Resisting the sacred canopy over U.S. ways of war

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This article explores the “omnipotent sacrificial sacred canopy” in US war-culture. I argue that sacrificial linguistic habits and patterns of logic in the US successfully discipline citizens, such that the violence of our current wars remains mystified, and clear analysis of the wars’ true costs is disabled. Rather than attempt to arrive at one universal theory of sacrifice to analyze and better understand sacrificial US war-culture, I demonstrate that diverse theoretical methods of analysis better help us to understand the pluralistic nuances and permutations of these smothering dynamics. I further argue that increased awareness of the sacrificial sacred canopy over war and militarism in the US finally must lead to self-examination on the part of Christians regarding the way in which sacrificial civil religious admonishments regarding war merge with and are mutually reinforced by theological and ecclesial soteriological habits of Christians in the US. Lastly, I advocate a two-fold approach for addressing this disturbing and destructive reality in the nation.

KEYWORDS Sacrifice, War, War-culture, Soteriology, Culture

Introduction

Who’s for the trench—
Are you, my laddie?
Who’ll follow French—
Will you, my laddie?
Who’s fretting to begin,
Who’s going out to win?
And who wants to save his skin—
Do you, my laddie?
In 1915, poet journalist Jessie Pope wrote the poem, “The Call,” published in a popular British newspaper, to galvanize young men to join the war effort for the British nation.¹ Her poetry might be forgotten, were it not for another English poet, who responded to her propagandistic effort with his own searing revelation of a deeper truth about war. With agonizing detail, Wilfred Owen portrayed the experience of an adolescent soldier gruesomely dying from exposure to poison gas. Perhaps, he continued in his poem, had she witnessed this reality of war, Jessie Pope might less glibly and enthusiastically tell “[...] with such high zest, To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie [...]”

And what is “the old Lie”? It can be traced a very long ways indeed in Western history, as far back as Horace: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. It is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country.² Owen describes “the smothering dream” of reliving over and over again the boy’s terrible death. But this is no dream, it is reality; the untruth from which Owen hopes readers will wake up is the sweet sacrificial dream of dying for the motherland. However, even long after Owen’s time, this dream lives on, and surges and resurges whenever potential or actual war looms on the horizon, including the post-9/11 context of contemporary America.

In this article, I explore “an omnipotent sacrificial sacred canopy” that shrouds popular rhetoric, practices, and institutions of war-culture in the United States. On the one hand, citizens and especially leaders proclaim that we approach decision making about war with “a clean slate,” as it were. Supposedly we logically and neutrally calculate through the theoretical method of Just War Theory the merits and deficiencies of each and every armed conflict we enter. But I argue that we are as misguided as those early twentieth century folk whose minds were dulled by the apparent sweetness of the smothering lie Owen described. Our own linguistic habits and patterns of logic successfully discipline citizens such that the violence of our current wars remains mystified, and clear analysis of the wars’ true costs is disabled.

I investigate sacrificial language, logic, and performance, and shine light on a number of contemporary examples to illustrate the dynamics of sacrificial U.S. war-culture. With the term, “war-culture,” I refer to the interpenetration of the ethos, institutions, and practices of war with other vast sites of culture at large in the United States, including the economy, education, popular and especially youth culture, patterns of labor and consumption, government, religious institutions, and more. The culture of war and militarism, like water finding its way through cracks in the pavement, covers and intermixes with diverse expressions of supposed civil culture throughout the United States, but simultaneously, relatively few Americans are much aware of the atmosphere of war-culture that we take in with every breath. We need to better understand just how and why this is the case.

Rather than attempt to arrive at one universal theory of sacrifice to analyze and better understand sacrificial U.S. war-culture, I demonstrate that diverse theoretical methods of analysis better help us to understand the pluralistic nuances and

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permutations of these smothering dynamics. I further argue that increased awareness of the sacrificial sacred canopy over war and militarism in the U.S. finally must lead to self-examination on the part of Christians regarding the way in which sacrificial civil religious admonishments regarding war merge with and are mutually reinforced by theological and ecclesial soteriological habits of Christians in the U.S. Lastly, I advocate a two-fold approach for addressing this disturbing and destructive reality in the nation.

**Sacrificial “Linguistic Subterfuge”**

Elizabeth Samet, Professor of English Literature at West Point U.S. Military Academy, recently dared to pose a courageous question for an article in *Foreign Policy*: “Can an American Soldier Ever Die in Vain?” According to Samet, we are living in a time of “linguistic subterfuge” with respect to our ways of war in the United States. As she writes, “[…] whenever people describe violence with abstraction or indirection, […] there’s a reason.”[^3] In other words, the very language we use to speak about war has the direct result of shifting our attention away from the most direct and devastating awareness we might otherwise develop regarding war’s destructive costs and consequences. This is “subterfuge.”

Samet describes our language of war in the United States as immersed in a kind of sentimentality that makes every war story a tale of redemption. She lists examples: “[…] the empty profusion of yellow ribbons and lapel-pin flags […] the organized celebration of American heroes and patriotic values […] celebrity public service announcements, beer commercials about military homecomings […] the National Football League’s ‘Salute to Service’ campaign […]”[^4] In the end, according to Samet, “linguistic subterfuge,” the practice through which Americans mis-describe war and militarism, grows out of our unwillingness to face the ugly underbelly of war, both at home and abroad. Samet further describes the consequences of American refusal to face the futility of war: the dehumanization of military service members, increasing inability to honestly account for our own violence in the United States, and unwillingness to engage a sober evaluation regarding the next war on the horizon.

**Sacrificial Commemorations of War**

Precisely because we are not in the practice of directly facing the futility of war, and in order to help us more clearly see the contours of our national sacrificial sacred canopy, I direct attention to some contemporary examples of these dynamics, beginning with the latest memorial addition to the National Mall in Washington DC. This memorial project was approved unanimously in congress, and appears easily to have met every requirement for its construction. Money flowed in to support it, and few if any questions or criticisms have been raised about the message it conveys. Called

[^4]: Ibid.
“The American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial in Washington,” and dedicated to veterans whose war-time experiences have left them with life-changing injuries, the memorial project has been in the planning and implementation for sixteen years. Its dedication day was October 5, 2014, and the news and human-interest stories about it that converged in the media illuminate our analysis about the times in which we live.5

One of the veterans whose picture will appear in the memorial’s structures is Army Lt. Dawn Halfaker, who lost her right arm in an explosion while serving in Iraq. Now, ten years later, she is the chairwoman of the Wounded Warriors Project. In an interview with The Associated Press, Halfaker was asked why the memorial is important: “I think it will bring it home for visitors. I think it will give people a better understanding of how somebody’s life is forever changed and really help them understand the sacrifice a little bit more.” Others involved with the project have described its purpose with the same sacrificial language, such as Arthur Wilson, another disabled veteran from the Vietnam era, and co-founder of the foundation tasked with building the memorial: “Who could take issue with honoring those who have given a life sacrifice?” Yet another young veteran of the U.S. recent wars, whose photograph in the memorial structure portrays him at his Purple Heart ceremony in a wheelchair, had this to say, when interviewed about his experience: “It’s a blessing to be wounded in the name of my country.”6

In our time, it seems that the only words we have to speak about the wounds of war are steeped in sacrifice. Our forgetful era is characterized by seemingly unaware and unending repetitions of Owen’s “old Lie.”7 We should stop and think about the spectacle of these sacrificial rationalizations that mostly are met with a resounding lack of any critical appraisal. Is there really nothing more to be said after hearing for the millionth time, “it is sweet to die (or be wounded) for one’s country?” Used in this way, sacrificial language has the impact of creating a deafening silence.

A Code of Distortion and Concealment

This is why Samet’s courage and thought are so striking. Her question about our difficulty facing futility in war is one that I also have asked, though phrased in somewhat of a different way: If we didn’t describe the deaths of soldiers as “the ultimate sacrifice,” what would we say instead?8 Samet notes that the

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6 All quotes come from Martin, Building a monument, and The Associated Press, Disabled Veterans Memorial.
7 Samet writes, “Suggesting that a death in battle was in vain – ‘Lives were wasted’ in Fallujah, a former Marine told the Times, ‘and now everyone back home sees that’ – also starkly exposes what the World War I poet Wilfred Owen described as the ‘old Lie’ about the unadulterated sweetness of dying for one’s country.” (Can an American soldier ever die in vain?, 77).
sentimental language we use to speak of war is in fact “[. . .] a code of distortion, misdirection and concealment.” But as she attempts to think this through, she gets caught up herself in the sacrificial tentacles of this discourse. She writes, “It isn’t easy to determine whether a war is futile. Perhaps it never has been. Are all lost wars futile? Are all victories worth their price? Might Pyrrhic victories be described as futile too?” If Samet’s linguistic analysis were sharper with regard to the role of sacrifice in the linguistic subterfuge she describes, she might more easily find her way through these hard questions. For whenever we find ourselves speaking in terminology that describes war as weighing the price, considering the cost, cleansing the impurity, and surgically removing the cancerous evil (the language currently used by President Obama to describe warring efforts against the group known as “The Islamic State” or ISIS in 2014), we are in a sacrificial discursive world.

This language and imagery throw a sacred canopy over the realities of war and preclude clear thinking; but we can take Samet’s insight a step further, because not only does this way of speaking and understanding promote distortion and concealment of the realities of war, the “old Lie” Owen described. Daring to raise questions or invoke strong analysis makes one a heretic in the sacred world of war and war-culture. As a recent critic wrote, “Put a man in uniform, preferably a white man, give him a gun, and Americans will worship him.”

A Sociological Investigation of Sacrificial War-Culture

Social scientists long have been fascinated by the strong links between war, religion, the nation, and violence. Some have returned to the classic theory of social theorist Emile Durkheim, and his description of the sacred as totem to better understand American fascination with and worship of war. Communications scholar Carolyn Marvin asserts that though Durkheim believed that sacrificial blood rites primarily characterized only ancient societies, sacrificial relations and representations are alive and thriving in the modern nation as well. Her investigation traces the history and contemporary dynamics of sacrificial practices in the United States, characterized by values, rites and representations that mandate and rationalize the shedding of citizens’ blood. Sacrificial exchange creates the necessary glue to hold citizens together. She writes, “[. . .] violent blood sacrifice makes enduring groups cohere, even though such a claim challenges our most deeply held notions of civilized behavior.” In the United States, we draw upon the popular language of

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9 Samet, Can an American soldier ever die in vain?, p. 75.
10 Samet, Can an American soldier ever die in vain?, p. 77.
11 I define “war-culture” as the ethos, institutions and practices of war that interpenetrate with an ever-widening variety of cultural sites in the United States, including the economy, education, popular culture (especially youth culture), labor and consumption, religion, government, etc. See Chapter One of Denton-Borhaug, US war-culture, sacrifice and salvation.
Just War Theory to tell ourselves that we only invoke violence as “a last resort.” Perhaps more than anything else, this is what makes our warring violence “moral” in our own minds. In contrast, Marvin claims that the spectacle of ritual bloodletting in mass sacrifice, through war, is “[…] the hidden foundation of the system that leads us to define the nation as the memory of the last sacrifice.”

However, citizens hide this dark secret from themselves, promoting the myth that they want nothing better than peace. We live inside this tension, referred to by Marvin as taboo, as we participate together in the underlying national violent mechanism for group unity, and simultaneously adamantly refuse to recognize it.

Nations such as the United States express their deepest sense of identity in narrative myths and symbols about the violence through which they came into being; one only has to pay attention to the U.S. national anthem or the symbolic role of the American flag to see this dynamic at work. According to Marvin,

The flag soldiers carry into battle signifies their willingness to go to the border and die. This flag functions like the Christian cross that also stands at the border between life and death and also signifies sacrificial willingness, and recalls the origins of European nation-states within the sacrificial system of Christianity. The myth of the sacrificed Christ who dies for all men makes every sacrificed soldier a remodeled Christ dying to redeem his countrymen. Every soldier becomes a redemptive sacred figure to subsequent generations of celebrants.

Marvin concludes that the strong and shared memory of blood sacrifice operates as the most important unifying bond for the nation. Not a few Christian ethicists perpetuate this ideology, suggesting that humans most strongly demonstrate what we value by way of our willingness to die in its cause. Moreover, the same element provides the deepest and most prized dynamic for national self-identity and representation. This is why it is sweet to die (or to be disabled) for one’s country.

Popularly understood, as the bumpersticker puts it, “freedom isn’t free.” The central exhibit in the World War II Memorial on the National Mall is emblazoned with the phrase, “Here we pay the price of freedom.” When one asks, “Why isn’t freedom free?” the common response is to focus on many dangerous threats facing the nation that demand willingness to fight and die. But a plethora of scholars has probed this response as overly superficial and even manipulative, and examined what communications scholar Robert Ivies calls “victimage rhetoric.”

All along the road back to the beginnings of U.S. history, we find a trail of “enemies,” beginning with the native peoples in the Americas, to various Europeans (including the British), and increasingly in the 19th and 20th centuries, non-white peoples of various backgrounds and especially religions who many
Americans find alien and disturbing. At times of conflict and potential war, or at times of imperial desire for expansion and control, polarized and binary victimage rhetoric powerfully captures the popular imagination with respect to descriptions of whoever is the current “enemy.” While we are rational, peace-loving, and have a superior form of government, in contrast, they are barbarous, irrational, violence-loving, inferior – in fact less than fully human, and only our violence will stop them. War is the only option they have left us. In this way we paint ourselves as injured and innocent victims, thus excusing and providing a rationale for our violence against others.

Marvin challenges popular assumptions that justify the violence of war. Yes indeed, the nation faces security needs, but it is not primarily outside danger that is at the basis of war-culture in the United States, but our own need for group solidarity, not to mention our tendency to mask our imperialism from ourselves; we forge both unity and self-deception through sacrificial dynamics. Citizens must die in order for the nation to cohere; blood sacrifice ensures that our internal sense of security and national wellbeing will be maintained, and meanwhile, the material interests of those in power, who are materially benefitted by the processes of war-culture, are served and maintained. Even as we have transformed from a nation with military conscription to one with a professional army, sacrificial dynamics have not diminished, but continued and even expanded. The standard current rush to thank veterans for their service (largely characterized as sacrificial) creates an effective barrier against deeply listening to the ambiguity and injury of wartime experiences. But in addition, the felt need citizens express regarding their gratitude for soldiers’ sacrifices appears to have grown in correlation with the decrease in actual numbers of citizens carrying the burden of war’s violence.

Of course, these subterranean dynamics of national unity bought and maintained through blood sacrifice are in stark contrast to the convictions we find in the Declaration of Independence. There it was declared that life, liberty (freedom), and the pursuit of happiness are not commodities to be purchased with blood, but human rights bestowed by a beneficent Creator. Nevertheless, the sacrificial impetus endures, and at times of potential or actual war, such as the last decade and more of the United States, it surges. As Marvin declares,

Patriotism is a religion of the borders organized around a myth about the violence that begets them. This religion is as necessary to the American nation-state as its standing armies, its police and its administrative apparatus. Something like it is necessary to all groups that strive to be enduring.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Disciplining Through Sacrifice}

But this sacred not only is “unknowable,” a “dark secret” that citizens hide even from themselves, it also demands unquestioning obedience. Everyone must fall into line. And by and large, this precisely is what citizens do. In fact, citizens participate

\textsuperscript{18} Marvin, Blood sacrifice and the nation, p. 66.
in all kinds of disciplining measures to ensure that no deeper questions will be raised, no deeper analysis attempted. To do so would be to engage in a kind of heresy. Of course, most people think of “heresy” as belonging to arcane religious systems and demands. But this heresy operates in a different way. We find it in many examples of contemporary popular, political, and military culture.

For instance, recall that President Obama, as a senator, came out against the Iraq war, saying that it was a “mistake.” This was used against him during his first presidential campaign. One Internet campaign ad for John McCain featured Sam Cook, a 23-year-old veteran of the Iraq War. As the commercial opens, we see Cook, filmed only from the waist up, facing the camera and steadfastly declaring that Obama is unfit to be president because he does not understand the “sacrifices of war.” The repetitive use of sacrificial language throughout his short monolog builds to the end until, as he walks away from the camera, his lower body is revealed to show his prosthesis limb. Thus the centrality of “necessary sacrifices” is emphasized not only through word but also through visual image. And the message? Critical thought, questioning, and protest against war are heretical, and those who promote it, such as Obama, should be shunned, and removed from consideration of leadership positions. As Cook summarizes in the commercial, calling the Iraq War a “mistake” is equivalent to “disrespecting the sacrifices” of those who have fought. In essence, making a sacrifice means never making a mistake.19 The Wall Street Journal called the video the “first real run-away hit” for the Republican Party in the campaign, emphasizing that in the first month alone after its release on the Internet, it received over eight million views.20 Sacrifice “works.”

However, sacrificial linguistic subterfuge does not belong only to one political party. One only needs to examine President Obama’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize to see similar disciplining rhetoric at play:

Peace entails sacrifice [...]. The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity [...].21

The speech deftly draws on the rationalization of “the necessary sacrifices of war” to underwrite a defense of war, in what was supposed to be a speech about celebrating and promoting peace.

**Diverse Investigations of Sacrificial Exchange**

Marvin’s sociological analysis about why sacrificial dynamics are so prevalent in U.S. war-culture is complemented by additional investigations into the dynamics of sacrifice that come from a wide variety of disciplines. While we may learn much
from her investigation, I follow other theorists who are wary of any one universal
to fully explain sacrificial dynamics, opting instead for drawing from many
perspectives and analyses to probe sacrificial dynamics. In this way, we may more
thoroughly see and understand our reality in the United States.

In addition to Marvin’s work, for instance, Cognitive Linguist George Lakoff
persuasively has argued that “cognitive metaphors” unconsciously shape our way
of thinking, valuing, and acting. The dominant cognitive metaphor we tend to use
in our language to think and speak about morality is that of wealth, or “keeping the
moral books.”

Lakoff writes, “Whenever we are not talking literally about
money, and we ask whether a course of action is ‘worth it,’ we are using this
financial metaphor to treat the resulting well-being or harm as if they were
money [...].” Exchange systems, including and especially sacrificial notions of
exchange, are endemic to the ways we speak, think, and act, and we tend not to
question or analyze the logic behind them; they are normalized and function
unconsciously. The logic that is involved in the notion that something must be
offered up, destroyed, killed, and eviscerated, as exchange for something of
supposedly greater benefit to us, is very deeply embedded in the collective human
(sub)consciousness. This too is part of the reason why we tend not to raise questions
about sacrificial rationalizations and justifications.

However, in addition to everything above, analysis of sacrificial subterfuge
with respect to war eventually leads us into the realm of religion, and in
the United States, to examine more closely the way that Christian understandings,
proclamation, and practice feed into these dynamics. In nations such as the United
States, where Christian traditions, speech, and rituals have played such a dominant
role, Christian sacrificial exchange rationalizations, especially those related to
understandings about the death of Jesus as “the ultimate sacrifice for the salvation
of the world,” further electrify and sacralize the dynamics of our sacrificial war-
culture.

Soteriology may be Christianity’s most pluralistic doctrine, with its
unending and creative metaphors, images, and theories related to understandings of
Christian salvation. Nevertheless, in contemporary popular culture and especially
civil religious culture in the United States, a much more narrow understanding
predominates. Sacrificial images (and often even more narrowly, penal substitutionary images intermixed with sacrificial overtones) take center stage, to the
exclusion of just about any other possibility.

Moreover, in popular culture it is very difficult to tease apart civil religious
practices from specifically religious ones. Christian theological, liturgical, and
ecclesial exposition is replete with sacrificial discourse, and we often find this
discourse slipping into all kinds of civil religious rhetorical frames (and vice versa).
In addition, sacrificial exchange frameworks frequently merge with statements
about divine response to the reality of war, such as this quote from a recent issue of
a journal of protestant theology focusing on war:

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22 Lakoff G. Moral politics: how liberals and conservatives think. 2nd ed (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press;
2002), p. 44.
23 Ibid., p. 45.
what to do, for example, with that language of broken heads, crushed heads, wounded heads. What if God were to take all that pain and suffering on God’s own self? What if the “head now wounded” is not the head of the enemy, but the sacred head of God’s own son? What if God were to send God’s beloved son in order that all might be saved?\textsuperscript{25}

Note the unquestioned, even unconscious Christian sacrificial exchange metaphor in the above quote; such constructions beg to be addressed and critiqued. But for many Christians, questioning sacrificial interpretations of Jesus’ death raises hackles! Posing such questions treads on a sacred landscape that is at the core of many people’s religious identity and ritual practice. Nevertheless, we may not escape the conclusion that Christian soteriological habits contribute to the presence of a sacred canopy over the ethos, institutions, and practices of war in the United States. Asking why we describe the death of soldiers as an “ultimate sacrifice,” creates an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. This discomfort is mirrored in Christian settings, when we ask whether describing Jesus’ death as “the ultimate sacrifice” is a good idea. The seamless pattern of logic behind both linguistic constructions merges and is mutually reinforcing. This too is part of the explanation for the continuing linguistic distortion and concealment in our time, a reason behind the deafening silence.

This theological analysis puts into question sacred (civil) religious ideals that are deeply cherished even while their destructive consequences have been too little examined. Naming the damaging potentialities of sacrificial exchange may evoke a powerful, even hostile response. But in the end, honest analysis leads to the conclusion that an adequate Christian ethics must look inward and fully explore just how Christianity, even unwittingly, has become a handmaiden to cultures of war. Though articulating questions about the role of sacrificial constructions in Christianity raises hackles, this is a task that ethicists may not ignore.

**Asking Who Benefits**

At the same time, in addition to all these methods above, the sociological and psychological, cognitive linguistic, and the theological and rhetorical, a materialist investigation also is needed. In other words, we should ask: who benefits from our current political, social, religious, military, and economic arrangements with respect to war and war-culture? Who is served by these sacrificial constructions? Marvin argues that the blood ritual of sacrifice embedded in war serves to unify and enliven the nation. But sacrificial exchange discourse and systems operate within every human sphere and institution, and frequently they interact and collide with one another. The process of distortion and concealment they promote is not accidental or neutral, nor are the “costs” justified by these sacrifices distributed equitably. For example:

- Brazilian liberation theologian Jung Mo Sung explored the way that sacrificial exchange rhetoric and thinking concealed unjust economic

austerity programs in Latin America, heaping pain and misery on the poorest, while enriching a small elite. These inequitable arrangements were justified and mystified with the language of “the necessary sacrifice” for the economic health of the nation, and underwritten with the language of sacrificial Christian salvation.26

- Anthropologist Nancy Jay investigated the patriarchal sacrificial systems in ancient as well as contemporary societies through which males utilize sacrifice as a way to naturalize the consolidation of male power and “expiate” femaleness, especially female reproductive power. According to Jay, the logic and rituals of sacrifice not only create a useful way to control religious meaning, but are equally effective in centralizing channels of communication with transcendent powers who provide legitimation for the (patriarchal) social order [...]. Sacrifice becomes coterminous with patriarchal civilization; domination is “sacrificially maintained.”27

- When Nobel Laureate Jody Williams recently gave the Convocation address at the college where I teach, “Why Do We Glorify War?” she had an immensely practical and material response to the question she raised. If we didn’t glorify war, we would never be able to convince 17- and 18-year-olds to enlist! Of course, this precisely was the insight of Wilfred Owens, and the criticism he raised may be taken a step further with a materialist analysis. Currently I am investigating how sacrificial war rhetoric has the outcome of concealing a permanent war economy in the United States that benefits too few, and promotes a permanent predisposition toward war, while the many are left with a dilapidated health, education, and social infrastructure.28

The examples above only begin to suggest the importance of a material analysis that illuminates just who benefits from diverse sacrificial social arrangements and rhetorical frames in the United States and wider world.

A Two-Fold Response to Sacrificial War-Culture

I encourage a two-fold method for responding to these realities. First, the task for scholars and others is to peel back the layers of sacrificial constructions, to understand exactly what comprises them, and illuminate their functioning and consequences. One presentation that I created was titled, “How Did War Become Religious?” Before anything else, we need eyes to see past the distortion and

subterfuge, wake up from the smothering dream, and recognize our reality in the United States. This first task belongs to the process of shining investigative light on what formerly had been concealed, mystified, or masked. In the case of the recent memorialization on the National Mall, for instance, we can illumine the sacrificial discourse that has shaped and surrounded this process of memorialization. We further may explore the ways sacrificial discourse functions to silence deeper or contradictory analyses, so that one central meaning is consolidated to interpret the vastness of injury from our recent wars. Recall Veteran Wilson’s words: “Who could take issue with honoring those who have given a life sacrifice?” Recognizing the phenomenon that formerly was buried in our consciousness is the first all-important step.

The second task has to do with what I call, borrowing from Brazilian theologian Jung Mo Sung, “detranscendentalizing.” After consciously seeing our reality, the ethical task facing citizens is to try to take charge of it. When Sung saw that “the market” in Brazil and other countries of South America was sacralized through sacrificial rhetorical subterfuge, he did not move to demonize all market structures; instead, he advocated for stripping away the transcendentalization that had taken place, so that the market might be seen more truthfully as a human construction, prone to all the limitations of all human creations. According to Sung, once the sacred canopy has been dispensed with, the process of criticism and transformation becomes more open and available. One important result for Sung was that it became possible to ask who benefited from current market structures, and who was harmed. Imagine analyzing the same set of questions with regard to the sacralized war-culture in the United States.

Finally, for those of us whose work is in political theology, I underscore the theological ethical task that confronts Christians and theologians. While various theologians of recent times have more seriously questioned the centrality of sacrificial language, logic, and practices in Christianity, Sung perhaps says it best:

We know that the market absorbed its sacrificial theology from a determined historical configuration of Christianity. It is obvious that sacrificialism was and is present in many other religions and societies. The influence of Christian sacrificial theology in the mentality of the West is also undeniable. In the struggle against the culture of insensitivity that marks our time, it is fundamental that we show that human suffering, particularly the suffering of the poor and the excluded, is not part of God’s demand for salvation. We need living practices and witnesses to show that what God wants is “mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt. 9:13).

At the same time, though some Christian theologians have begun to criticize sacrificialism in Western Christianity, very few have tied this criticism to

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29 I draw from the theoretical backbone of Jon Sobrino’s theological endeavor for the process I describe above. Sobrino in turn is indebted to philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría for his investigation regarding the liberative process of seeing reality, bearing reality, and taking charge of reality for a more humane and just world. Among other works, see Sobrino J. Where is god? Earthquake, terror, barbarity, and hope (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; 2004).
30 Sung, Reclaiming liberation theology.
U.S. war-culture. But if we hope adequately to address the disciplining omnipotent and omniscient sacrificial sacred canopy that currently shrouds U.S. ways of war, we must face head on the troubling consequences of a sacrificial Christianity in the West. How must Christianity grow to meet the challenge of the behemoth of sacrificial war-culture in the United States? Religious sacrificial constructions are part of the deepest and least conscious beginnings of the smothering dream, growing into a force that blunts our conscience and blurs our vision. If war were not religious, returning to Samet’s excellent question, would we finally arrive at the conclusion that indeed, “war is futile”? Released from the constraints of heresy for daring to challenge a transcendentlized but all-too-human institution, war, what changes would emerge as possible in our imaginations? For now, I am still in the process of trying to imagine logic and language to respond to the question, “If we didn’t describe the deaths of soldiers as ‘an ultimate sacrifice,’ what would we say?”

Notes on contributor


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1 In “Detranscendentalizing War,” I add to the work of other theologians who are attempting to reimagine a nonsacrificial soteriology. See Denton-Borhaug, US war-culture, sacrifice and salvation, 182ff.
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