

BLM: POLICING AS RITUAL SACRIFICE

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In some earlier writings I explored the possibility that US police killings, much like lynchings, were a form of ritual human sacrifice, unaware that several important scholars had arrived at the same conclusion.

Brian Smith, formerly Professor of Religious Studies at UC Riverside writes:

“...modern executions are more or less undeniably ritualised killings of a human being and so, of course, are those traditional religious practices termed ‘human sacrifices’.¹

Police killings in the US seem at first sight random and arbitrary but if one stands back there is a clear pattern. At a sociological level, there is no requirement that a social practice - the organised and recurrent execution of Black males - have only one ‘driver’. Successful resistance to change would be better explained if there were multiple drivers and institutional interests at stake, not just one.

Ritualised killing becomes a means whereby through police action on its behalf society attains a divine status of holiness through purgation. Situations that threaten the existing social order, a sense that the existing order may break down, are seen as symptoms of divine displeasure which must be propitiated through further and numerous sacrifices. After WW1 returning Black American soldiers were seen as a potential threat to the status quo of the South USA and a vigorous and renewed outbreak of lynching took place.

‘In Congress, the fear that returning soldiers posed a threat to racial hierarchy in the South was a matter of public record. On August 16, 1917, Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman spoke on the floor of the United States Senate, warning that the reintroduction of black servicemen to the South would “inevitably lead to disaster.” For Senator Vardaman and others like him, black soldiers’ patriotism was a threat, not a virtue. “Impress the negro with the fact that he is defending the flag, inflate his untutored soul with military airs, teach him that it is his duty to keep the emblem of the Nation flying triumphantly in the air,” and, the senator cautioned, “it is but a short step to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.”²

¹ (Smith, 2000, p. 4)

² (Stevenson, 2017, p. 25)

The crisis of 2008 and more recently the Pandemic are further signs of the need for extensive propitiation. This would be a better explanation of the continued random police killing in the same locales even during the trial of Derek Chauvin which would otherwise seem irrational. Ritualised police killing: the traffic stop, followed by police arriving guns drawn to effect the execution. This could be seen as arbitrary behaviour (one bad apple etc.) if it were not repeated ad nauseam. Repetition turns it into a ritual.

As Smith writes:

‘The participants of the sacrifice, having entered into a separate and sacred ritual sphere and having themselves been transformed and identified with the gods, are required to act accordingly - to act like the gods do and to leave behind the ways of human beings.’³

As the police enter into this ritual all human empathy disappears as they take on the role of ‘gods’.

Smith also explains the extraordinary overdetermination of the ritualised killing of unarmed persons i.e. multiple armed police shooting at one unarmed person or multiple shots at the same unarmed person at close range.

‘In sacrifice, and also in modern executions, we have the attempt to enact under controlled circumstances the ‘perfect kill’ ‘⁴

Sacrifices are historically sometimes public and sometimes private. In the US they have been mostly public but in the UK they have recently been behind closed doors - in police custody.

‘Executions in pre-modern Europe were public displays whereby a drama unfolded before the eyes of large crowds. They were meant to portray the power of the state and church over the bodies of the disobedient, and the spectacle of suffering (the more the better) was designed not only to punish but to convey a pedagogical message of power, punishment, and the possibility of redemption to the assemblage.’⁵

One can challenge Smith’s referral to pre-modern Europe as in any way different from our present circumstances. Fire-bombing Tokyo, an undefended city made of wooden buildings of no military significance, and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, an equally undefended city of no military significance can be seen as forms of mass human sacrifice. The intended effect was no different than that desired by the Aztecs.

Smith writes: ‘Human sacrifices among the Aztecs, like the public executions in premodern Europe, were ritualised killings designed (at least in part) to keep those who witnessed them in order.’⁶

Smith at one point concludes: ‘The similarities between sacrifice and murder are close; indeed, only an interpretative function can distinguish the two.’⁷ ‘..’ what is a ‘sacrifice’ for some may be something quite different for others.’⁸

³ (Smith, 2000, p. 6)

⁴ (Smith, 2000, p. 6)

⁵ (Smith, 2000, p. 6)

⁶ (Smith, 2000, p. 7)

⁷ (Smith, 2000, p. 18)

⁸ (Smith, 2000, p. 19)

In the UK deaths at the hands of the police generally take place behind the scenes ‘in custody’ though there have been recent instances of public executions. Ian Loader, Professor of Criminology at Oxford University, came to see police killing as ‘sacrifice’ from examining the process of review of deaths in police custody. He noted a repetitive institutional process (ritual) and asked: ‘Why this repeated cycle of death, review and inaction, and the attendant sense of enduring crisis and institutional intractability?’⁹

Loader recognises that “the police retain traces of untouchable authority’ and then quotes another scholar ...’ The police are linked, even in modern societies, with the sacred, the powerful, mysterious, distant and awesome’.¹⁰ This approach shares Smith’s view that the police are vested with sacred powers on behalf of the dominant elements of society. Loader takes this as a clue to what might be going on. Conventionally, the police are seen as a rule-governed bureaucracy but the reality is different. When unlawful killing emerges there is a great deal of angst and misunderstanding. If the angst was about the unlawful killing why is there no action taken to prevent further acts? Loader quotes a report by the charity, Mind ‘More than 15 years since Rocky Bennett’s death, we are still no closer to implementing the lessons learned.’¹¹

Loader suggests that the angst arises in the conflict between the desire to present the police as rule-governed defenders of civic virtue and the apparent evidence of something else going on. The ritual becomes a means for re-establishing the norm: there are rules and if broken we will investigate. This apparent consensus is however entirely false.

‘This suggests that the consensus on how to respond to deaths in custody is a surface phenomenon that masks a deeper conflict and that the recurrent failure to enact sensible remedies is the product of something more embedded than lack of resources and institutional inertia.’¹²

As Loader says: ‘The recurring mix of review, reform proposal and institutional intractability intimates, however, that something else is ‘going on’ - namely, a ritual of catharsis and reassurance that conveys the appearance of busy concern while the fundamentals of the status that that conduce to custodial death are left in place.’¹³

For Loader, two roles policing plays. Firstly, there is the symbolic role of the police in restoring and enforcing order according to the law in society, and it is this role that creates angst when evidence of failure arises

. The second role is that of the sacred interlocutor with other forces that through sacrifice bring about the restoration of the status quo.

‘The deeper conflict is between the state’s duty to ensure the welfare of those whom it detains and the effectively powerful idea that policing must be afforded the tools and support needed to manage marginal populations to secure public protection and maintain order.’¹⁴

⁹ (Loader, 2019, p. 3)

¹⁰ (Loader, 2019, p. 5)

¹¹ (Loader, 2019, p. 7)

¹² (Loader, 2019, p. 7)

¹³ (Loader, 2019, p. 8)

¹⁴ (Loader, 2019, p. 7)

Loader euphemistically referred to a world of ‘fantasy’ in which these acts are required. But the key issue is this: to what extent in any material sense is the killing of innocent unarmed people likely to increase subordination rather than provoke rebellion? To be effective to enforce subordination the killing should be demonstrable of those who resist or rebel rather than a random selection. However if the purpose of the ritual is to seek purgation and catharsis, to remind the dominant society that it has the power to control and that they need not fear the marginalised, then the public visibility and repetition become explicable. Chauvin showed no hesitation even when he knew he was being filmed. It is this understanding that the randomised killing of marginal people is so pointless as a control mechanism that leads Loader to believe that ‘something else is going on’. One can return to the killing of veterans after WW1. These are people who have been trained not to fear death so why should lynching rationally have the desired effect unless the desired effect is in the minds of the lynch-mobbers? Such behaviour is rationally incoherent. Loader locates this something else in a world of ‘fantasy’, while Smith locates it in a divine world requiring propitiation. Whether there is any substantive disagreement between Smith and Loader remains to be seen. Professionally Loader as a criminologist may be less at ease with religious terminology than Brian Smith, a professor of religious studies. But even Loader goes as far as to speak of a ‘quasi-religious’ context.

‘I have argued in this article that in official reactions to deaths in police custody, one can discern a deep structure of meaning that helps to make sense of the otherwise puzzling motifs that recur in such reactions. What that structure discloses is an illiberal and undemocratic policing imaginary which in effect treats those who die in custody as collateral damage; bodies that are sacrificed to shore up and defend a police system that protects the law-abiding majority from dangerous out-groups. One outcome of this powerful imaginary is that those who die in custody and their families are expelled from consideration both as fully democratic citizens and as victims of abuse or neglect.’¹⁵

What can one learn from all this? If what is driving the killing of Black and minority males in the US is a deep-seated need for human sacrifice an exclusive focus on improving procedures is unlikely to be successful. These attempts at procedural reform are likely to meet the same end as all past efforts: ‘these efforts typically fall into a quagmire of warm words and repeated inaction’.¹⁶ Further, since the ritual is performed to ensure that the audience reaps the sense of security then as that audience, the fearful dominant society is directly complicit, as these acts, as these sacrifices, are being performed for them, so they, not solely the police, should be held accountable. Police killing, this ritual slaughter, is both a political and religious phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

A human sacrifice does not become a sacrifice just because it is called a ‘sacrifice’, just as it does not cease to be a ‘sacrifice’ because it is called something else.

¹⁵ (Loader, 2019, p. 14)

¹⁶ (Loader, 2019, p. 15)

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