

THE FUNCTION OF ANIMAL SACRIFICE AMONG THE CULTURES AND RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

One of the most ancient rituals, found worldwide in almost all religions, is the concept of sacrifice. This varies from religion to religion, place to place, and also sometime tribe to tribe. The object of sacrifice is open for variation i.e. bird sacrifice, food and animal sacrifice, self and human sacrifice. The animal sacrifice also varies from place to place and god to god. If one god needs a goat, the other may need the sacrifice of a sheep or an ox. However, animal sacrifice is the most common and universal type of worship offered since ancient times. There are differences, however, in its function, motivation and its effects on society. In this paper I will restrict myself to the sacrifice of animals. I will show the different natures of this practice. I will consider examples from Greek, Roman, African culture, as well as examples from Arabs before Islam, Bengal, Judaism and Islam. In the beginning I will define "sacrifice". Afterward, I will examine several cultures and religions where it is practiced. And finally I will discuss its effects on the society.

DEFINITION

Mircea Eliade, while defining the Latin word for sacrifice, writes that "the term sacrifice, from the Latin *sacrificium* (*sacer*, "holy"; *facere*, "to make"), carries the connotation of the religious act in the highest, or fullest sense; it can also be understood as the act of sanctifying or consecrating an object" (Mircea, 1963).

In the Bible various verbs are used to designate the act of sacrifice. Two of the terms are used for the slaughter of animals for both secular and sacred purposes. The word for sacrifice in Hebrew is *zebah* which means "to kill". This is the term for a particular sacrifice to be distinguished from the *'Olah* or holocaust (Sykes, 1991). According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the Talmudic name *Zevahim* refers to the slaughter of animals for sacrifice. The word *Korban* express the idea "to bring near" (Encyclopaedia Judaica).

In Arabic there are also two different words used for animal sacrifice. One word is *al-dhibh* and the other *Qurban*. *Al-dhibh* means cutting the throat of an animal i.e. sheep, goat, an ox or a cow, for food or sacrifice (Ibn Manzoor, 1966). (For slaughtering camels the word *al-Nahr* is used). As for the word *Qurban*, the verb '*qaruba*' is derived

from the same radicals and means "he came closer". *Qurban* as the infinitive means "offering" or "oblation" which brings a person closer to Allah (God) (Lane, 1984). In the Qur'anic term *qurban* was an act of offering to God by early nations. If it was acceptable to God, a divine fire would come and burn it. In other words, its burning with the divine fire was a sign of its acceptance. If it was not burnt then that meant its rejection. However, sacrifice is commonly referred to a system of worship that has its most charismatic and effective action in the slaughter of a victim.

CONCEPT

The concept of a higher and supernatural power is found almost in every nation and religion. In case of its wrath and anger, it can harm human beings. The best way to make good relations with the supernatural power and to get its favors and protect themselves from its anger is to offer sacrifice. In the words of Heusch (1985), one common factor of sacrificial rites is to restore the normal physical connection of man - his health, or his status - which has been compromised by some "offence". Wilhelm Schmidt thinks that the basic reason of sacrifice was homage and