THE AUTHORITY OF THE SACRED VICTIM

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Abstract: *Suffering can make sacred, so it may partly be nature, and not culture alone, that leads us to apprehend a sacred aspect in victims of oppression. Those who recognize this sacredness show piety—a special form of respect—toward members of oppressed groups. The result is a system of social constructions often dismissed as "identity politics." This essay starts with an analysis of the intentionality of piety and sacredness and how they relate to suffering, sacrifice, sanctions, pollution, and purification. It then argues that the sacralization of oppressed groups is an expression of the perennial human disposition to acknowledge sacredness and to respond piously. The essay then analyzes this sacred status as socially constructed. Based on the sacred-making (that is, "sacrificial") power of suffering, the sacred status elicits piety, gives its bearers special authority, surrounds them with sanctions, and calls for symbolic sacrificial punishments of the impious. By dissecting sacrificial politics as a system of social constructions, we see that, although the oppressed groups are made sacred, certain people in the oppressor groups—"the Pious"—continue to exercise fundamental power. This essay, by displaying the inner logic of this cultural phenomenon, helps us both to sympathize with and to critique the system and then to pose questions about what good or bad the system might be doing.*

KEY WORDS: identity politics, social constructions, sacred, sacrifice, oppression, privilege, intersectionality, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, social ontology, feminist philosophy

> We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain.
>
> bell hooks

> For while we love both the truth and our friends, it is a sacred thing to give the higher honor to the truth.
>
> Aristotle

"Identity politics" is a worn-out phrase, a corpse of a meaning. From the mouths of its enemies, it has come to mean engaging in politics tribally, to benefit one's demographic group. In the eyes of its practitioners, it means advocating equal rights and respect. Because these two ideas are pretty much opposites, the phrase has become too vague, less useful.

This essay is, instead, about a phenomenon often dismissed as identity politics, lumped in with things quite different from it. What I'll call "sacrificial politics" is a symbolic system driven by piety for those who have suffered sociopolitical oppression. It is not marked by selfish concern for one's own group, nor does it establish equal rights and respect.

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> Hypothesis: Demographic categories that have been oppressed inspire piety—that is, they take on the aspect of sacredness—by virtue of the suffering of their members.

Belief in the sacred, naturally, has consequences: when people apprehend something as sacred, they respond by developing ways to express their piety.

> Corollary 1: Members of the oppressed category by default receive Sacred status, which carries special authority and ideological obligations and is surrounded by rules for proper treatment.
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> Corollary 2: Members of the oppressor category by default receive Polluted status, which cannot be overcome completely, but can be mitigated through piety and sacrifices.
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> Corollary 3: Disagreeing with Sacred authority is impious.
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> Corollary 4: People who violate the Sacred are to be sacrificed.

The argument of this essay is structured as follows: The first section presents the fundamentals of sacredness and its relationship to sanctions, sacrifice, suffering, piety, pollution, and purification. Section II argues that those fundamentals are present in sacrificial politics. In other words, the evidence for my hypothesis is that the characteristic features of sacred systems are found in this system. Section III provides auxiliary evidence by exploring the logic behind sacralizing oppressed groups—it makes some sense, it's intelligible. Section IV articulates the structures of authority and representation accompanying Sacred status, preparing us in Section V to lay out the nuts and bolts of sacrificial politics as a system of social constructions.

Understanding is a prerequisite of approval and of criticism, and understanding of human things requires sympathy. This essay aims at understanding. Though I focus here on describing rather than evaluating, I do not pretend neutrality. The analysis is not value-free. It is ambivalent. That doesn't mean, "indifferent" or "apathetic." Mine is a passionate ambivalence. I'm convinced that this system—like many sacred systems—has done serious good, but not without drawbacks. I hope to lay out the system as I think it is operating so that we are better positioned to evaluate its benefits and its costs.

I. Preliminaries: The Intentionality of Piety and Sacredness

The sacred, the profane, piety, pollution, purification, sanctions, sacrifice, and suffering form a family of concepts naturally related to each other, with sacredness at the center. The sacred shows up across cultures and in a great variety of beliefs and practices. There is no use in looking for a thick unified

account, as though all men honor the same thing. Our greatest diversity arises from the variety of things we hold sacred. Still, commonalities, motifs, and parallels sprout up perennially.

To be sacred is to be set apart, distinguished from profane things. But people do not simply set the sacred *apart*, as in "to the side," and they don't arbitrarily select things to be set apart.[1] People set something *up* as sacred because they think it is incommensurably, ontologically higher than profane things. A thing may inherently possess this elevated way of being, or it may acquire it by undergoing something or by being connected to or infused with something else that has it.

The sacred's superior way of being requires that a sacred thing not be treated like other things. It naturally produces prohibitions and accrues sanctions—a sanction being what surrounds and protects the sacred from profane treatment.[2] The sanctions preventing us from handling or interrogating the sacred reinforce the sense of mystery it possesses for us as something above us. When someone recognizes something as sacred, she will act differently toward it. The normal rules of prudence do not apply. It isn't right to sell it, for example, or to make jokes about it or to push for proof. Because piety suspends the normal rules of prudence, outsiders will often view acts of piety as foolish or unreasonable. The setting apart, the self-limitation imposed by piety, this refraining from treating the sacred like a normal thing, is already a form of sacrifice.

The sacred calls for sacrifice, which is an offering to or for the sacred, motivated by piety, generally seeking communion or harmony with it.[3]

[1] Émile Durkheim defines the sacred as what is "set apart" by a community from its complementary category, the profane. This would make the sacred and profane symmetrically set apart from each other, parallel domains. For Durkheim, the sacred exists to serve social unity and organization—the maintenance of a church (Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1915], trans. Joseph Swain [London: Geo. Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1964]). Instead, in my account, *the consciousness of sacredness apprehends (whether rightly or wrongly) the sacred thing as possessing a higher ontological status.* It is this apprehended quality, and not the effect of social organization, that defines the sacred. A similar comment should be made about René Girard's theory, heir to Durkheim's, that the sacred essentially functions to protect a community from spirals of mimetic violence; for Girard, beginning with a hydraulic theory of human violence, sacrifice is a cathartic safety valve that produces sacredness to contain violence (*Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977]). Both theories reduce sacredness to a profane social effect reconnoitered by the theorist. Instead, sacredness resists definition by profane purposes. This does not preclude impious people from using what others hold sacred in all manner of ways. This also does not prevent the sacred from being incidentally beneficial for solidarity and peace and for the organization of social statuses, and it does not prevent beliefs and practices related to the sacred from spreading and surviving because of such incidental benefits (as in natural selection). We should not, however, let incidental properties into a definition (the featherless biped fallacy).

[2] On the Latin terms *sacer* and *sanctus*, see Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Coral Gables, Fl.: University of Miami Press, 1973), bk. VI, chap. 1. While both are translated as *sacred* or *holy*, the *sanctus* becomes so because it protects the *sacer*.

[3] I here follow, with adjustment, the features of sacrifice articulated by Louis Dupré in "The Structure and Meaning of Sacrifice: from Marcel Mauss to René Girard," *Archivio di Filosofia* 76, no. 1/2 (2008): 253–59.

The sacrificer expresses piety by giving something up and over to the sacred. It is part of the structure of piety, which is our consciousness of the sacred, to be willing to sacrifice for it. Forms of the practice are found globally. Things sacrificed may include, for example, money to a temple, portions of the harvest, bread and wine, animals, or people. Humans sacrificed might be slaves, prisoners of war, women, children, criminals, foreigners—or not. They may be innocent, or not; eaten, or not. There's lots of variety, but sacrifice is a perennial phenomenon.

A sacrifice fly in American baseball, like sacrificing a pawn in chess, is not a sacrifice but a strategy. We give up one thing to gain some other profane thing more desired by ourselves. The attitude operating is not piety but mundane prudence. Nevertheless, the lowest levels of what people call "piety" shade into strategy, for example in *quid pro quo* petitionary prayers looking to trade favors with God, or in sacrifices meant to assuage some mysterious and terrifying power toward which one feels dread but no devotion.

Piety proper is deontological, a duty to the sacred. It seeks to honor the sacred purely for itself, because we are supposed to. And because piety is a form of love, it rejoices in and seeks to commune with the sacred, to get close to it, even while respecting—perhaps fearing—the sacred's superiority. Knowing its inferiority, forbidden to touch yet yearning to be close, piety produces the dual impulses to clean up and to kiss up. There are often cleansing rituals to prepare us to be more worthy of the presence of the sacred (examples: the Jewish *mikvah*, the Catholic priest's *lavabo*, the Eastern Orthodox confession before divine liturgy, removing shoes and washing hands before entering a Hindu temple, putting on one's "Sunday best"). Those sacrifices that purify by offering a gift unite the cleaning-up and kissing-up behaviors.

The cleaning-up and kissing-up impulses are especially strong after some transgression, which produces a pollution we seek to cleanse. Sometimes the violator of the sacred incurs a curse, a severe pollution, and this curse can be communal or contagious.[4] One way sacrifice can work is that the sacrificer uses the sacrificed thing to represent herself or her community, such that the sacrifice at once reenacts the guilt and symbolizes the punishment, leaving the sacrificer (or her community) purged and reconciled. This, too, could be performed in a merely prudent mode, using the sacred for our own profane purposes, to protect ourselves from punishment or to make ourselves feel better. It can also be an expression of genuine piety.

In a blood sacrifice, superficially it seems as though the action happens to the victim—to the animal or person killed. In fact, as pointed out by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, the change sought happens to the sacrificer (or to

[4] That is, offense against the sacred/set apart/untouchable might render a person cursed/excluded/untouchable, putting the violator in something like a negatively charged version of the sacred state. (The Latin for "sacred," *sacer*, can also mean "cursed.")

the person or community on whose behalf she acts). The action changes the sacrificer's moral condition or status vis à vis the sacred. By signifying a certain relation to the sacred, sacrifice can also change the sacrificer's sense of her moral identity, and when public, a sacrifice can affect the community's view of the sacrificer. Thus, sacrifice can be used as a powerful social signal. Perhaps public sacrifices, not just primitively but perennially, serve as a naturally understood *lingua franca* for displaying moral identity.[5]

There is always a risk in piety. The shadow of profane strategy dogs sacrifice everywhere. If we get beyond exchange, flattery, propitiation, and assuaging our guilty feelings, the sacrifice may be done out of dutiful devotion to something we see as higher, or it may be done out of our underlying desire to protect our moral identity or to elevate our own social status—to be counted as one of the pious.

One final point: sacrifice vividly shows the natural connection between suffering and sacredness. The sacred calls for suffering on its behalf, and the connection also runs the other way: suffering can render something sacred. "Sacrifice" means just that, "to make sacred." One version of the idea seems to be that in being destroyed the sacrificed thing becomes property of the sacred to which it is given, and thus sacred itself. Likewise, we are familiar with tales in which a person becomes holy by a great struggle or pilgrimage, overcoming obstacles and proving her devotion, acquiring wisdom, even becoming a new person and perhaps acquiring a new name, her old self destroyed. This classic and universal narrative is parallel to that of the blood sacrifice.

Leaving behind ritual sacrifices and legends of holy pilgrimages, the idea that suffering makes sacred possesses commonsense cache. We have all experienced how suffering transforms us. It is our best and most brutal teacher.

Sometimes people who undergo suffering get distorted or damaged, with no recovery or rebirth. Suffering is not some automatic ticket to maturity. It can have the opposite effect, hardening the person, killing trust, incubating animus, making the person narrower and baser, filling her with resentment, prejudice, and vengeance. Suffering can cause a self-justifying desperation that elicits the worst injustice from people. Trauma's first effect on perception is distortion, lack of proportion.

But suffering is necessary to maturity. And, by some wonderful jujitsu power of the soul, almost any type *can* be used by a person for her own good, making her wiser, more mindful, more compassionate, and more discerning about others, if it is passed through and processed well. The paradox is that suffering—precisely by humbling us, destroying us, charting our limits, undermining our misplaced confidences and priorities—contains a power to elevate us. This inherent ambiguity of suffering finds a parallel in

[5] I thank Allen Buchanan for this point.

"blessed," which means *wounded* or *bloodied.* Suffering is—rather, it can be—wisdom-bestowing, identity-transforming, and sacred-making.

This section has emphasized that human beings show a perennial disposition to recognize some things as sacred—set apart, ontologically elevated, and calling for special treatment. It has mapped the constellation of concepts centered around the sacred, and it has flagged certain difficulties as intrinsic to sacred systems: namely, the tension between genuine piety and self-serving pious show, as well as the tension between piety and prudence. The essay will now argue that this perennial disposition is playing out in a contemporary set of practices responding to oppression and oppressed groups. If this is so, we should be able to map this constellation—sacred, sanctions, suffering, sacrifice, piety, pollution, and purification—onto these practices. We should also expect to find in these practices the tensions related to piety, pious show, and prudence.

II. A Sacred System

The idea of sacrificial politics is that, as a result of the authority-bestowing, identity-transforming, and sacred-making suffering of their members, oppressed demographic categories have an elevated way of being that elicits, or should elicit, piety.

Sacrificial politics is a system of interlocking socially constructed statuses conferred on people according to their memberships in oppressed or oppressor categories. The system is both functional and meaningful. That is, the statuses are tools by which those around us bestow rights and responsibilities on us, and also the statuses communicate something about us, about who we are, what we deserve, and why we deserve it.

Social constructions come in many types—for instance, economic institutions, political regimes, gender roles, games. Sacrificial politics is a system of social constructions *of the sacred type.* That is, the center of the system is something held sacred. From that center radiates the other aspects of the system—the other socially constructed roles, in addition to the rules and patterns of interaction between those roles. The system begins when there is a recognition of sacredness and the attempt to respond to it piously. (Note that, like spirituality, a sense of the sacred does not require a religious system or belief in the divine.)

It may be helpful to picture this as a game with three or so key positions. We begin with the legacy of some sociopolitical oppression, such that we naturally recognize certain individuals as members of mistreated groups. Examples of such categories include black, female, gay, trans, and so on. Correlative to these are the categories responsible for the mistreatment—for example, white, male, straight, and cis. The legacy of that oppression is like the board the game of sacrificial politics is played on.

The players of the game interact based on perceiving themselves and each other as symbolizing their respective oppressed or oppressor demographic

categories. That is to say, in social settings, sometimes the game is being played, and sometimes it isn't. We may feel free from it, and then abruptly the situation engages the issues and people fall into position. When it is being played, the players are aware of their own and each other's classifications in these categories as salient. They perceive each other symbolically as the oppressed or oppressors. The system builds on these classifications, but it gives them a new interpretation. Here is the defining dichotomy of the game (we will discover sub-positions as we go along):

(A) The Sacred: Members of a demographic category that has been oppressed.
(B) The Polluted: Members of the correlative oppressor category.

These are new statuses overlaid on old facts. (Titles of statuses within the system will be capitalized.)

The game begins, first, when some members of the oppressor category look at members of the oppressed category as set apart, elevated, and surrounded by special rules, not to be treated like other people. That is, they look at members of the oppressed category with *piety.* This subgroup of the Polluted—often called "allies," we will call them "the Pious"—feel humble, gazing with a sense of mystery at the suffering they imagine the oppressed bear merely for being themselves. This feeling is intentionally cultivated, as the Polluted are commonly reminded that they "cannot understand what it is like to be" a member of an oppressed group.

Second, this reverential look causes the members of the oppressed category to be actually surrounded with special rules and practices and given protective places ("safe spaces," like sanctuaries or sacristies). That is, they become functionally *sacred*, shrouded with a sense of authoritative mystery, and shielded by *sanctions*.[6] For example, disagreement is offensive: one should listen, not argue. "Cultural appropriation" provides another example: people from an oppressor group should not take practices (for example, clothes, hats, food, celebrations, lingo, music) from the culture of an oppressed group. Likewise, an actor playing a person from an oppressed category should herself be a member of that category, and fiction authors from privileged categories should not write characters of oppressed categories. The claim is not that there is something wrong with cultural borrowing, acting, or fiction writing. Here is the clue that sacredness is involved: the rule does not apply in reverse. It is a common feature of sacred systems that profane people are not permitted to touch sacred things.

Third, this piety toward oppressed categories is accompanied by a feeling of communal shame, a feeling of being contaminated because of one's

[6] To say that the Pious have apprehended something as sacred and constructed a system of statuses in response is not to criticize or insult them. On the contrary, it is an insult to say a person holds nothing sacred.

demographic membership and especially because of the actions of other people in one's category. That is, piety toward oppressed groups is accompanied by a felt *pollution.* To mark that feeling of being polluted, we use the word "privilege."[7] Sacrificial politics interprets being in the oppressor category as a condition of ignorance, unfairness, and guilt, as is shown by ordinary speech—individuals are told to "check" their privilege when talking and to "examine" privilege as one examines a conscience, and the Pious sometimes "confess" their privilege. No amount of playing by the rules, suffering other injustices, or not benefitting from the oppression are enough to exempt a white/male/straight/cis individual from the accusation of privilege, with its connotations of being sheltered, unworthy, and complicit. Because this condition is attributed to everyone in the oppressor group, it is plausible to think of this as a form of pollution. Pollution spreads. It contaminates groups. It's nothing so personal as privilege. One's whole category is stained and in need of expiation (regardless of one's actual advantages and disadvantages in life).

Fourth, piety toward the oppressed categories evokes cleaning-up and kissing-up impulses, and thus the Pious engage in *sacrifices.* Some of these are gift sacrifices or abstentions akin to fasting or Lenten sacrifices, by which a person refrains from enjoying something in order to participate in the suffering of the Sacred, thus purifying herself. The Pious express devotion to the Sacred by showing special courtesies, giving things up, and keeping themselves clean by avoiding benefits correlated with privilege. For example, in a political situation in which gays cannot marry, a Pious straight person might refrain from marrying.

Some of the sacrifices utilize symbolic substitutional victims. When a Polluted person violates the sacred by saying a wrong thing, or supporting

[7] "Privilege" talk is ambiguous. In its more precise usage in the scholarly literature, "privilege" names the inverse of oppression possessed—of necessity—by the non-oppressed. Namely, the non-oppressed in a context of oppression are spared certain injustices; statistically face certain decreased risks and increased chances of goods; likely receive indirect benefits resulting from others' diminishment (especially in the case of zero-sum and positional goods); can afford to be insouciant about the oppression; and may possess a prerogative to mistreat the oppressed in certain ways. (See Lawrence Blum, "'White Privilege': A Mild Critique," *Theory and Research in Education* 6, no. 3 [2008]: 309–321, for a perspicuous account that distinguishes between types of privilege.) This privilege belongs to the non-oppressed as such, regardless of whether or how individuals personally exercise it or benefit from it, and regardless of whether they are disadvantaged in any number of other ways. So possessing these privileges does not entail being blameworthy or objectively advantaged. Still, critics complain that privilege talk blames innocent non-oppressed people for the oppression and casts them all as objectively advantaged. A social construction account clarifies the disagreement by exposing the ambiguity: It is common for a thing to be confused with the use to which society puts it. What happens in sacrificial politics is that the Pious feel their group's privilege as pollution. "Privilege" as mere inverse-of-oppression gets operationalized into the "privilege" of guilt and inferiority, used to justify a socially constructed Polluted status attributed to all members of the category. In the latter sense, "privilege" can be used to imply complicity, to suggest people deserve not to have the goods they possess, and to undermine their opinions. The ambiguity obstructs people's ability to hear and understand an important point about how oppression works.

a wrong policy or politician, she becomes susceptible to a range of possible repercussions: public condemnation, loss of professional opportunities, social ostracism, forced resignation, firing, de-platforming, slander, exposure of personal details, or refusal of service. (This can happen also if a researcher approaches a sacred issue too clinically, in the uncertain exploratory mode suitable to science. Detached lack of reverence seems awfully close to irreverence.)

Let's call this subgroup of the Polluted "Blasphemers." Some may want to distinguish more sharply between perpetrators of direct harm and those who speak or think offensively—or even just naïvely—about oppression and oppressed categories. Sacrificial politics, however, emphasizes both that offense is a form of harm and that bad speech creates an atmosphere that tolerates or even fosters other harms. In other words, Blasphemers enable perpetrators, and in their own way are perpetrators.

An accusation is often as good as a conviction. There is no statute of limitations. There is no leniency given for youth, old age, or previous service. There may be no distinctions drawn between intentionally offensive statements and expressions of malice, on the one hand, and misstatements, use of unfashionable terminology, and benevolent disagreement, on the other hand. Some people, whether from a puckish irreverence or an ugly hostility, intentionally blaspheme. Others trip into it. The special, pronounced pollution accrued by the violator may spread to her friends, acquaintances, employers, sponsors, and business patrons—who often protect or purify themselves by severing ties and publicly announcing their disapproval. The Blasphemer's required apology does nothing to rehabilitate her status. The person is permanently stained.

Viewed from outside the system, the response often seems out of proportion to the offense. Viewed as punishment for sacrilege, it seems proportional—even quite humane compared to the penalties blasphemy may earn in other sacred systems (sackcloth and ashes, excommunication, maiming, execution).

These events in our culture function emotionally as purgative public sacrifices. Because sacrificial politics denies the distinction between violence and offensive speech, Blasphemers are appropriate sacrificial offerings, symbolically substituting for oppressors generally. When being excoriated, they stand for the perpetrators—past and present—who have escaped punishment, as well as for the social system that has enabled the perpetrators. Their excoriation is our expiation. It is, of course, one classic function of sacrifice to cleanse the community of some pollution that has resulted from transgressions committed by particular members of the community.

Those demanding punishment are usually few but fastidious. The Sacred who participate seem to do so in order to requite mistreatment and to reinforce the sanctions that protect them. The Pious who participate are cleaning up and kissing up, purging their group's pollution and proving

their personal innocence.[8] Remember that sacrifice elevates the sacrificer's status and can be used as a powerful, naturally understood social signal of moral identity. Aware of themselves as included among the Polluted, the Pious keenly feel their group's guilt. Naturally, the whole situation threatens their internally felt moral identity as well as their socially recognized moral status—two things to which human beings tend to be desperately attached. Sacrifice allows the Pious to protect a sense of their personal purity and to publicize it.

These symbolic substitutional sacrifices are ineffectual emotionally. They provide a temporary catharsis but fail to satisfy the desires to punish and to cleanse. Their short-term payoff and long-term emotional inefficacy ensure their regular repetition.

Though unsatisfying emotionally, the sacrifices do effectively regulate the public behavior of many people. They promulgate the sanctions, publicizing the rules and the punishments for violations. The punishments, though harsh at the personal micro-level, exercise an educative function at the societal macro-level. Most people in the Polluted category either play pious or play possum. They fear offending and fear being accused of offending. Let's call them "the Profane"—which just means "outside the temple," so neither Sacred nor Pious. Most of all, this group desires to stay out of it and to not be dragged into it, and that requires obeying the rules.

III. The Logic behind Sacralizing Oppressed Categories

The excoriation of Blasphemers—when recognized as a pollution-purification ritual—puts the sacrificial output of the system on public display. Sacrifice plays another key role, namely, as input, in the origin of the Sacred status. Sacrificial politics traces its source to an interpretation of oppression's suffering as sacred-making (which is, again, what "sacrifice" means). Even though sacrificial politics is not an inevitable cultural development, it makes sense that a victimized category could become sacred. In fact, "victim," etymologically, names a sacrificed animal.

In a precise sense, oppression is not a form of sacrifice: sacrifice involves a nominative, an accusative, and a dative—a sacrificer intentionally sacrificing something to or for the sacred. The forms of oppression rendering victim categories sacred do not fit this structure. There have been perpetrators and villains aplenty to blame for the mistreatment of black, gay, female, and gender-nonconforming people, but they have not been sacrificers. Far from

[8] Here are two points from Aristotle that may illuminate motivations. Regarding the oppressed who participate: "a city stays together by paying things back proportionately," and when people cannot "pay back evil" to those who have done them evil, it "seems to be slavery" (*NE* V.5, 1132b35–1133a1). Regarding the Pious who participate: "People seem to pursue honor in order to be convinced that they themselves are good" (*NE* I.5, 1095b27-28). References are from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002).

viewing their targets as sacred, perpetrators often rationalize injustice by denigrating their targets. And, tragically, mistreatment or misfortune often cause a person to be seen as inferior, inconvenient, polluted, or cursed, and thus to be further mistreated. Overall, it seems more natural to hate than to love victims.

Yet ours is a Christianity-influenced culture, and Christianity has the habit of reversing the "natural" or worldly ordering of values: Matthew 20:16, "The last shall be first, and the first last." Several features of Christianity cause sacrificial politics to make sense to us.

- The crucifixion has been the paradigm of sacrifice in the West for almost two millennia, but note that Pilate was not intentionally performing a sacrifice, and witnesses did not at the time interpret it as a sacrifice. It was not understood that way until after the fact.[9] The injustices foundational to sacrificial politics are sacred-making (that is, "sacrifices") only on the *ex post facto* model of the crucifixion.
- The gospel provides a prototype for understanding victims of cultural practices and social structures as sacred sufferers. Namely, Christianity interprets lepers and the poor as symbolically united with Christ as victims, lifted up with him on the cross and made sacred through it.
- Martyrdom's targets are interpreted as sacrificial victims, although their persecutors are not sacrificers. In martyrdom, the victims are made sacred through the injustice done to them, and the rule is that the injustice must be motivated by hatred (*odium fidei*)—that is, hatred of the faith, or of the faithful, or of the lives the faithful lead merely by being themselves. In martyrdom, we see the sacred-making power of hate-crime.

Our culture remains downstream of Christianity. It is a short distance in the imagination of a Christianity-informed culture to sacralize other targets of hatred and other sufferers of hurtful social practices. My account may seem to swim upstream, against the facts of our increasing secularization. But just as conversion doesn't erase a character developed over a lifetime, the secularization of our culture does not so swiftly eradicate Christian habits of thought. Secularization may actually unleash some Christian ideas, allowing them to develop in ways they could not when kept within a whole Christian system.

One might object that we all suffer, and sacrificial politics does not accord this any recognition. This would mistake the logic of the system. Not all

[9] Although not understood at the time by human beings as a sacrifice, according to a dominant theological account, it was understood by God as such: intended by God the Father from the beginning of time, and performed by Jesus, who served as both priest/sacrificer and victim/sacrificed. That is, one must buy a particular view of divine providence in order to believe that the crucifixion is a sacrifice, in the precise sense. It isn't clear to me whether there is a view of (perhaps historical) providence operating in sacrificial politics.

suffering makes the relevant kind of sacredness. It must be a sociopolitically salient type of suffering to produce a sociopolitical sacredness. For sacrificial politics, that means oppression targeting demographic categories. Individual suffering doesn't matter so much. The categories are central. Note that individuals can flag their own Sacred status by recounting things *other people* have suffered—as long as the victims are members of the same group and the suffering is attributable to their group membership. In sacrificial politics, individuals are significant as symbols or incarnations of their oppressed/oppressor categories.

This explains why there isn't a simple relation at the individual level between sacredness and suffering. Individuals who haven't suffered from oppression may have Sacred status (there are objectively privileged and protected black, female, gay, and trans people who carry the status), while some who have been mistreated due to the relevant oppressive structures do not seem to have it (for instance, Clarence Thomas). The explanation: it is not the individual sufferers who are Sacred, but their categories. Individuals are Sacred because Pious people take them to symbolize or to incarnate their categories. Those members of Sacred demographic categories who do not properly represent lose their Sacredness—that is, the Pious have no piety toward them. This happens, for example, to black, female, gay, and trans dissenters, who go against the system's pieties. We could call them "Defectors" because they don't play the game—they disrupt it by undermining our propensity to treat people not as individuals but as generalized symbols of abstract groups and social forces.

IV. The Authority of the Sacred Victim

Systems of oppression expose a person to discrimination across contexts due to some demographic feature. Often part of that discrimination is epistemic. Persons of the category may be less trusted, due to suspicions of inferior ability, moral corruption, sneakiness, disloyalty, mental instability, or insincerity.[10] Turning this on its head, sacrificial politics involves a belief that oppressed groups enjoy a morally and epistemically superior standpoint and that privileged groups suffer from an impoverished one.[11] Remember that suffering can be wisdom- and thus authority-bestowing.

[10] For an excellent philosophical treatment of this phenomenon, which Miranda Fricker calls "testimonial injustice," see her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). She advocates an Aristotelian corrective virtue by which hearers practice neutralizing their prejudices. The bestowal of Sacred authority is not this virtue. Rather, it reverses the prejudice by (selectively) elevating certain speakers above questions of credibility and downgrading others. Fricker articulates a second type of epistemic injustice—"hermeneutical injustice"—in which persons are denied the resources to understand themselves and the world of their experience. By anathemizing even benevolent dissent, Sacred authority may contribute to hermeneutical injustice.

[11] This structure is illuminated by a reflection on the history of "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology," which made precisely this claim on behalf of women. For example, consider Alison Jaggar's argument that "Women's subordinate status means that, unlike men, women

As a consequence, in situations in which sacrificial politics is being played (and only in those situations), the voices of members of oppressed groups are elevated above the voices of members of oppressor groups (crucial caveat to follow). This section outlines the special type of authority bestowed on the Sacred and the special type of representation expected of them.

While playing sacrificial politics, we may start a sentence with "As a woman" or "As a gay person," and the like. Let's call it "As-A representation." Sacred status is something passively bestowed by the Pious on people they recognize as members of an oppressed category. For its bearers, it is involuntary, a matter of how other people look at us. When we explicitly speak "As a … ," we take ownership of the Sacred status handed to us and activate it, and we signal that we are about to speak with an authority to which people outside of the category should defer.

Not everyone feels comfortable doing this—brandishing a demographic feature as though it's her reason for believing what she believes, as though it should be a reason for others to accept what she says. In fact, members of Sacred groups do not even need to brandish the status to be heard in the mode of As-A representation. In a situation in which sacrificial politics has been engaged, the person needs only to be out, known, recognized. Though Sacred authority in one way augments a person's ability to speak and be heard, it undermines the person's ability to speak and be heard *as an individual with a mere opinion* based on conversational, fallible reason. In this mode of listening and speaking, the individual speaker is a symbol or avatar for the category that speaks through her.

For a member of an oppressed category in a sacrificial politics context, one reason for hesitating to speak is a reluctance to "play the card" of Sacred authority. Let's call those who engage actively in As-A representation "Sacred Spokesmen" and those who do not the "Sacred Constituency."

The representational expectation placed on the Sacred has been noted and criticized within sacrificial politics, for example, by Peggy McIntosh in her celebrated piece explaining the "Invisible Knapsack" of white (and male and straight) privilege. One benefit of being white, she reports, is "I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group."[12] The obligation to educate that may follow with this representational expectation has also been noted and criticized within sacrificial politics, for example by Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*:

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do not have an interest in mystifying reality and so are likely to develop a clearer and more trustworthy understanding of the world. A representation of reality from the standpoint of women is more objective and unbiased" (*Feminist Politics and Human Nature* [New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983], 384). See the *Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Politics Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004) for a representative collection.

[12] Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (July/August 1989): 10–12.

> Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes …. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions.[13]

McIntosh here challenges the representational expectation, not the representational capacity. Lorde here challenges the educational obligation, not the group knowledge or educational authority. And neither calls into question the common claim that the privileged "cannot understand what it is like to be" one of the oppressed.[14] The expectation to represent and the obligation to educate may elicit complaints as bothersome or burdensome; still, these cannot be avoided by the Sacred in the system. The Sacred possess the prerogative to represent and to educate in their talk to outsiders because they have a knowledge earned through their group's suffering—a wisdom inaccessible to outsiders.

The authority seems justified by the truism that people with experience know more than people without it. People with the right experience often understand what others do not. The inexperienced may fail to notice things in plain sight, like signs of domestic abuse or an act of racial discrimination performed under some pretext. Experience can ground authority—and this is especially true of profound and difficult experiences. This type of wisdom is real and important. It belongs to individuals.

In sacrificial politics, the authority exercised in As-A representation does not derive from the experience or wisdom of the speaker. Inexperienced members of the category may exercise it (the young seem to do it the most). Defectors—however practiced in suffering and oppression—cannot. Defectors' views are discounted as unrepresentative. To speak with authority, an individual must reflect what is taken to be the group's wisdom; she must be seen as representative, and Defectors are not.

So the authority is based on representativeness. Yet, it would be a mistake to take Sacred Spokesmanship as representative in a statistical sense. In fact, Sacred Spokesmen tend to be unrepresentative statistically, taking more aggressive and radical positions than members of the Constituency. Finally, Sacred Spokesmanship, though clearly not representative in a democratic

[13] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Random House, 1984).

[14] The common claim that a person of a privileged category "cannot understand what it is like to be" a member of an oppressed category contains, of course, a significant amount of truth. Yet, taken as fully true, it suggests a few unlikely claims: that not directly experiencing something means you cannot understand it; that directly experiencing something means you understand it; that understanding is binary, either on or off; that people cannot understand other people; that people understand themselves. A better claim: *Those who lack sympathy will not let themselves understand.*

sense, can be usefully contrasted with democratic representation. A democratically representational status is bestowed by those who are represented. In As-A representation, it is your audience, not your constituency, that makes you representative. Your representational status is conferred by the outgroup who takes you as a token or symbol of your category. It is the Pious look that bestows Sacred authority.

This power of authoritative As-A representation is contingent on representing properly, that is, in ways the Pious think are representative of your group's wisdom—and that means believing and advocating things toward which the Pious feel pious. In this way, the system of social constructions encourages individuals to convert their demographic features into political identities with deep convictions. Being gay or black or a woman is a raw fact, a passively possessed property, without necessary connection to any number of questions calling for weighing evidence or exercising judgment—for instance, questions about the efficacy of minimum wage laws or of vouchers in public education, when legal protections should kick in for incipient life, or the fairness of sexually segregated athletic competition. Sacrificial politics pressures members of Sacred categories to operationalize their demographic features as though possessing the feature obligated a person to adopt a set of answers to questions only tangentially related to their experience as members. Defectors, answering these questions differently, are often accused of betrayal and of being fake members. Sacrificial politics puts doctrinal obligations also on the Polluted, but in a different way. As a member of the Polluted, one should believe certain things as a matter of piety; as one of the Sacred, one should believe certain things as a matter of authenticity and loyalty.

When a person belongs to several oppressed categories, the person becomes vulnerable to overlapping and interacting forms of discrimination and disadvantage. This is called "intersectionality." In sacrificial politics, intersectionality gets functionalized in two ways.[15] First, multiple memberships mean a person can symbolize multiple groups, giving the person more As-A representational authority. Intersectionality increases sacredness and authority, and thus produces a hierarchy among the Sacred. Moreover, not all oppressed categories are equally sacred. Intersectionality is used to

[15] Putting sacrificial politics in the context of social ontology helps us see the ambiguity of claims about intersectionality. Intersectionality initially names the multi-dimensionality of oppression that follows from the complexity of the person. Oppression takes on different patterns for different people, as a person's many features interactively contribute to her social location: for example, both racism and anti-gay prejudice tend to affect women differently than men. (The *locus classicus* is Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 [1989]: 139–167,which establishes the need to consider discrimination intersectionally.) Critics complain that intersectionality establishes a hierarchy of oppression, while scholars reject this "additive" reading of intersectionality as a misunderstanding. A social construction analysis clarifies the disagreement: It is common to confuse a thing with the uses to which society puts it. What happens in sacrificial politics is that intersectionality as the scholars mean it gets operationalized into the hierarchy the critics lament. It gets used as a tool for the distribution of social statuses.

remind less sacred people that they, too, must be pious toward the more sacred. (Consider, for example, how the feminist position on transwomen changed as *trans* became a Sacred category.) The second function follows from this: intersectionality is used to justify a tight coalitional politics in which the Sacred Spokesmen of one category become the Pious for other categories. A message is sent to members of the Sacred Constituency that they, too, should—out of loyalty to their own groups—support whatever is advocated by the Sacred Spokesmen of other groups. What is most remarkable about intersectional coalitional politics is that it sometimes induces Sacred Spokesmen to advocate positions against their own group's Sacred interests. For example, a Pious gay activist may condemn as racist a U.S. policy encouraging foreign countries to decriminalize homosexual activity.[16] This structure of reciprocal piety greatly increases the political effectiveness of sacrificial politics and the ideological expectations placed on members of oppressed groups.

One consequence of this authorization of certain voices within each Sacred group is the muffling of intra- and intergroup disagreements. By showing more piety to some Sacred voices than others, the Pious select which positions, identities, and voices within the Sacred groups are authentic and representative. In the system, the Sacred Spokesmen have the right not to be offended and the prerogative to define what is offensive. Their authority can endorse the ideology, they can fill in details, and they can develop the ideology of the Pious stepwise—but they cannot deny or resist it and still be counted as Sacred. That is what the Defectors prove. In (and only in) sacrificial politics, the voices of members of oppressed groups are elevated above voices of members of oppressor groups. But this comes with a crucial caveat: the Sacred Victim's authority ends where its corroboration of the Pious's ideology stops. This is something like chivalry: to get it, one must act like a lady—as defined by the chivalrous. The sanctions surrounding the Sacred to include and protect them are also walls that enclose and control them.

V. A System of Social Constructions

Members of an oppressed demographic category *count as* Sacred. Sacrificial politics is a system of social constructions.[17] That is to say, it is made up

[16] See Mathew Rodriguez, "Trump's Plan to Decriminalize Homosexuality is an Old Racist Tactic," *Out Magazine* (February 19, 2019) https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2019/2/19/trumps-plan-decriminalize-homosexuality-old-racist-tactic. The countries with the harshest penalties for homosexuality—including imprisonment and execution—are disproportionately Muslim or African.

[17] Being socially constructed does not make something arbitrary or false. For example, in the case of a system of constructions of the sacred type, one can ask whether the attributions of sacredness, which anchor the system, are true or justified or coherent. One could ask, also, how fittingly or how wisely the system of constructions expresses its piety for the sacred, and how well the system harmonizes with other aspects of human life. For an account of the possibility of rationally or truthfully grounding constructions, see the author's "A Realer Institutional

of statuses bestowed on people by those around them. John Searle's useful formula for social constructions is "We accept that X counts as Y in context C," where Y is some socially conferred status and always involves "deontic powers" conferred on someone.[18] The idea of deontic powers is that, because of a recognized status, the person is enabled or required to do (or not do) something, or the person is entitled or susceptible to other people doing (or not doing) something to them.

For any such system, one can ask questions like, What are the statuses? What rights and responsibilities do the statuses carry? In what context do they operate? What X conditions must something meet to get the Y statuses? Who does the conferring? This section addresses these questions, using as a guide the 'X counts as Y in C' formula, where a Y status entails prerogatives, obligations, entitlements, and susceptibilities.

Let's begin with the Y terms. We have identified, within the Sacred-Polluted dichotomy, six positions. The key players are the Pious, the Sacred Spokesmen, and the Blasphemers. The Sacred Constituency and the Profane—which include most people—spectate and play only reluctantly. The Defectors can't fully escape the game, but they do disrupt it by unsettling the categories.

The different positions come with different deontic powers. As we have seen, belonging to a recognized oppressed category allows a person to act as a Sacred Spokesman, which carries the prerogatives of speaking authoritatively to the outgroup about the suffering of one's group and even about oppression generally, of leavening Polluted communities with diversity, and of determining what counts as offensive. The Sacred Spokesmen may have the ability to require offerings in response to offenses. The status also carries the obligations to believe and advocate the right things. The Defectors buck these ideological obligations, but only at a cost: they lose their prerogatives as Sacred and become susceptible to accusations—sometimes quite vicious—of disloyalty or fakeness. They gain status they likely do not want among the Blasphemers, who may believe the Defectors vindicate them. The Pious take on a status that protects them (imperfectly) from accusation and that entitles them to being honored—mostly by themselves—as credits to their Polluted categories. The Blasphemers have the power to infect associates with a pronounced pollution. They become susceptible to being excluded, de-friended, canceled, fired, protested, and boycotted, and to not receiving normal treatment regarding politeness and procedural rights. They are obliged to recant, to apologize, to display remorse. The Blasphemers possess the most interesting power in the system:

Reality: Deepening Searle's (De)Ontology of Civilization," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 1 (2012): 43–67 (published under the name M. B. Flynn).

[18] John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) and Searle, *Making the Social World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

they can—by being punished—cleanse the groups that expel them. They do so only by symbolizing their category's sins.

Reflecting on the C term helps reveal the source of power within the system. Socially constructed statuses are always limited by context. Only in some situations are the statuses recognized or relevant. For example, "pope" names a status formally bestowed on certain people by the Catholic Church, carrying both rights and duties, but sometimes the status isn't operative—say, while the man speaks to a nonbeliever or writes a letter to his mother. The context that operationalizes a status includes being among people who recognize or accept the status (let's call this *communal uptake*) and the status being applicable to the situation (let's call this *situational relevance*).

What is the context in which sacrificial politics operates? Its situational relevance is satisfied any time some recognized oppression or its legacy might occur or be significant. This includes pretty much any Sacred/Polluted cross-category interaction or speech related to it. As shown by the concept of microaggressions, sacrificial politics possesses very broad situational relevance. Indeed, one common argument maintains that oppression's effects are ubiquitous, inflecting everything in the lives of both the oppressed and the privileged.

Communal uptake requires the presence of the Pious. Borrowing a term from Ásta[19], let's call the power in a community to bestow a status "standing." Standing belongs to those people whose uptake makes the status exist and capable of operating; the other people around are more or less conscripted into following along. The Sacred possess their status only because the Pious bestow it on them. Without others' piety, victims of oppression still have many other features related to oppression and its aftermath, but they are not treated as Sacred by anyone. The other statuses follow in Sacredness's wake, so *the Pious have ultimate standing in sacrificial politics.*[20]

Straightforwardly, it may seem we could analyze Sacred status with the "X counts as Y" formula by naming the relevant demographic categories, for example, "Gay people count as Sacred." But when we spell out the X conditions that ground the Y status, we see they are more elaborate: they are built on top of other, preestablished constructions. For a demographic

[19] Asta, *Categories We Live By*: *The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[20] This power is flagged in Pious texts with the abbreviation "etc." When listing Sacred categories, the Pious standardly write something like "black, gay, female, etc." It is worth wondering, who is included in the "etc.," and why are they included only elliptically? The "etc." expresses pious fear toward oppressed groups left out of the list (there are too many to list), and it also expresses deference to the Pious of the future—we know other groups will later make the A-list of oppressed categories. So, while expressing piety, the "etc." indicates potency, the power of standing that determines who is oppressed enough to be listed. The "etc." signals that it is the author and others like the author who bestow Sacred status. They do not have this power individually. They move like a school of fish.

category to be counted as Sacred, it must first be counted as oppressed (this is itself a socially conferred status, for there are at any given time oppressed groups not recognized as such). Moreover, as sacrificial politics often reminds us, those systems of oppression themselves consist of social constructions—bestowals of statuses on categories of people. So "gay people count as queer" underlies "gay people, by being counted as queer, count as oppressed," which in turn underlies "gay people, by being oppressed for being queer, count as Sacred."

A few important points follow.

First, some people have analyzed "identity politics" as fundamentally Hegelian, a form of the politics of recognition—an expression of the human need to be seen. Namely, members of oppressed groups desire to be incorporated into public life not merely as individuals like other individuals, but precisely as black, female, gay, trans, and so forth. Rather, according to this analysis of sacrificial politics, the required recognition happens two levels up. The desire is to be recognized as set apart because oppressed because of the feature. That's what *black*, *woman*, *gay*, and *trans* mean in the system.[21]

Second, this analysis distinguishes sacrificial politics from some other ways to oppose oppression. One way to resist oppression might be on the model of the mid-century Civil Rights, homophile, and "first-wave" feminist movements. The goal is to erase the negative status, allowing persons in the category to be equal to others. Another way to oppose oppression might be on the model of the black-is-beautiful, gay pride, or girl power movements. The goal is to erase the negative status and then to replace it with a positive interpretation, where that positive spin is consistent with equality and built directly on the underlying, previously denigrated property. So, as the slogans go, "black is beautiful," "gay is good," and "girls rock," but that's how they are *in themselves*—not because they have been previously oppressed, and not because white is ugly, or straight is square, or boys smell. Sacrificial politics does not erase or erase-and-replace; it builds upon the oppressed status. The Sacred status presumes and harnesses the oppression, and when it does so it establishes a new, inverted hierarchy. One motivation for the system may be that erasure and replacement have proven more challenging and slower than hoped. For beings like us with communal memory, building on the past may be more realistic than letting go and moving on.

A third upshot is that both the Sacred Spokesmen and the Pious run the risk of becoming invested in the appearance of oppression. Like a mirror's image, the new hierarchy requires the *continued* presence of the oppressive hierarchy. Because sacrificial politics traces its power and logic to oppression, people in the Sacred Spokesmen and the Pious categories frequently

[21] Consider, for example, Sally Haslanger's definition of "woman" as "systematically subordinated." Significantly, she defends this definition not on purely descriptive grounds, but as useful for a liberationist movement. See "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55.

narrate tales of injustice. By articulating the suffering that makes Sacred and the guilt that makes Polluted, the narratives justify and buttress the system. Thus, the Sacred Spokesmen and the Pious may become invested in oppression not only as the right interpretation of the past, but as an ongoing event. The individuals are working to end oppression, but the system may incentivize the Spokesmen and the Pious rather to manage the appearance of oppression upon which their statuses are built.

Fourth, it is only because the Pious count a group's experiences as oppression, and then further accept oppression as the ground of Sacredness, that a group acquires the status. On top of this, for an individual person to be treated as Sacred, she must be counted as a representative member of the group. So, what matters *in the system* is not that you are black, female, gay, or trans (and so forth), or that your group has been oppressed, or that you have suffered from that oppression, or that you have learned something from it, or that others would benefit from listening to your story. These are not the operative properties of the person in context.[22] Rather, what matters in sacrificial politics is that the Pious consider your group's experiences as constituting oppression and recognize you both as a member and as an appropriate symbol of your group.

Finally, the system aims to represent and protect people as they exist independently of the Sacred system, but it also produces *prêt à porter*, norm-laden identities, and recruits people into them. The presence of black, gay, female, or gender-nonconforming people is not new. Sacrificial politics laminates new identities on top of these preexisting features. The lamination is so tight that one can barely see the layer added. One can hardly distinguish what one is by virtue of being a black, gay, female, or gender-nonconforming person, from what one is supposed to be, do, and believe as a black, gay, female, or trans player in sacrificial politics. People often talk to you assuming that because you are the first, you will and should be the second. That is, the system isn't just about representation and protection of persons as they exist independently of the system, but about the construction of, and conscription of these persons into, prefabricated "identities" or roles.

VII. Piety and/or Prudence?

It is easy to view other people's sacred systems with skeptical condescension. But experience of the sacred and the desire to sacrifice for it are perennially human. And if we sometimes fear zealous people for holding something sacred that we don't, we should also fear someone who doesn't

[22] Ásta in *Categories We Live By* explains the way that social constructivist accounts often operate: "the aim of the debunking project is to reveal which property is operative in a context. Understood in this way, the widely held but erroneous beliefs concern which property is operative in a context, and the debunking consists in revealing that some other property is really operative in the context from the ones that are widely held to be operative" (37).

hold anything sacred. It seems to me that holding victims of unjust suffering as sacred is a morally serious position. It is less clear whether sacrificial politics is healthy culturally, politically, and legally given how it goes about expressing its sense of the sacred. Both my appreciation of and my concern about sacrificial politics arise from the same source: I see something sacred in the mundane human being, the liberal virtues of tolerance and intellectual openness, and the boring procedural rights that protect the individual.

It is no easier to understand oneself than to understand others. No one—not least pious people themselves—can be sure where piety ends and a pious show begins. On the one hand, there is such a thing as genuine piety. On the other hand, most human actions spring from multiple motives, and piety is always shadowed by profane strategy. These are not rhetorical questions: How much of sacrificial politics is driven by the desires to make ourselves feel better or look better, to protect ourselves from accusation, to buy support for our own cause, to exert power over people of other demographic groups, to purge our sense of pollution, to insure coalitional conformity, to outsource punishment for our own failings?

A tension between genuine piety and pious show are inherent to all sacred systems. So is the tension between piety and prudence. How much of sacrificial politics is driven by an actual, smart, and strategic dedication to making people's lives better? And can the system learn epistemic humility, making its spaces safer for the benevolent and intelligent dissent that is necessary for civic life?

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