

Response to Taussig-Rubbo, “Sacred Property: Searching for Value in the 9/11 Rubble”

In “Sacred Property: Searching for Value in the 9/11 Rubble,” Mateo Taussig-Rubbo discusses the various, sometimes conflicting, kinds of value that are assigned to the locations and physical remnants of the 9/11 attacks. The essay compares several ways that these spaces and remnants undergo changes in valuation and are made “sacred,” according to different conceptions of the term. But among the most thought-provoking moments in the piece comes when Taussig-Rubbo notes the point at which the idea of sacrifice – literally “making sacred” – fails to coherently frame the events of 9/11: “Perhaps the biggest impediment to an application of the sacrificial schematic is that we cannot accept that the terrorists are in the position of sacrificer: we have a result of sacrifice—the sacred, the instantiation of the U.S.—while displacing the actor who created that meaning for us.” The sacrificer, for Hubert and Mauss, is “the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects.”¹ Undoubtedly this is a problematic designation for the 9/11 attackers – for the sacred to emerge with the attackers as cause, says Taussig-Rubbo, is “too awkward to accept,” presumably because it casts the attackers as necessary, even beneficial in some way, and as having benefited.

According to Rene Girard’s similarly canonical formulation of sacrifice, the 9/11 attacks would fail to qualify for another significant reason: Sacrifice should not lead to vengeance or retribution; indeed, it is meant to subdue violence rather than inflame it. (This quelling of violence does not always come about, of course, but when more bloodshed results from a sacrifice, Girard sees a malfunction of the sacrificial mechanism). The aftermath of 9/11 demonstrates a failure on the count of non-retribution, and thus another incoherence in the application of the category of “sacrifice.” But despite these two conspicuous misalignments, Taussig-Rubbo’s analysis reveals quite a bit about the 9/11 events and their aftermath that does call to mind notions of sacrifice. To approach the apparent inconsistency, we might consider Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle’s idea of national religion, and its role in “organizing killing energy.”² Marvin and Ingle talk about the “soldier resurrected in the flag” as the totem of nationalism-as-religion; it is the nation that is rejuvenated with each death, even at the hand of an enemy, thereby accruing the benefits of the sacrifice – the nation becomes the sacrificer.

For Marvin and Ingle, the sacrifice must be willingly undertaken on the part of society to function properly (soldiers must be sent to their deaths with society’s consent); thus, their framework would seem only to apply to certain categories of the 9/11 dead. Taussig-Rubbo too notes the complexity that arises from these different categories of deaths: “[S]hould we distinguish the dead emergency workers from the civilians? Was one group heroic and self-sacrificing (Flight 93), the other victimized and sacrificed?” But Marvin and Ingle’s core

¹ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W.D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 10.

² see Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, “Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 767-780.

argument, that deaths that otherwise might seem random or without purpose are used to construct group cohesion and stimulate nationalism, is relevant. They write, “[W]hat keeps the group together and makes us feel unified is not the sacrifice of the enemy but the sacrifice of our own.”³ American citizens might disagree heartily on how to deal with the “enemy” post-9/11, but Taussig-Rubbo shows how widespread (though various) has been the sacralization of the Americans who died, and how they have been encompassed within an official rhetoric of sacrifice. Taussig-Rubbo suggests at several points that the “value” of 9/11 space and rubble, the sacred character, has been shepherded and employed by the nation – he notes, for example, the “deployment of Ground Zero to mythically authorize the war on terror.” Though the usage may be imprecise, the American deaths have been officially coded, in order to stimulate nationalism, as “a sacrifice of our own” within the religion of nationalism.

Marvin and Ingle liken the religion of nationalism to sectarian religion, arguing that “sacrificial death...defines both sectarian and national identity.”⁴ In his final analysis, Taussig-Rubbo concludes that neither can quite hem in the event-generated sacred: “I find myself wanting to distinguish between two sacreds, one which is officially recognized and thereby contained and disempowered, and one which seems genuinely a site of power and uncontained potential.” Similarly, “the ‘religious’ is not the only place we find the sacred. We might ask then, whether, within our current constellation, we should think of the sacred as a religious category.” The suggestion is that we should not, that “the sacred” transcends religious categories. Taussig-Rubbo considers the tensions that arise when different kinds of “value” come into contact – market value versus sacred value, for example. Yet questions remain about the tensions that may arise when this transcendent, event-generated sacred, not bound by or coextensive with religion, comes into contact with notions of the sacred that *are* grounded in a particular religious sensibility or frameworks.

In the third case that Taussig-Rubbo relates, that of the debate surrounding possible uses for the crash site of United Flight 93, one member of the Families of Flight 93 group argues that the “blood, bones and the souls” of those who died on the flight, including his cousin, are present on the land, thus complicating the “value” that adheres to it. Taussig-Rubbo discusses the implications that the statement has for conceptions of property – Is the land private or public? Has its property value increased as much as the current owners say it has, or indeed in any quantifiable way? Has the land has been “paid for” with these blood, bones, and souls? If, for the author of that statement, the idea of “souls” is linked to a religiously-grounded conception of the sacred (and, like that of “unconsecrated ground,” also invoked by the Families, it reasonably might be), does that conception of the sacred remain distinct from – even, perhaps, at odds with – both the sacrality generated by the “event,” and the sacrality constructed by the nation? What complications might arise from contact between religiously-framed notions of the sacred and notions of a larger, event-generated sacred? Is the religiously-framed sacred merely subsumed into either the event-generated or the officially-marshaled sacred (as other ideas about “property” or “value” are subsumed or replaced by the *ex post* value of the remnants)?

One salient example of the possible discrepancy between religious versus event-generated conceptions of the sacred returns us to the point with which I began – the ill fit between the

³ Marvin and Ingle, 772.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

attackers and the “sacrifier” designation. The designation is an ill fit not only because it is offputting or offends the sensibilities, but because within their own religiously-informed sacrificial framework, the attackers occupy a different role, as “victims in the mold of Isaac.” It would be interesting to look at how the attackers and their milieu regarded the spaces and remnants of the attacks – as permeated with what kind of value, as occupying what position or role in their own spreading film of the sacred?

Kristen Tobey