emotional support. How can one strive to defend the concept of sacrifice against such cultured despisers? I think we need to start by reflecting upon why the slaughter of an animal, say, makes holy – *sacra facere*? The root meaning of 'sacrifice' has a basis in ritual practice, as its Latin etymology suggests. Though in common parlance it communicates a giving up or rejection, the word as we are going to understand it

¹ Sylvana Chrysakopoulou, *Théologie versus physique dans la poésie présocratique de Xénophane à Empédocle* (Thesis at the Sorbonne, Paris IV, 2003), 318–328.

signifies the *substitution*, or more perhaps *sublimation*, of an item or interest for a higher value or principle. St Augustine speaks of the outward symbol of the true sacrifice of spiritual offering that God requires in the altar of the heart – a sacrifice of humility and praise.² The metaphor works because his audience was familiar with the literal sense of the term.

Three Phases of Sacrifice: Ancient, 1st Millennium and Enlightenment

Our culture possesses an inherited concept of sacrifice, largely from Christianity and the Graeco-Roman world. The near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham or the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon (though she is spirited away in one major version) are instances. The death of Jesus Christ is understood by the gospel writers as a sacrifice and St Paul enjoins Christians to become living sacrifices.

Sacrifice was immensely important within the Graeco-Roman world. Judaism and Christianity marked the end of that kind of literal sacrifice. Animal sacrifice was part of the expected behaviour of the Roman citizen, a contribution to the sustaining order of the universe. When Christians refused to submit to Imperial power and offer sacrifices to him, they seemed to be challenging the very cosmic order supported by the sacrificial system.³ Whereas animal sacrifice was a fundamental part of the ritual method of attaining communion between the divine and the human in the Graeco-Roman world, the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 meant that animal sacrifice disappeared in Judaism. One might note the argument of Guy Stroumsa concerning the end of public sacrifice.⁴ Christianity rejected both the sacrifices of the Jews and the 'Pagans'. The religion of the Rabbis, like Christianity, was a radical transformation of sacrifice. The period between Christ and Mohamed was an age of transition that prepared for the great metaphysical theologies of medieval Islam and Christendom.

However, the potency of the figurative meaning of sacrifice did not end there. Throughout its history, Christianity has been fascinated by the idea of sacrifice and the battles of the Reformation are

² Augustine, *City of God*, X, 5.

³ Heyman, G., *The Power of Sacrifice, Roman and Christian Discourses in conflict*, Catholic university of America, (Washington, 2007).

⁴ G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice: Les mutations religieuses de L'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 2005).

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incomprehensible without reference to it. Much of this debate is about the levels of the symbolic, figurative and literal. In the early modern period we have the development of a radical critique of sacrifice *tout court*. Philosophers of 'self preservation' such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Spinoza have criticised the very idea of sacrifice. The key question is no longer just whether the relationship between literal and figurative sacrifice is one of continuity or rupture. It is now: has sacrifice hitherto 'imagined' become unimaginable. Is the very language of sacrifice a barbaric vestige of antiquated cruelty and superstition? As Girard observes in his own terminology: '(T)he phrase "modern world" seems almost like a synonym for the sacrificial crisis.'⁵ If we take that to mean the problem that post Enlightenment European culture confronts in the legacy of sacrificial language, then Girard's point is most apt.

Sacrifice and Imagination

There is a considerable literature consisting of anthropological approaches to sacrifice, a body that has developed since the late nineteenth century.⁶ E.B. Tylor on sacrifice as a gift to the gods within a context of animism; W. Robertson Smith on sacrifice as a ritual of communion; James Frazer on sacrifice as liberating spirit from body with a context of magic and fertility, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (sacrifice as a oscillation between the profane and sacred); E.E. Evans-Prichard, who presents sacrifice as a process of ritual substitution in his work on the Nuer Religion. Others have argued for a pure pragmatic account of sacrifice: eminent scholars of religion and antiquity have argued that 'sacrifice' is the product of the fancy of other scholars. The distinguished French scholar Marcel Detienne famously considers sacrifice as merely a political and sociological phenomenon. Others have doubted whether any rational explanation for such an irrational activity can be given.⁷ Walter Burkert's *Homo Necans* and Girard's *La Violence et Le Sacré* in 1972 represents a momentous period in the literature on scholarship. Among the manifold and wildly incompatible theories

⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (New York: Continuum, 2005), 199.

⁶ Strenski, I., *Theology and the First Theory of Sacrifice*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁷ Joseph Henninger, 'Sacrifices', in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

of sacrifice, Girard and Burkert produce clear explanations of the nature of sacrifice.

Sacrifice explained: Burkert and Girard

Burkert and Girard are of particular note because of the scope and vigour of their theories of sacrifice. Both draw upon longer traditions: Burkert is the inheritor of the magnificent tradition of German Classical philology together with wider philological concerns, (I am thinking especially of Nietzsche); Girard is clearly standing within a tradition of French speculation about sacrifice that goes back to the spirituality of counter-Reformation. Both are proponents of grand and provocative theories of sacrifice.

Walter Burkert notes that even the great age of Aeschylus to Euripides possesses striking archaic elements within sacrificial contexts. If one thinks of the paradigmatic tragic cycle of the *Oresteia*, it is structured by a succession of failed sacrifices: from the sons of Thyestes through Iphigenia to Orestes' killing of his mother, Clytemnestra. The ubiquitous nature of sacrifice through Ancient Greek religion can be explored in various texts: however Burkert pursues the ritual of sacrifice into the Palaeolithic age of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and beyond. He is inspired by the ethology of Konrad Lorenz, especially his *On Aggression* of 1963. Thus animal behaviour is the paradigm for understanding human behaviour. On the assumption that 90% of the evolutionary history of *homo sapiens* was in the Hunter/gatherer state and must have at least vestigial influence in later civilisation, Burkert pursues the roots of sacrifice in the hunting practices of our ancestors.

It is a moot point whether the Palaeolithic evidence is as convincing as Burkert avers. Perhaps there was more gathering than hunting, and more scavenging than heroic killing. That aside, my concern is that Burkert gives inadequate weight to the imaginative dimension of human culture. Is culture, in this case specially a cultural milieu with certain religious rites, merely the conventional shape of universal natural instincts? This seems to be Burkert's assumption. For example, Burkert's theory requires the generation of myth by ritual, which in turn is grounded in biosocial factors. The myths of gods and heroes are derived from ritual of sacrifice, which in turn are derived from ritualised hunting practices. If culture were a level of life that rests neatly upon biological structures, then a biological account of 'religion', like Burkert's, would be feasible. However, perhaps human culture is not the conventional shape of passions

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that are universal in human nature. Rather, the distinctively human passions are shaped by cultural traditions and history. This, I think, is a subtle and intriguing critic of naturalism in ethics. Man is made by society, by institutions and rituals, and as such human nature is irreducible to the stimulus-response model of the crude naturalists and barely explicable by the more sophisticated versions of naturalistic theory. As Vico, Burke and Maistre insisted with profundity: art is man's nature.

Girard cannot be accused of naturalism. His inspiration is not biology but imaginative literature and he is scathing of those who deny great literature the capacity to convey real truth. Furthermore, his theory of mimetic desire is consciously anti-naturalistic. The imagining of the desires of others shapes desires. The object of human desires is thus moulded by the imagination and imitation of the desires of others. In Girard's theory the social psychology of desire cannot be reduced to the push and pull of raw instincts, inclinations and aversions.⁸ Girard's theory of mimetic desire is derived from literature and quite incompatible with ethology.⁹ Whereas Burkert's theory is naturalistic in the sense that sacrifice emerges out of the natural need to kill for food, Girard's theory is based on a monstrous act of murder. This arises from a mimetic desire that is inherently competitive and which generates an upsurge of violence with the community. Girard uses the term 'mimetic doubling' for this process by which rivalry for the mediated desires generates the monstrous double: the competitor locked into conflict over the desired objects, and the ensuing violence. Rivalry is not the product of the fortuitous convergence of two agents desiring the same object. The one subject yearns for the object precisely *because* the rival wants it. Violence is not an unfortunate by-product of clashing desires, but the necessary upshot of mimesis:

...the original act of violence is the matrix of *all* ritual and mythological significations.¹⁰

Mimetic doubling generates the mimetic crisis, in which swelling violence threatens social breakdown (Girard depicts as the erosion of hierarchy and distinction). The resolution of this mimetic lies in

⁸ There is no truth 'not mediated by culture', Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 240.

⁹ Though Girard has become very interested in the evolutionary dimension of mimesis. See *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello and de Castro Rocha, J.C.

¹⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 117.

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the redirection of the violence of the mob to a single victim. The society almost destroyed by conflict can unite itself by concentrating its ire upon a scapegoat. Hence the murder of single victim both releases the violence of the mob and unites the many.

Religion is a complex attempt to obscure the terrible truth of victimisation at the root of human culture, sacrificial ritual the inadequate attempt to resolve the problem of violence at the root of all human relations, and myth is a language of concealment. The *Bacchae* of Euripides plays an important role for Girard since the relations between myth, ritual and literary reflection are so porous. Girard's thesis rather oddly makes the surrogate victim, the scapegoat rather than God the sacred, or indeed as Girard writes: 'the sacred is violence'.¹¹

If Burkert with his enthusiasm for ethology fails to do justice to the crucial role of imagination in human culture, Girard sees mankind as almost universally condemned to a perversely overactive imagination: creating saviour figures out of ritual substitutes. Briefly, I think that Girard is wrong about myth as a process of concealment and is an attempt to divorce Christianity from any mythic component. Christians, according to Girard, become the Gnostic few who have grasped the secret curse of human culture.

Making Sacred

What is the 'sacred'? It is often contrasted with the profane. In the popular imagination the sacred or the holy is associated with a sacred place and a time: a temple, a festival, or perhaps a place that seems to evoke awe. There is a dimension of the sacred that is often remarked upon: its ambivalent status. The 'making sacred' of sacrifice is both a source of terror and consolation. It holds society together and yet induces anxiety and horror. This is true of theories of sacrifice from Maistre to Girard. The obvious point of reference is to the seminal work of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* of 1917. Otto employs for his motto the lines from Goethe:

Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes Teil.
Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verteuere,
Ergriffen fülht er tief das Ungeheure

These lines are very difficult to translate. 'Schaudern' is cognate with the English shudder. 'Ungeheuer' has connotations of massive scale

¹¹ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1987), 32.

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and the uncanny. 'Ergriffen' is a state of being grasped. It means that awe is the best part of mankind, even if not valued by the world; it is grasped in the depths by the sense of the numinous. But I don't know how to translate it into poetry. The difficulty is to find words that resonate in a similar manner. Burkert in his effort to produce an ethology of Greek religion clearly thinks that Otto's influence is baneful.¹²

A good example of the numinous is one of the seminal discussions of sacrifice in modern philosophy: Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The title itself points to that experience of the non rational *Schaudern* of Goethe and Otto. Abraham is famously silent in Kierkegaard's account: he cannot conceptualise his experience. For Kierkegaard – and I think this is a plausible interpretation of the position presented in *Fear and Trembling* – it is the fact of transcendence, of the 'absolute relation to the absolute' that justifies the idea of sacrifice. This, of course, makes any rational-ethical justification impossible. Kierkegaard's idea of the teleological suspension of the ethical is highly suggestive and problematic.¹³ It challenges any cosy domestication of religion – like Arnold's famous 'morality touched with emotion'. But Kierkegaard's rejection of an identification of religion with the ethical has the unwelcome effect of furnishing warrant for fanaticism.

Whereas many modern writers, whether for against, assume the absurdity of the practice of sacrifice, the Savoy Count de Maistre does not. In the text *Enlightenment on Sacrifice*, he noted the oddity of the phenomenon that sacrifice is a universal and intractable element in human societies. He claims that the ritual of sacrifice furnishes institutions with both awe and terror: it makes them sacred. For Maistre, Christianity fulfils rather than denies the principle of sacrifice that forms the basis of the partial truth of heathen piety.¹⁴ The pagans demand regularly repeated 'communion in blood', while Christ sacrifices his divinely innocent blood so that the heathen sacrifice, 'redemption through blood', can find its telos. Maistre's account is specifically aimed at the rationalism of the French revolution and the optimism of its theorists. Maistre thought that a failure to

¹² See the useful discussion, Burton Mack: 'Introduction: Religion and Ritual', in Hamerton-Kelly (ed.), *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, (Stanford, 1987), 1–70.

¹³ See Rudd, A., *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, (Clarendon: Oxford, 1993).

¹⁴ St. Petersburg Dialogues, or Conversations on the Temporal Government of Providence, ed. and tr. Richard A. Lebrun (Kingston and Montreal, 1993).

recognize human limits, frailty and finitude would create terror.¹⁵ Maistre's own vision is an apocalyptic view of the whole earth as a gigantic altar upon which there is a continual and terrible sacrifice of life until the final eradication of evil. The world is a vast altar on which each being must be sacrificed until the final purification of evil: evil is not a refutation of Divine purpose and providence but rather reveals the necessity for sacrificial expiation and redemptive substitution as part of a process of cosmic return to Divine Unity. This return is a divine education of mankind realised through pain and sorrow.

There was a tradition that fed upon the vigorous rhetoric of Maistre through Donoso Cortés up to Carl Schmidt, and which used this apocalyptic vision to justify violence and war. The attempt of a thinker like Girard to distance Christianity from the very principle of sacrifice is doubtless both inspired by and in revolt against Maistre. Yet Maistre's own philosophy is better understood within a tradition of Christian theodicy than as some sombre irrationalism of the kind diagnosed by critics like Isaiah Berlin. Indeed, theologically Maistre is attached to the Greek Orthodox tradition of Origen and universalism. The ultimate interest of Maistre is in Christ consummator rather than violence, and his theodicy is an ingenious attempt to re-imagine sacrifice in a profane age. I cannot here defend such a reading of Maistre, but his is a brilliant reading of the relationship between literal and figurative sacrifice as one of continuity not rupture.

Sacrifice and the Crucified Holy One

Maistre was a Christian Platonist. Plato's description of the discussion between Glaucon and Socrates concerning the just and the unjust man. The just man as an image of eternal justice is contrasted with the unjust man who is concerned with courting the mere appearance of justice. The initial comparison begins with the famous ring of Gyges, which makes its wearer invisible and free from approbation or disapprobation. The most unjust man is one who feigns the appearance of justice: he practices immorality while attaining the appearance of righteousness. By way of contrast, the truly just man cares not for the appearance but the substance of justice. Since *apparently* just acts may be motivated by the desire for honour or gifts, it is not always evident whether the motive lies in justice itself or the

¹⁵ Bradley, Owen, *A modern Maistre: the social and political thought of Joseph de Maistre* (London: University of Nebraska, 1999).

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desire for reputation. Thus in order for his justice to be evidently motivated for the right reasons, he should be mocked and held in disregard. Hence Glaucon is intent on placing the 'simple, good man' where his stubborn love of justice can be proved. Thus the depiction of the perfectly unjust man as hailed for his justice and the truly righteous man is lonely and despised. Socrates observes that the two figures are like polished statues. Glaucon goes further and claims that the righteous man will be humiliated and tortured, bound, blinded and crucified:

They will say that the just man, as we have pictured him, will be scourged, tortured, and imprisoned, his eyes will be put out, and after enduring every humiliation he will be crucified, and learnt last that one should want not to be, but to seem just.¹⁶
(*Republic*, 362)

Evidently these lines were composed after and in the light of the death of the suffering and execution of Socrates. Socrates had been publicly humiliated by Aristophanes, the most popular writer of comic plays in Athens. Yet he had to endure not merely the mockery and humiliation through the wit of the poet, but also a vicious attack on his piety and the accusation of corrupting the youth in court. The actual death of Socrates was not as described – it was in fact the serene death of a free citizen. The description of the suffering of the just is closer to the violence and humiliation of Golgotha. The King of the Jews, descendant of King David, executed through a slave's death.¹⁷

In his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* Kant discusses the crucifixion of Christ as the sacrifice 'Holy One' of the Gospel, especially in the section concerning the evil principle's rightful claim to dominion over the human being, and the struggle of the two principles with one another.¹⁸ Kant is here drawing upon his theory of 'radical Bösé' in humanity as expressing the innate disposition to evil. Kant, like Plato, emphasises the manner in which the righteousness of Christ provoked the 'prince of this world' to humiliate and kill him:

He finally pursued him to the most ignominious death, without achieving anything in the least against him by this onslaught by

¹⁶ Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), tr. D Lee, 49.

¹⁷ Benz, E. 'Der gekreuzigte Gerechte bei Pato, im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche', *Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur in Mainz*, 12 (1950), 1–46.

¹⁸ *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, eds. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1998). All text references are to this edition.

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unworthy people upon his steadfastness and honesty in teaching, and example for the sake of the good. (*Religion* 6:81)

Christ's death serves to manifest goodness. It reveals the capacity of the free agent to exhibit autonomy and the power of the moral law over inclination: the contrast between the freedom of the children of heaven and the bondage of a mere son of earth (*Religion* 6:82). It is a paradigm of the capacity of the virtuous agent to prevail over the most difficult of circumstances. Moreover, within Kant's rational theology, Christ's death can convey a powerful awareness of mankind's moral vocation, the potential for liberation from bondage to inclination, and as the perfect representation of holiness: the utter correspondence of disposition to the moral law.

It means that sacrifice is unavoidable: those in the world who adhere to the good principle should always be prepared for physical sufferings, sacrifices and mortifications of self-love. (*Religion*, 6.83)

This suggests a difference of emphasis at least between the *Groundwork* and Kant's *Religion*. The motivational rigorism of the *Groundwork*, the thesis that actions are only morally good if prompted by duty rather inclination. On this thesis the special value of ethical sacrifice is that it can be an index of the sovereignty of the moral law: 'the sublimity and inner worth of the command is the more manifest in a duty, the fewer are the subjective causes for obeying it and the more there are against...'*(Groundwork*, IV 425).¹⁹ Thus virtue 'reveals itself most splendidly in suffering' *Critique of Practical Reason* V 156).²⁰ From being an indication of the sublime power of the moral law, sacrifice becomes an unavoidable aspect of the free agent's experience in the *Religion*:

The emergence from the corrupted disposition into the good is in itself already sacrifice (as "the death of the old man" "the crucifying of the flesh") and the entrance into a long train of life's ills which the new human being undertakes in the disposition of the Son of God. (*Religion* 6:74)

Kant quotes St Paul's notion of being crucified with Christ. If we bracket the complex and opaque idea of grace in Kant as a surplus

¹⁹ *The Moral Law*. H.J. Paton (ed.) (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 88.

²⁰ *Critique of Practical Reason* (ed.) Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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imputed via Christ's death, the dominant idea is the symbolic crucifixion of the inclinations and sharing in the sufferings of the just man par excellence: an idea that is strikingly akin to Plato's vision of the innocent suffering of the righteous man in the *Republic*. Here we have the language of 'Sacrifice' is, of course, often employed when considering the core meta-ethical problem of moral worth. What reasons can one give for a rational interest in the moral?

Let us bracket the arguments in the social sciences (especially psychology, evolutionary biology and economics) concerning cost-benefit analysis of action towards others and expense to the agent. The typical arguments about reputational altruism, reciprocal altruism or the hedonistic account of altruism reduce morality to some form of egoism. Plato and Kant produce an account of self-sacrifice as an index of the freedom of the agent to pursue the good. They both explicitly use the language of ethical sacrifice to express the sublime power of a transcendent goodness. Both envisage the reception of the power in terms of a dualism of a phenomenal and noumenal, sensible and intelligible domain. Both envisage the good life in metaphysical terms as proper subordination of the former to the latter. Both present the fulfilment of that good life as a life of sacrifice. Maistre makes this thought explicit: mankind's proper relation to the physical cosmos is a sacrificial rite, a 'making sacred'. Through sacrifice, the hidden seed of the Divine is brought out of potentiality into actuality. As such, the renunciation of the will, the sacrifice of self for an absolute good must remain an integral element of human self-realisation. Maistre, with Burke the most eloquent polemicist against Enlightenment, saw himself as the inheritor of the great philosophical inheritance of Europe and the relentless adversary of the trivialisation and banalisation of Western philosophy in so called 'philosophes' like Voltaire. Yet Maistre was no mere polemicist: he was an astute reader of Plato and the Platonic tradition, and his reflections upon the relevance of the concept of sacrifice reflect his deep immersion in the European philosophical canon.

Conclusion

I have reflected upon philosophers of very different temperaments, to suggest why I do not think that sacrifice is merely 'constructed'. The idea of sacrifice exhibits the natural and legitimate human sense of the sacred dimension of life. Here I think Plato, Kant and Maistre, are better guides than socio-political pragmatists like Detienne. Sacrifice traditionally concerns usually a relation to gods

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or a God. Its ritual forms often reflect or point to the violence that pervades the animal kingdom and human culture: the threat of death and the violent origins of cultures. Yet it also points to humanity's abiding desire for renewal: to 'make sacred' and participate in the very source of life. Religious thinkers, from Vico to Maistre and Girard know that society is not a product of human contract. If sacrifice is ambivalent in the sense that it a transcendent dimension to human experience, it is an index of a double obstacle for the naturalist. For the naturalist can neither provide a satisfactory reduction of the irreducible hermeneutical dimension of sacrifice, its role in our stories about ourselves as creatures aware of life *and* death. One only need think of the power of many tragic and, by implication, 'sacrificial' themes in Western art: from Wagner to Mann, from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to Melville's *Moby Dick*. This is why the Romantic legacy is still so important for our age. The greatest minds of that period had both a deep sense of cultures as wholes: we cannot ignore the particularity and contingency of any human culture. Yet neither can we ignore the sacred and the eternal impinging upon human consciousness: the transcendent source of the gift of life.

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