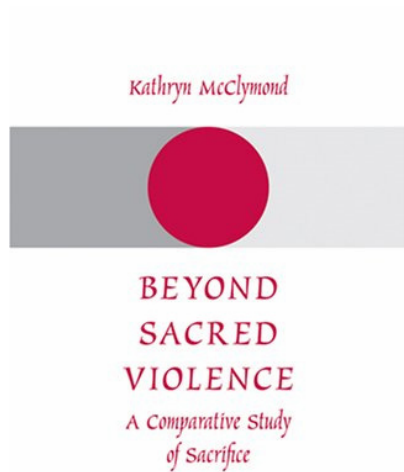


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McClymond, Kathryn

Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice

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Leigh Trevaskis
Queensland Theological College
Brisbane, Australia

In *Beyond Sacred Violence*, a comparative study of Vedic and Jewish sacrificial practices, Kathryn McClymond uses a polythetic approach to understand what characterizes a ritual as sacrificial. In response to traditional approaches, she contends that sacrifice cannot be reduced to a single idea or activity such as violence or killing. Alternatively, it is proposed that the presence or absence of several activities combine to make a ritual “more or less” sacrificial. The scope of McClymond’s investigation extends beyond ancient Vedic and Jewish traditions to examine if her polythetic approach makes sense of how sacrificial language is used on a symbolic or metaphorical dimension within religious contexts and in national discourse where traditional sacrifices are not made.

Within the introduction McClymond describes how scholars have conceptualized the idea of sacrifice from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. This part of her work will prove a useful resource for both postgraduate students interested in sacrificial practice and for who teach ritual studies at degree level. McClymond summarizes and evaluates anthropological approaches to sacrifice as myth (e.g., Adolf E. Jenson), exchange (e.g., Tylor, Durkheim, Maus), cuisine (e.g., Robertson Smith, Détienné, Vernant); structural approaches (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, Staal); feminist approaches (e.g., Jamison, Jay), and the common Western equation of sacrifice with violence (e.g., Girard, Burket). She

finds that all of these approaches share two common assumptions. First, they presuppose that animal sacrifice is more important than vegetal and liquid offerings. Second, they assume that sacrificial activity is violent. Since it is her contention that both of these assumptions have misled previous studies of sacrifice, McClymond proposes to undertake a comparative study of Vedic and Jewish sacrificial practices that will provide a new perspective on sacrificial activity.

In chapter 1 McClymond unpacks her rationale for using a polythetic approach that understands sacrificial ritual as a combination of activities. Such an approach departs from popular approaches to sacrifice that “assume that there must be one essential or definitive element of sacrifice that distinguishes it from other ritual activity” (26). She observes that single activities such as killing and eating take on a sacrificial quality only when they are combined with other activities (e.g., the presence of the ritual elite). “A polythetic approach to ritual draws attention to the importance of the interaction between activities. Understanding the polythetic nature of sacrifice will prevent us from focusing inappropriately on any single activity (e.g., killing, consumption) or overlooking the significance of others (e.g. apportionment, heating)” (27).

Seven activities are identified that regularly occur during sacrificial events: selection; association; identification; killing; heating; apportionment; and consumption (29–33). It is in relation to the presence, absence, and sequence of these activities that allows one to define a certain ritual as “more or less sacrificial.” Chapter 1 concludes with a listing of the benefits of polythetic analysis and provides a brief overview of Vedic and Jewish sacrificial systems for readers who are unfamiliar with these traditions (35–43).

The role of killing within sacrificial rituals is examined in chapter 2. This chapter attempts to undermine the traditional tendency of scholars to mischaracterize sacrifice as killing or violence. McClymond contributes three observations to “put killing in its proper place in the broader context of sacrificial activity” (44). First, she observes that the notion of killing is absent from many vegetal offerings. Second, attention is drawn to the relatively little emphasis placed on the activity of killing within Vedic and Jewish traditions. Moreover, there is apparently no reference to sacrificial killing as an act of violence within these traditions. Finally, it is argued that killing should not be viewed as the culmination of a sacrificial ritual but as facilitating other activities. That is, killing is undertaken to facilitate the manipulation and distribution of an offering.

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of vegetal offerings. McClymond observes that, though some vegetal offerings within Vedic tradition are killed, this is not the case with all vegetal offerings, particularly within the Jewish tradition. This leads her to make two conclusions regarding how one should view killing within the context of sacrifice. On the one hand,

one must not confine the notion of killing to animal sacrifices. On the other hand, since there are parallels between animal and vegetal offerings, the absence of killing within the latter should caution against an attempt to define sacrifice in terms of killing.

In chapter 4 McClymond attempts to supplement what she argues is the neglect of liquid offerings (milk, soma juice, and blood) in the study of sacrifice. According to her, the key difference between liquid sacrificial offerings and animal and vegetal sacrificial offerings is that the former are not killed; this is further evidence for why one should not assume that killing is an essential element of sacrifice. Differences are also identified between the liquid offerings of Vedic and Jewish traditions, which McClymond suggests are indicative that killing is not the defining characteristic of sacrifice. Primary among these is her claim that the liquids of Vedic but not Jewish sacrifice are identified with the offerer. That is, following Milgrom she assumes that blood within the Jewish tradition does not represent its offerer because its object was the purification of the sanctuary. If this is the case, it is unlikely that one should view an animal's death as made in place of an offerer's.

The most original contribution McClymond makes to sacrificial theory comes within chapter 5, where she interprets the function of an offering's "apportionment." This term is preferred over terms such as "dismemberment" or "dissection" because it avoids the violent connotations of the latter (132). She arrives at three significant conclusions relating to the function of sacrificial apportionment. First, it is argued that one should view the division and distribution of an offering's parts as constructive rather than destructive. This is because the division of an offering replicates the cosmogonic activity within Vedic and Jewish creation myths. Second, by apportioning parts of an offering to the deity, priests, and laity, a sacrificial ritual "simultaneously reflects and reinforces socioreligious roles" (149). Third, apportionment imposes ritual order where there had been disorder. With regard to this last point, McClymond concludes that "the act of apportionment implies a moral dimension to the universe: one ought to do some things in certain ways, and one ought not to do others" (147).

In her conclusion McClymond examines whether a polythetic approach to understanding Vedic and Jewish ("traditional") sacrificial practice may contribute to two other arenas of sacrificial language. The first of these is the "symbolic, metaphoric, or internalized forms of sacrifice that develop subsequently or in reaction to traditional sacrifice within specific religious systems" (154). The second arena comprises the use of sacrificial language in national discourse. According to McClymond, sacrificial language continues to be used within these two arenas because sacrificial procedures that characterize "traditional" sacrificial practice still persist. "[W]hen we understand traditional sacrifice as a polythetic activity, we can see that metaphoric or symbolic sacrifice often replicates some of the procedures that were performed during traditional sacrifice" (159).

McClymond's study of sacrifice is a stimulating read and at times quite thought-provoking. Her work provides some much-needed balance to a field of research that has largely ignored the function of vegetal offerings within Vedic and Jewish sacrificial systems. Moreover, it would seem difficult to refute her argument that death or violence cannot be viewed as the essence of sacrifice. Nevertheless, her analysis of sacrificial ritual within a Jewish context may seem problematic to some Hebrew scholars.

First, the description of the sacrificial rituals as "Jewish" seems anachronistic, and at times McClymond blurs the distinction between ancient Hebrew texts and their later Jewish interpretation. One may also question her decision to give preference to rabbinic interpretation of sacrifice over its contemporary Christian interpretation, which is left untreated. Though McClymond may be partly correct in her frequent criticism of Christian contribution to the study of sacrifice, she seems to assume rather than demonstrate the problematic nature of early Christian interpretation. Perhaps this is an area of study she will apply herself to at a later time.

Second, McClymond's decision to make a distinction between animal and blood sacrifice seems surprising. On the one hand, no such distinction is made within the relevant texts. Her decision in this regard also seems at odds with a polythetic approach. Should one not view blood manipulation as another aspect of animal sacrifice? On the other hand, the distinction McClymond makes between animal and blood sacrifice is possibly misleading in terms of the relationship between an offerer and sacrificial blood. Since blood is part of an animal offering, it would seem that the legislator's reference to an offerer leaning his hand on the head of the "burnt offering" (Lev 1:4) suggests that a relationship is established between the offerer and all of the offering's parts, including the blood.

Finally, some of McClymond's conclusions may have been strengthened had she interacted more with the vast amount of recent scholarship on Hebrew sacrifice. This omission becomes particularly striking in relation to her claim that liquid offerings are virtually ignored by scholars. In this regard, no consideration was given to the relevant contributions made by scholars such as Bernd Janowski, N. Kiuchi, Roy Gane, and Jay Sklar. Each of these recent scholars has made arguments that threaten to undermine McClymond's suggestion that killing and blood manipulation are unrelated to the fate of an offerer. Indeed, in a scholarly work such as this, it seems regrettable that no attempt has been made to engage German scholarship. Given the clarity with which she writes and the stimulating ideas she offers, it is to be hoped that McClymond will contribute further research that engages such scholarship.