

Introduction

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This issue grew out of its editors' conversations on late medieval Christianity and on the different forms in which contemporary critical theory seeks to grasp its diverse practices and ideas. Is this "grasping" inextricably bound up with the will to dominate, as seems to be the case in much contemporary writing on medieval religious texts? We decided to organize a special issue on the subject of "sacrifice" in medieval and early modern culture. For a journal committed to inquiries that weave together history and theory in approaches which will not allow traditional disciplinary boundaries to control their explorations, "sacrifice" seemed a particularly fruitful concept to explore.

Sacrifice was central in late medieval Catholicism, central in theology, and central in the Mass where Christ's sacrifice was enacted. Reformation forms of Christianity rejected this understanding of what they inherited as the central act of worship. Christ had been sacrificed once and for all (Heb. 10). However, magisterial Protestants made an equally important place for sacrifice in their versions of Christianity, equally important but very different. Perhaps, we wondered, the shared story of Abraham and Isaac would provide an illuminating entry into profound transformations of Christianity and its subjects in this domain. How did what Protestant cultures make of this biblical story relate to this narrative's place in medieval Catholicism? And how would one understand both continuities and changes? But we could see many other possible lines of inquiries from different disciplinary and theoretical paradigms that might yield fruitful contributions to the study of medieval and early modern cultures. So in our suggestion of the kind of questions we had in mind for this special issue, we wrote as follows (*JMEMS* 30 [2000]: 430):

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In devoting a special issue to the topic of sacrifice, we wish to explore this topic within the context of medieval and early modern cultures (Christian, pre-Christian, Judaic, Islamic, and/or their interactions), and as part of an exploration of the way in which medieval culture and its transformations have been perceived. Examples of the kinds of questions we are interested in include the following: questions of soteriology and atonement, the role of sacrifice in ritual and theater (in which an actor stands in for another), its role in formations of subjectivity and in the self-understanding of social groups, in exegesis, in the poetics of sacrifice in literary texts, and in the relation of modernity to premodernity. Are there antisacrificial understandings of atonement in the Middle Ages? What are the social and psychic consequences for political and cultural forms of the Reformed rejection of the Mass as a sacrifice?

With this outline in mind, Duke's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies planned a lecture series on "sacrifice" and sought funding from the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Professor William Chafe. We would like to express our thanks for his support of this proposal, one that led to the lectures that have become the articles by Allen Frantzen, Lee Patterson, Michael Schoenfeldt, and William Cavanaugh. The fifth article by Simon Gaunt was a response to the proposal we published in *JMEMS*; it exemplifies the potentials of a psychoanalytic historicism in addressing medieval texts and cultures with specificity. The articles that grew out of the lectures themselves represent an extremely diverse set of theoretical commitments and study and an even more diverse range of materials. These articles range from medieval drama made out of the story of Abraham and Isaac to chivalric sacrifice, nationalism, and the First World War; from Jewish responses to Christian violence and its narratives to Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*; from conflicts between Catholic tradition and Reformation theologies of the Eucharist to the emergence of politics and ideologies of the subject; from Catholic devotion centered on Christ's Passion to Protestant writings about sacrifice (Donne, Herbert, and Milton) which transformed and/or sidelined Christ's Passion.