



Sacrificing Sacrifice to Self-Sacrifice
Sublimation of Sacrificial Violence in Western Indo European Cultures
during Karl Jaspers' Axial Period

Eric D. Meyer

Independent Scholar, Idaho Falls, ID
ericd.meyer@yahoo.com

Abstract: Karl Jaspers describes The Axial Period (800-200 BCE) as a world-historical turning point in the spiritual evolution of the human species, characterized by the rise of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, and the Hebrew prophets, without precisely identifying what defines this world-historical period. What defines The Axial Period, I argue with Jaspers, is the sublimation of sacrifice, through which the sacrificial killing of domestic animals, characteristic of primitive religions, is sublimated into the self-sacrificial disciplines of prayer, meditation, and asceticism. This sublimation of sacrifice involves a curiously duplicitous gesture, through which the sacred violence of primitive sacrifice is simultaneously sublimated into the self-sacrificial disciplines of the Western Indo-European religions, and demoted to the strictly physical violence of modern warfare, stripped of its sacred origins. I argue, against Jaspers, that there is no world-historical discontinuity between primitive and modern sacrifice, but rather a continuous trajectory of the sublimation of sacrifice in Western Indo-European cultures. The Brahminic sacred texts, the *Rig Veda* and the *Brahmanas*, for example, describe a sophisticated sacrificial ritualism that more effectively sublimates sacrificial violence than do Western European modern cultures, in which un-sacrificial violence continues to escalate, to challenge the survival of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Axial Period; Indo-European; Veda; sacrifice; ritual.

...the gods sacrificed sacrifice to sacrifice.
---*The Purushasukta*, *Rig Veda*, X, 90.

Between 800 and 200 BCE, the Western Indo-European world witnessed the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in India, of Zoroastrianism in Persia, of Pythagoreanism and Orphism in Greece, and of the Hebrew prophets in Israel. Karl Jaspers calls this era The Axial Period.¹ There is probably broad agreement, in theoretical circles, that during this 600 yearlong period in the spiritual evolution

of Western Indo-European societies, something must have happened that had a serious impact on the Western Indo-European religions. The question, of course, is: What could possibly have happened to bring about this world-historical change from the sacrificial religions of Brahminic Vedic India, Ancient Greece, Archaic Rome, and Ancient Israel, with their striking emphasis on the sacrificial killing of domestic animals as the quintessentially religious experience, to the post-sacrificial religions of Upanishadic Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Pythagoreanism, Orphicism, Post-

¹ Karl Jaspers, "The Axial Period," in *The Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, pp. 1-21. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

Second Temple Judaism, and Early Christianity, in which sacrificial killing was ostensibly abolished or eliminated altogether, and which, therefore, inaugurated what is called modernity?

There is probably also broad consensus that what took place is what is called, variously, the supercession, supererogation, abolition, or abrogation of sacrifice,² which, in the case of Brahminic Hinduism and Second Temple Judaism, resulted from the monopolization of sacrificial ritualism by a priestly caste (the Hindu *brahmins* and the Second Temple priests), and which, in turn, precipitated a rebellion against the sacrificial priests and their elaborate ritual prohibitions and taboos. This spiritual rebellion was also a revolt against the sacred violence of the sacrificial killing of domestic animals—and sometimes human beings—and finally culminated—in Upanishadic Hinduism, in Post-Second Temple Judaism, and in Early Christianity—in the transformation of sacrificial ritual into the self-sacrificial disciplines of prayer, meditation, and asceticism, after which the sacred violence of sacrificial killing was increasingly repudiated, and, finally, eliminated altogether, at least from the superficial practices of those un-sacrificial religions. But, as Johannes Heesterman observes of Brahminic sacrifice, "[t]he question that occupies religious thought" in Jaspers' Axial Period, "does not appear to concern the affirmation or rejection of sacrifice, but rather what is the true sacrifice, the latter being, of course, the interiorized [i.e., sublimated] sacrifice" (*ICT* 42). It is this sublimation of sacrifice in Western Indo-European cultures which is responsible, I argue, for what Jaspers calls the "spiritualization" of the contemporary human species during that world-shaking transitional period, in which, as Jaspers claims, "[m]an, as we know him today, came into being" (*OGH* 3, 1)—or, more specifically, in which the Western Indo-European classic cultures crossed a world-historical divide from prehistory into modernity. This world-historical divide is then conveniently marked, in conventional accounts, by the death of Socrates (399 BCE) and the crucifixion of Christ (ca. 30 CE), which

are considered the definitive events through which, in Western European cultures, sacrificial killing was finally superseded, supererogated, abolished, or eliminated, once and for all. Or so the conventional argument has it.

In this essay, I will restrict myself to describing the epochal changes in Western Indo-European sacrificial cultures as they took place in Brahminic Hinduism, Ancient Greek and Archaic Roman religions, Post-Second Temple Judaism, and Early Christianity, leaving aside Jaspers' claims that a roughly contemporaneous change also took place in Chinese (Confucian) culture; for the simple reason that I believe that these Western Indo-European cultures (with the exception of pre-exilic Judaism, prior to the Babylonian captivity and the return to Palestine under the Persian king, Cyrus the Great) come from a common source, that Jaspers, following Alfred Weber, correctly identifies as the Proto-Indo European tribesmen who migrated into Western European, the Mediterranean, and the Near East, from the Central Asian steppes, in the millennium before the Axial Period (*OGH* 16-7, 55-7). I do not believe that Jaspers' axial thesis can be extended to the Chinese, Southeast Asian, and East Asian cultures, without straining the world-historical paradigm. While Jaspers' desire to extend the Axial Period to include non-Western European cultures is certainly admirable, it nonetheless runs the risk of attempting to assimilate non-Western cultures to what is still, basically, a Eurocentric paradigm; and despite his attempts at inclusiveness, Jaspers' axial hypothesis still draws a distinct line of world-historical discontinuity between what he calls "[t]he axial peoples... Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Jews, and Greeks... [and t]he peoples without this breakthrough" (*OGH* 51), such as the Egyptians, Babylonians, Romans, and many others. Jaspers' classification distinctly resembles the conventional distinction between the Western European world and the non-Western world, which it is Jaspers' desire to overcome. Hence, for the purposes of this essay, I define Western Indo-European culture(s) to include Brahminic India, Ancient Greece, Archaic Rome, Second Temple Judaism, and Early Christianity, excluding, somewhat arbitrarily, Persian (Indo-Iranian) culture. Also, I define sublimation as the psychological process through which destructive primal energies are simultaneously repressed, internalized, displaced, and redirected toward supposed higher or more creative social activities—in this case, sacrificial ritualism and non-violent religious disciplines, like prayer, mediation, and asceticism. Although, in this context, the sublimation of sacrifice appears in a strongly positive

² Two versions of his thesis are found in Johannes C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1985. [Henceforth cited as *ICT*] See chapter "Ritual, Revelation, and the Axial Age," pp. 95-107; and Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity*, transl. Susan Emmanuel, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009. [Henceforth cited as *ESR*]

light, I agree with Norman Brown's reading of Sigmund Freud that sublimation is also closely connected with repression, and that the danger of sublimation is that the repressed contents within the subconscious mind frequently reemerge, in what Freud called the return of the repressed.³

The current theory that what takes place in Western-Indo European cultures during Jaspers' Axial Period is the sublimation of sacrifice appears to be a common hypothesis of contemporary scholars, both in the fields of Brahminic (Vedic) Hindu and Second Temple Jewish studies, as well as in critical studies of Greek and Roman religion of which Jean-Pierre Vernant's work is representative.⁴ In Brahminic Vedic sacrifice, Heesterman, for example, argues, "the decisive turning-point" which marks the Axial Period occurred when "the warrior's sacrifice was replaced with the brahmin's ritualism, which rules out conflict and marginalizes [sacrificial] violence...When the ritual does require the immolation of an animal victim, it is no longer decapitated at the sacrificial stake...but bloodlessly suffocated outside the ritual arena. Violence and death have been replaced with the ritual mistake... to be corrected by ritual means" (*ICT* 100-1). In Early Christian and Jewish sacrificial ritualism, Stroumsa argues that the supererogation and interiorization of sacrifice is characteristic of "the 'paradigm shift' in the domain of religion under the Roman Empire" (*ESR* 2, 9). Following these positions, it can be observed that contemporary thinking about sacrifice is still inscribed within the Western Indo-European paradigm, in which sacrificial killing is supposed to have been superseded by the spiritualization and interiorization of sacred violence and its sublimation into the self-sacrificial disciplines of prayer, meditation, and asceticism.

Heesterman, among others, offers a different interpretation in his "Vedic Sacrifice and Transcendence" (*ICT* 81-94). He reads the sacrificial paradigm backwards, so that rather than emphasizing the sublimation of sacrificial killing and its sacred violence, the strikingly competitive character of primitive sacrifice is

emphasized, as a conflict or contest between competing sacrificial priests, in which the defeated sacrificers themselves risk being sacrificed by the victors. As a consequence of this specular reversal in the reading of the Western Indo-European sacrificial paradigm, these studies, following Walter Burkert's Paleolithic hunting hypothesis, also emphasize the violent origins of sacrifice in the earliest prehistory of the early modern human species, when the distant ancestors of the early modern human species first learned to kill wild game and eat cooked meat to survive.⁵ The primitive violence of the prehistoric huntsman is then simply repeated in the comparatively less violent killing of the domesticated animal and the sharing of the sacramental meal in Western Indo-European sacrificial ritualism. This specular reversal of the Western Indo-European sacrificial paradigm, however, does not thereby escape the sacrificial paradigm, but, instead, only re-inscribes it within its primitive form, dating back to a prehistoric time before the sublimation of sacrifice had begun, when sacrificial killing and its sacred violence were still comparatively un-trammelled by the constraints of a priestly caste upon the sacrilegious act of blood sacrifice.

The clearest contemporary statement of the sublimation of sacrifice thesis appears in Jean-Luc Nancy's "The Unsacrificeable," which tracks the sacrificial paradigm into the contemporary theories of French critics such as Georges Bataille.⁶ The Western Indo-European paradigm of the sublimation of sacrifice was, however, already clearly described in G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, in which the previous world-historical stages of sacrificial ritualism are seen as definitively superseded (*aufgehoben*) by the Christian revelation of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, while the Christian revelation itself is subsumed into the "revealed religion" of "absolute spirit" or "absolute knowledge."⁷ In Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the sacrificial character of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, previously evident in "The Epistle

³ Norman O. Brown, "The Ambiguities of Sublimation," in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1969, pp. 137-44.

⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Greek Religion, Ancient Religions," in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma I. Zetlin, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1991, pp. 260-89.

⁵ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, transl. Peter Bing, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. [Henceforth cited as *AFT*] See chapter "The Unsacrificeable," pp. 51-77.

⁷ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, transl. Sir J. B. Baillie, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1966, pp. 685-808.

to the Hebrews" and in the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, is strongly emphasized, and the Christian religion is assimilated into the Western-Indo European sacrificial cultures. But the Hegelian paradigm still inscribes a world-historical discontinuity between Western European modernity and the earlier sacrificial religions within the speculative dialectical structure of sublimation itself—that is, within the Hegelian *Aufhebung*—so that sacred violence is seen as at once transcended and abolished, cancelled and preserved, within Western European Christian culture.

A conspicuous problem with this Western European paradigm, then, is that it inscribes a world-historical discontinuity or an epistemic break—what Nancy calls a "mimetic rupture" —between "old sacrifice" or "early sacrifice" —that is, the strictly physical killing of sacrificial animals—and "new sacrifice" —that is, the Platonic Greek sacrifice of Socrates' death or the Christian sacrifice of Jesus Christ's crucifixion (*AFT* 54-5). I contend that there is no "decisive turning point," in Heesterman's terms (*ICT* 100), in the world-historical dialectic of the sublimation of sacrifice, and also no "mimetic rupture," as Nancy claims (*AFT* 55), between old and new sacrifice; because sublimated sacrificial violence does not simply go away, it still exists within the collective subconscious of the contemporary human species. Also, there is no sublimation of sacrificial killing that does not simply incorporate its sacred violence within the Eucharistic sacrifice of Western Christian culture, and, subsequently, within the secularized political institutions of Western European modern culture, as is evident in the symptomatic outbreaks of sacrificial violence which have repeatedly erupted throughout the past several centuries—the French Revolutionary Terror of September 1793, or the Bolshevik Red Terror of the October 1917 Russian Revolution—and in the catastrophic world-wars, holocausts, and atrocities, which are characteristic of twentieth century world history.

As René Girard has argued, the sublimation of sacrifice in Western European Christian culture did not solve the basic problem of the sacred violence of the early modern human species, but only disguised that primitive violence behind the more sophisticated forms of sublimated violence characteristic of modernity. "Two world wars, the invention of the atom bomb, several genocides, and an imminent ecological disaster," Girard argues,

have not sufficed to convince humanity...that the apocalyptic texts [the Christian Gospels] might not be

predictions but certainly do concern the disaster that is underway....Violence, which produced the sacred, no longer produces anything but itself.⁸

The Christian revelation of sacrificial violence, demystified by Christ's Passion, has simply sublimated sacred violence as the bloodless sacrifice of Western European Christian culture; and, as Jaspers observes, "[t]he Axial Period too ended in failure" (*OGH* 20). The sublimation of sacrifice does not result in a final cessation of sacrificial violence. Un-sacrificial killing continues. Nor does the Christian revelation of Jesus Christ's crucifixion result in an end of history. History still goes on.

The Western European paradigm also obscures the fact that sacrificial killing and its sacred violence are not simply atavistic throwbacks to the primitive, violent origins of the early modern human species, but are always already sublimated from the strictly physical killing of wild and domestic animals by predatory beasts. Sacrificial killing by the early modern human species was not a biological, instinctual behavior, but, instead, was an invention of the early modern human species, equivalent to their becoming human, their hominization itself, by which primitive violence was transformed into the sacrificial violence of early modern human culture. By drawing a distinct line between primitive sacrifice, and sublimated, modern sacrifice, this Western European paradigm also predictably results in the ambivalent attitude toward, for example, Brahminic Vedic sacrifice, considered as primitive sacrifice, which is both privileged and exalted, as the sacrosanct religious experience of a pristine aboriginal culture, in which sacrificial transcendence suffuses all worldly experience, and deprecated as a throwback to a prehistoric culture, which has not sublimated sacrificial violence, as have Western European modern cultures.

Some versions of the sublimation of sacrifice thesis continue to underwrite contemporary discussions of Western Indo-European sacrificial cultures, resulting in the paradoxical attitude of Western scholars toward the Brahminic sacred texts. However, this ambivalent attitude toward the Brahminic sacred texts obscures the fact that there is really nothing primitive, barbaric, or savage, about Brahminic sacrifice, since it is a sophisticated sacrificial system designed to sublimate sacred violence and to minimize the suffering and

⁸ René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, transl. Mary Baker, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press 2010, pp. x-xi.

pain of the sacrificial victims, while also dealing with the shocking trauma of sacrificial killing upon the community. In Brahminic Vedic ritualism, sacrificial killing is performed within a strictly ritualized system, under the direction of up to seven priests (the *brahmin*, *adhvaryu*, *udgatri*, *hotr*, and assistants); and the sacrificial ritual is accompanied by chants, like the *Apri* hymns from the *Rig Veda*, which prompt the Brahminic priests to follow the strictly prescribed rules to prevent the sacrificial killing from causing suffering and pain to the victim. There are ten *Apri* hymns in the *Rig Veda*, which follow a strictly ritualized formula, suggesting they were chanted by the priests during the sacrificial killing, to ensure their conformity to the Brahminic ritual procedures designed to prevent the suffering of the sacrificial victim.⁹ In the "Animal Sacrifice to Agni and Soma" in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, for example, even the cutting of the stake to which the sacrificial animal is bound must be accompanied by sophisticated ritual preparations, so that the sacrificial axe does not hurt the cut tree, so that the falling tree does not injure the sky or air, and so that from the dismembered stump of the chopped-down tree, a hundred, yes, a thousand shoots will spring up.¹⁰

In Brahminic Vedic sacrificial ritual, the strictly prescribed killing of the sacrificial animal is also preceded by prayers and offerings to the family of the victim to grant permission for the killing, and followed by elaborate procedures to restore the dismembered body of the victim to wholeness and life. "What does it mean to sacrifice?" Charles Malamud asks, "it is the reenactment of the primal sacrifice of the *Purusha* [Sanskrit for "man" or "self"],"¹¹ the primordial cosmic human from whose dismembered body the whole cosmos is created. "Sacrificing is thereby the means by which one can mend the primary sacrifice: the rites...

have as their goal the reconstitution of the body of *Purusha-Prajapati*, who dispersed himself in his creation" (CTW31).

[T]he divided body of the victim is indirectly reunified by making it into an analogue of another body which is itself undivided....But the main concern of the authors of the *Brahmanas* is to show that it is in the very being of the sacrificial animal that the fragmentation resulting from its death [is] erased. [CTW173]

In the sacrificial paradox of Brahminic ritualism, the priest and the victim are brought together by the sacred violence of sacrificial killing, so that sacrificial killing is also a self-sacrifice; and by eating the dismembered body of the sacrificial victim in a sacramental meal, the sacrificers makes the victim flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood, thereby bringing them together in the recomposed body of the sacrificial victim. The *Satapatha Brahmana* 3.8.4.1ff. offers

one example among many of the identification between sacrificer and victim, or, more precisely...of the animal victim being substituted for the sacrificer.... By offering up the victim, [the sacrificer] shows that it is himself that he wishes both to offer and [to] avoid offering. Victim and sacrificer are united *nidanena*, 'by esoteric identification.'...However, identification must not be total, otherwise the sacrificer would die at the same time as the victim. [CTW171-2]

In Brahminic Vedic sacrifice, the re-composition of the dismembered body of the sacrificial victim is accomplished through its consumption by the sacrificial priests, through which the sacrificial victim is reborn as the transfigured body of the sacrificial community.

Nonetheless, as Heesterman suggests, "violent conflict and death [are] the essence of [Vedic] sacrifice," as of sacrificial ritualism *tout court*. "The important point [of the Brahminic sacred texts] is that out of the awesome violence of sacrifice...a new and unique view of the transcendent has been won. It urges man to emancipate himself from his mundane bonds and to realize the transcendent exclusively by himself and in himself" (ICT 94). Despite, or perhaps, because of, this transcendent element of sacrifice, Heesterman argues, "[t]he element of violent conflict cannot be totally eliminated" from sacrificial ritualism (ICT 94). If sacrificial violence cannot be eliminated altogether, the Brahminic sacred texts suggest, it is still the obligation of the sacrificial priests to eliminate, as far as possible, the suffering of the sacrificial victim, so that sacred violence does not recoil upon the sacrificers, to destroy

⁹ The *Apri* hymns are *Rig Veda* 1.13, I.142, I.188, II.3, II.4, V.3, VII.2, IX.5, X.70, X.110. See *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, 3 vols., transl. Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 104-5, 318-9, 393, 405-6, 472-4, 667-8, 883-5, 1239-40, 1494-5, 1576-7.

¹⁰ *The Satapatha Brahmana, According to the Text of the Madhyandina School*, transl. Julius Eggeling, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers 1990. vol. II, Bks. III & IV, pp. 162-7, 182-4, 189ff.

¹¹ Charles Malamud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, transl. David White, Delhi: Oxford University Press 1996, p. 31. [Henceforth cited as CTW]

the sacred bonds of the sacrificial community. It can then be said, as Hanns-Peter Schmidt, Herrman Tull, and Heesterman have variously argued, that the Hindu doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*) emerges from within the strict limits on sacred violence in the Brahminic Vedic sacrificial system; and sacrificial violence (*himsa*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*) are simply two sides of Vedic sacrificial ritualism.¹²

The Brahminic sacred texts also describe a sacrificial ecology of sacred gift-exchanges between gods, humans, and animals, in which all sentient creatures are performing a continuous sacrifice, and in which the priest and the victim both serve as sacred food for the sacrificial community. In Brahminic sacrificial ritualism, the sacrificer and the victim are merged in the sacred violence of sacrificial killing, because the priest and the victim eat, and are eaten by, each other; and the sacrificer, after death, also becomes sacred food for the sacrificial community. As the Brahminic lawgiver, Manu, describes it:

The Lord of Creatures fashioned all this universe to feed the breath of life, and everything moving and stationary is the food of the breath of life. Those that do not move are food for those that move, and those that have no fangs are food for those with fangs; those that have no hands are food for those with hands; and cowards are the food of the brave. The eater who eats creatures with the breath of life...does nothing bad... for the Creator himself created creatures...some to be eaten and some to be eaters.¹³

It can, of course, be objected that the Brahminic priest survives the sacrificial killing, while the victim is brutally slaughtered and dismembered to serve as sacred food for the community. But Brahminic ritualism at least attempts to eliminate the suffering of the sacrificial victim, by suffocating, instead of beheading, or slashing the throat of, the sacrificial

victim; and, in the Vedic mythos, the victim who serves as sacred food survives the sacrificial killing by a kind of transmigration, by being eaten by the sacrificers, and is finally reincarnated in the recomposed body of the sacrificial community.

In the Brahminic sacred texts, this sacrificial ecology is the paradigm for the self-perpetuating cycles of cosmic existence—of creation and destruction, of transmigration and reincarnation, and of birth, death, and rebirth—and the priest and the victim both serve as offerings to the gods of sacrifice—*Agni*, *Indra*, *Mitra*, *Varuna*, and *Rudra*, et al.—who are themselves personifications of the cosmic elements of sacrifice. "To the Vedic thinker," Heesterman observes,

the whole universe was constantly moving between the two poles—of birth and death, integration and disintegration, ascension and descent—which by their interaction occasion the cyclic rhythm of the cosmos.

"*La vie du sacrifice est donc une série infinie de morts et de naissances*," as [Sylvain] Lévi concluded. They are the two poles of cosmic life, and the sacrificer... performs through the sacrifice the cyclical rhythm of the universe in a series of deaths and births.¹⁴

The primordial sacrificial victim, who is also the primal macrocosmic human, *Purusha*, and the primordial god of sacrifice, *Prajapati*, who is dismembered and recomposed to create the whole cosmos, are simply incarnations or avatars of the cosmic substance—*brahman* or *atman*—which is continuously sacrificed, and continuously reborn, through the mysterious agency of sacrifice.

In this sacrificial ecology of sacred gift-exchanges between all worldly creatures, sacrificial violence is seen as a strictly inevitable, if not necessary, element of the cosmic cycles, since even if the sacrificial offering is a vegetable substance, like a rice cake, there is still a certain violence involved in the cultivation, harvesting, cooking, and eating of the rice; and, in contemporary versions of the Brahminic Vedic sacrificial rituals, where a vegetable offering is substituted for the animal, it is shaped like the body of a sacrificial beast and sacrificed as if it were an animal victim. "When the rice cake is offered," the *Aitareya Brahmana* proclaims, "it is indeed a *pashu* [Sanskrit for "sacrificial animal"] which is offered up. Its stringy chaff, that is the hair; its husk is the skin; the flour is the blood; the small grains are the flesh;

¹² Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "The Origin of Ahimsa," in *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Louis Renou, Paris: Editions E. de Boccard 1968, pp. 625-655; J.C. Heesterman, "Non-Violence and Sacrifice," *Indologica Taurinensia* XII (1984), 119-127; Herman W. Tull, "The Killing That Is Not Killing: Men, Cattle, and the Origins of Non-Violence (Ahimsa) in the Vedic Sacrifice," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 39/3 (July 1996), 223-244.

¹³ *The Laws of Manu* 5.28-30, cited in Wendy Doniger, "The Ambivalence of Ahimsa," in *On Hinduism*, Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 409-425, here p. 421. [Henceforth cited as AOA]

¹⁴ Johannes C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rajasuya Described According to the Yajus Texts*, 's-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co. 1957, p. 6.

[and] whatever is the best part...is the bone."¹⁵ Doniger adds,

Nowadays, the Brahminic priest often sacrifices a goat made of dough and papier-mâché....When a Vedic sacrifice was recently performed in India...rice cakes alone were used. But the rice cakes were wrapped in leaves, tied to little leashes, and carefully suffocated before they were offered. [AOA 425]

As Heesterman concludes,

it might be argued that vegetal offerings, unlike animal sacrifice, do not require killing. On this point...the ancient Indian texts leave no room for doubt. The pressing of the soma stalks, the killing and cutting up of the animal victim, and the grinding of the grain are all equally killing, and, to drive the point home, the text uses the verb, *anti*, to slay, to kill.¹⁶

The Brahminic sacred texts are clear: the sacred violence of sacrificial killing cannot simply be eliminated by the sublimation of sacrifice in Western Indo-European sacrificial cultures.

Given that a certain element of violence is inherent in worldly existence, and if sacrificial killing necessarily involves the suffering, pain, and death of the sacrificial victim, whether vegetable, animal, or human, it is nevertheless strictly necessary to minimize or eliminate the suffering of the victim. Doniger has pointed out the hypocrisy of the Brahminic sacrificial system, especially the *Laws of Manu*, which attempt, with considerable categorical confusion and taxonomic disarray, to prescribe strict rules to define which sacrificial victims are suitable as sacred food, and which, for supposed sanitary and dietary reasons, are distinctly not. As Doniger concludes,

Clearly the ambivalence of *ahimsa* has...never been resolved. Every human and every animal dies, every human and every animal must eat, and eating requires that someone or something...must die.... The ambivalence toward the killing of the animal... is another manifestation of...the basic paradox, at the heart of all sacrifice: one must kill to live. [AOA 425]

What Doniger's conclusion fails to state is that if one must kill to live, that killing does not have to be

performed with sadistic cruelty toward the sacrificial victim, but must be carried out with the strictest minimum of violence, to eliminate, as far as possible, the suffering of the victim. The conclusion that can be drawn from the above discussion is that instead of attempting to impose strict moral absolutes upon the ambivalent business of sacrificial killing, it is important to recognize that sacrificial killing and its sacred violence appear to be insuperable elements of worldly human existence, which ultimately cannot be eliminated without also eliminating worldly existence itself, and without endangering the sacrificial ecology upon which all creatures depend to support worldly life upon the planet earth. And that is also why the Brahminic doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*) is a paradoxical supplement to the sacred violence (*himsa*) of sacrificial killing, and why the sublimation of sacrifice has been a necessary complement of the spiritual and moral evolution of the human species, from the earliest emergence of early modern human societies, until the Kali Yuga—or, at least, until the world-historical discontinuity or epistemic break, which, two thousand years ago, inaugurated Western European modernity.

Following from this thesis, I argue that sacrificial killing and its sacred violence are contemporaneous with the hominization of the early modern human species in distant prehistory, when a catastrophic change¹⁷ in the African climate-and-habitat zone compelled the pre-human hominids to compete with predatory beasts by killing wild animals, simply to survive, resulting in a stigmatizing shock to the early human psyche, that has been categorized by Sigmund Freud as the primal trauma or death wish within the collective subconscious of contemporary humans. This change in the African climate-and-habitat zone along with the shock of adopting predatory killing were then compensated by the invention of sacrificial ritualism, which prevented sacrificial killing from recoiling upon the early modern human community. The adoption of predatory killing also spurred the invention of weaponry, and, in turn, the invention of warfare, when those weapons were turned against other early modern human beings. Sacrifice and

¹⁵ *The Aitareya Brahmana*, 1.8-9, cited in AOA 220.

¹⁶ Johannes C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1993, p. 9. [Henceforth cited as *BWS*]

¹⁷ I use "catastrophic" here in the strictly technical sense. Catastrophism in biology and geology is the theory that evolutionary or metamorphic change takes place suddenly, during brief periods of abrupt, violent events—extinction events, ice ages, volcanic eruptions—rather than gradually or incrementally over long periods, as argued by the opposing theory, called gradualism.

warfare are thus intimately interconnected within the subconscious of the evolving human species. Although there were certainly world-historical discontinuities in the evolution of sacrifice during the several thousand years of Western Indo-European civilization(s), there is also, more importantly, a virtually continuous trajectory of world-historical change described by the sublimation of sacrifice from the earliest origins of the early modern human species in the hunting-and-gathering societies of the Upper Paleolithic (ca. 40,000-15,000 BCE), through the domestication of animals and the invention of agriculture in the Neolithic period (ca. 12,000-3,000 BCE), and into Karl Jaspers' Axial Period (800-200 BCE), which is a transitional phase in the more complete transformation of sacrificial ritualism into the self-sacrificial disciplines of Western Indo-European modern cultures. This successive transformation of Western Indo-European sacrificial cultures by the sublimation of sacrifice is then clearly evident in the emergence of Upanishadic Hinduism in Ancient India (ca. 500 BCE), in Plato's description of the death of Socrates in Classic Greece (399 BCE), in the Christian gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Christ in Roman-occupied Palestine (ca. 30) and, finally, in the emergence of Early Christianity and Post-Second Temple Judaism (ca. 100-300) in the Western European modern period.

What takes place, during this perhaps 50,000 year-long period, is the sublimation of sacrificial killing and its sacred violence, which begins with the Paleolithic hunting rituals of Central Asian shamans and Old Stone Age hunter-gatherers, emerging from the killing, butchery, and eating of wild game animals, and continues through the specifically ritualized sacrifices and sacred initiation rites of Neolithic pastoralist and agriculturalist societies, in which wild game animals are replaced by domesticated species, finally culminating in the sophisticated rituals of the Western Indo-European sacrificial cultures, from which, in turn, the self-sacrificial disciplines of prayer, meditation, and asceticism emerge, in Upanishadic Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, in Pythagoreanism and Orphicism, in the Hebrew prophets, and in Early Christianity. This 50,000 year-long process of the sublimation of sacrifice is then also recapitulated in each sacrificial ritual of the Western Indo-European religions, which self-consciously repeat, in strictly ritualized form, the domestication of fire, the killing of domestic animals, and the sharing of sacred food as a covenant between the sacrificial priests and the community; and the sublimation of sacrifice continues, comparatively unbroken by world-historical

discontinuities, into the self-conscious invention of the specifically modern political and religious institutions of Western European Christian civilization.

But it is not this Western Indo-European paradigm of the sublimation of sacrifice that is a problem for contemporary humanity; nor is the world-historical dialectic of the sublimation of sacrifice something to be deprecated, as simply another product of the "economism and sexism" of a "Christo-centric" Western European culture.¹⁸ It is, instead, the de-sacralization of sacrifice, and the de-sublimation of sacred violence, which began with the Protestant Reformation, the wars of religion, and the bourgeois social revolutions in France, Russia, Germany, and elsewhere, reaching a peak in the twentieth century political movements of communism and fascism, in which sacred violence was reduced by all warring parties to the wholesale slaughter of human beings during World War II. Sacrificial killing did not disappear from these post-sacrificial societies, but returned, in the most grotesquely de-sublimated forms, to haunt Western European societies in the twenty-first century international war on terror. The sacrificial killings of apostates, infidels, and non-believers by Muslim *mujihadeen* terrorists and Islamist suicide bombers then appear as simply violent responses to the un-sacrificial violence of the Western European and Anglo-American worlds, with their virtually unchallengeable weapons of mass destruction. As Jaspers observes:

The decisive borderline is this: combat has ceased to be combat when you push a button to launch an engine of death against which there is no defense. The killer stops being a soldier, so does his victim.¹⁹

Jaspers also points out that "resistance to overwhelming power is suicide" (FOM 48). The de-sacralization of sacrificial killing then predictably provokes the diametrically opposite response to the monopoly on un-sacred violence claimed by Western European postmodern societies: the self-sacrificial martyrdom of the Muslim *mujihadeen* terrorist or Islamist suicide bomber, which represents a futile attempt to restore the sacred element of sacrificial violence

¹⁸ Dennis King Keenan, *The Question of Sacrifice*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2005, pp. 10-32, *passim*.

¹⁹ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1961, p. 47, 48. [Henceforth cited as FOM]

characteristic of the Abrahamic religions. In radical Islam, specifically, the sacrificial violence of holy war (*jihad*), is associated with the seventh-century Muslim conquests of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and North Africa, resulting in the establishment, some fourteen hundred years ago, of the Rashidun Caliphate which was the distant, obsolescent precursor of the twenty-first century Islamic State.

The major problem with this critical description of the 50,000 year-long emergence of Western Indo-European civilization(s) from the sublimation of sacrificial violence is not that sacred violence is increasingly sublimated into sacrificial ritualism and its secularized rites, and routinized and codified in the sacred laws and secular institutions of Western European modern societies. Instead, the major problem is that this sublimation of sacrificial violence is predicated upon the repression of that sacred violence, which, predictably, builds up within the collective subconscious of the sublimated-and-repressed members of those Western European societies, until it breaks out in a return of the repressed, symptomatized by the catastrophic world wars of twentieth century world history. This crypto-Freudian return of repressed sacrificial violence might then simply serve to remind the contemporary theorist that sacrificial violence is still a subconscious evolutionary legacy in the twenty-first century post-modern world.

I find it somewhat disappointing that Jaspers did not address in more detail the horrors of World War II in his *The Origin and Goal of History*, but only devoted a few sentences to the condemnation of the war crimes, atrocities, and genocide committed by Nazi Germany (and by Stalinist Russia). And in the "Sacrifice" chapter of *The Future of Mankind*, Jaspers barely devotes one fragmentary sentence to the mass extermination in German death camps when he writes,

The new inhumanity lies in this prospect: once combat is replaced by machinery, the victim cannot fight back, and the killer kills mechanically, without endangering himself in the moment of execution and without perceiving the act of killing as such, whether he is launching missiles that gut cities and will kill millions over thousands of miles or turning a handle to let gas stream into the chambers where hundreds are to die.
[FOM 52-3]

After Auschwitz, un-sacrificial killing has become simply wholesale mass slaughter, stripped of the slightest vestiges of sacred violence; and the sacred covenant between priest and victim has been replaced by

the semi-automatic, remote-control killing characteristic of post-modern warfare. Auschwitz death, I argue, is the absolute de-sublimation of sacrificial killing, which ironically stands at the culmination of the sublimation of sacrifice in Western European cultures.

Jaspers' inability to deal significantly with the Holocaust (or Shoah),²⁰ like the conspicuous silence of Western European intellectuals at large when faced by the sheer enormity of these horrendous crimes, is arguably an effect of the censorship and repression of sacred violence in Western European cultures, which has made it difficult to speak of sacrificial violence, except in the stigmatizing terms of schizophrenia and psychopathology; or to speak of sacrifice at all, except as an obsolete relic of a primitive, barbaric, savage world, which has been eliminated from the sublimated world of twenty-first century post-modern cultures. Yet, this sublimation of sacrifice apparently has not eliminated the un-sacrificial killing of wild and domestic animals for pleasure, sport, or food, and has also not eliminated the un-sacrificial slaughter of innocent civilians and victimized human beings, especially in the counter-terrorist and terrorist attacks that are a conspicuous feature of the twenty-first century international war on terror. And the sublimation of sacrifice in Western European post-sacrificial cultures is still shadowed by the specter of the return of the repressed sublimated sacrificial violence, whether through nuclear warfare or simply through conventional warfare between the three or four superpowers, which present a far greater threat to the survival of the human species than the sophisticated sacrificial ritualism of the Brahminic Vedic priests, which, in my opinion, successfully sublimated sacred violence into sacrificial ritualism to prevent sacrificial violence from recoiling upon the community.

There is a certain resistance to speaking of the Holocaust (Shoah) in the sacrilegious terms of sacrificial violence, as if to speak of the Holocaust in terms of sacrifice were somehow to justify or excuse those crimes and atrocities. But it is now widely accepted to refer to those events by the terms, Holocaust or Shoah, drawn from the sacrificial culture of those who suffered

²⁰ The difference between the Nazi Holocaust and the Jewish Shoah, as I understand it, is the difference between the self-destruction and mass extermination of Germany and the Jews, conceived from a German standpoint, and, arguably, rationalized as a sacrifice, and the mass murder of the Jews, conceived from a Jewish standpoint, as simply a catastrophe that is cannot be spiritualized or rationalized as a self-sacrifice.

most from those atrocities and horrors. The Auschwitz survivor, Elie Wiesel, has claimed to be "among the first, if not the first," to use [Holocaust] in that context,²¹ and, as Roy H. Shoeman observes, "[w]hen he did so, he was making explicit reference to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, recounted in Genesis," and to the Ancient Israelite sacrifice of the whole burnt offering (Hebrew: *olah*), from which the word, holocaust, is derived.²² But in "The Jews Did Not Want Burnt Offerings," Ernst Ehrlich argues against applying the term "holocaust" to the Auschwitz war crimes.²³ Instead, Ehrlich proposes the Hebrew word, *shoah*, (calamity or disaster), as the appropriate term to designate the catastrophe, citing its usage in Isaiah 47:6-11 (*SFJ* 170-1).

Following from this anti-sacrificial position, Giorgio Agamben argues that "the term *so'ah*, which means 'devastation, catastrophe,' and, in the Bible, often implies the idea of a divine punishment...contains no mockery. In the case of the term, 'holocaust,' by contrast, the attempt to establish a connection...between Auschwitz and the Biblical *olah*...cannot but sound like a jest"²⁴—and a bad joke at that, since, in Agamben's view, there is nothing sacrificial about Auschwitz death. "The only way you can make a 'beautiful death'" — that is, a sacrificial death — "out of 'Auschwitz' death," Jean-Francois Lyotard argues, "is by means of a rhetoric," which defames and desecrates the suffering of the victims it means to sacralize.²⁵ And finally, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe concludes: "I [have] argued that there is not the least 'sacrificial' aspect to the operation of Auschwitz." But he then adds:

Now, reconsidering the question, I wonder, whether in fact, at a quite other level, which would force us at

²¹ Elie Wiesel interview June 29, 1996, Sun Valley, Idaho, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/wie0int-1>

²² Roy H. Shoeman, *Salvation is from the Jews: The Role of Judaism in Salvation from Abraham to the Second Coming*, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press 2004, p. 170. [Henceforth cited as *SFJ*]

²³ Shoeman takes this information from Waltraud Herbstrith, *Never Forget: Christian and Jewish Perspectives on Edith Stein*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications 1998, pp. 129-30.

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York, NY: Zone Books 1999, p. 31.

²⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, transl. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1988, p. 109.

least to rework the anthropological notion of sacrifice, one should not speak of sacrifice.²⁶

Against this anti-sacrificial argument, I suggest that the attempt to eliminate the sacrificial interpretation of the Holocaust itself partakes of the Nazi attempt to desecrate or desacralize the Jewish and Christian religions, with their strong emphasis on the sacrificial element of worldly existence, and risks becoming an attempt to censor or silence mention of this atrocity. The anti-sacrificial argument also blocks the efforts of Holocaust survivors to heal their severely traumatic experiences by re-casting these events in explicitly sacrificial terms, thereby restoring their specifically spiritual or religious dimensions.

There is, of course, something offensive, and even morally repugnant, in the un-thinkable notion that the self-destructive specters of thermonuclear annihilation which haunt the contemporary human species might somehow be exorcised by the sacrifice of substitute victims, or that the continued escalation of counter-terrorist and terrorist violence might somehow be de-escalated by sacrificial killing, since these implausible solutions would simply contribute to the current problem, even if they also served to expose the survival of sacrificial violence within the collective subconscious of the contemporary humans species. But it is also clear that if contemporary humanity is to survive upon the planet earth without either depleting the whole earth's biosphere beyond its ability to sustain life, degrading what habitat remains for non-human species in the biosphere reserves and wildlife preserves of the vanishing natural world, extinguishing the few scattered remnants of the world's endangered species, or simply destroying itself with its suicidal weapons of mass destruction, contemporary humanity will have to find a solution to the problem of sacrificial violence, which, instead of being somehow superseded by the sublimation of sacrifice, has proliferated out of all proportion, and now threatens to exterminate biological life itself, along with the human species, from the endangered planet earth.

Jaspers observes that

[t]he basic situation of all living things — that they devour one another, defend themselves, and escape; that within a species there is contention for mates, for food, for power; that the Hindu 'law of the fish'

²⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, transl. Chris Turner, Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell 1990, p. 52.

prevails, and the big ones eat the little ones — all this recurs in the case of man. But man builds a dam against force. He tries...to channelize it (*FOM* 31);

and by sublimating sacrificial violence, humanity attempts to solve the problem of post-sacrificial warfare. But force, according to Jaspers, "cannot be eliminated from human existence; it would be absent only from a kingdom of angels" (*FOM* 31). Force undoubtedly persists within the contemporary international world-system, as the threat of a supremely un-sacrificial violence, wielded by the superpower states against each other and against the smaller states. As Jaspers pertinently raises the problems confronting contemporary humankind, through the proliferation of its weapons of mass destruction, it becomes clear that the problem of post-sacrificial warfare is even deeper. The twenty-first century international war on terror, with its self-sacrificial martyrdoms and push-button drone strikes, with its asymmetrical terrorist and counter-terrorist attacks, and with its excessive costs in the collateral damage of civilian casualties, has shown that Jaspers' dream of a new soldier with suprapolitical qualities of "self-sacrifice, reliability, chivalry...[and] a courageous approach to life" (*FOM* 55) has, regrettably, not materialized in the contemporary theater of war.

In Western Indo-European cultures, I have argued, the sublimation of sacrifice has provided a method of dealing with the shocking trauma of un-

sacrificial killing and the sacred violence of un-holy war, and has also provided a spiritual paradigm that condemns the physical violence of sacrificial killing, and, instead, promotes compassion and sympathy for the sacrificial victims. After World War II and the Cold War thermonuclear arms race, the un-sacrificial violence of the Western European world, with its self-destructive weapons of mass destruction, can no longer be contained within the strict limits of sublimated sacrificial rituals, but has escalated out of the control of the contemporary world-system. The sacrificial violence of the Muslim *mujihadeen* terrorists and Islamist suicide bombers cannot be appeased by self-sacrificial martyrdoms, or by the scarcely ritualized killing of substitute sacrificial victims, but simply fuels the self-perpetuating cycle of escalating violence which drives the international war on terror. But the Brahminic sacred texts, which describe a sophisticated ritual system that once served to sublimate sacrificial violence into more creative, higher forms, and to establish an equilibrium between the sacrificial community and the sacred ecology might still suggest methods of successfully sublimating the un-sacrificial violence of twenty-first century post-sacrificial cultures, and might therefore help contemporary humanity to survive the future centuries of their worldly existence upon the endangered planet earth.