

Sacred Media / Global Sacrifice

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The media has made the concept of a global city into reality. Yet the more we watch and listen, the less we consciously participate in the positive construction of our public and private lives. Ironically, this loss of autonomy is accompanied by an unprecedented expenditure of energy and resources devoted to the aggressive reproduction of a for-profit electronic architecture. The 'sacred media' is so-called because it expresses the virtues of technical efficiency. It is quickly becoming the arbiter of all values. We are taught that its existence depends on an alleged free market. Without questioning this assumption we have engaged in building a global hive where any attempt to question the media's legitimacy faces the opprobrium of a rigid social hierarchy, defended in the last instance by a Pentagon of brutal power. Consider the recent invasion of Iraq as the deployment of a multinational media army of thousands protected by the full might of the US and British military, and you understand the power of sacred media. Whatever fate holds for the poor Iraqis, we can be certain that the country will become safe, sooner or later, for the telecommunications market.

I would like to examine the problem of how and why the electronic media undermines the self-conscious humanist influence on history. To pose the question more succinctly, if today's media is part of the problem, how can we transform it into part of the solution?

I will treat this question by excavating the components of the sacred media and by looking at these artifacts under the microscope of history and anthropology. I wish to be brief and concise because I think this is a familiar topic to everyone even if we use different ideas and words to talk about it. What we need is more translation, more conversation, and more experimentation devoted specifically to creating a useful media - a 'tool for conviviality' according to the vision of the late Ivan Illich.

I am grateful to the conference organizers and particularly my colleague Olli Alho of the YLE (Finnish Broadcasting) for the opportunity to be in this beautiful land, far from the morally ambiguous judgments of scholarly bureaucrats. I hope therefore that I have chosen the appropriate challenge to inaugurate this conference; for me anyway the time has come to be quite specific about the notion of a sacred media. What constitutes its sanctity? Is it not simply disguising an agenda of hubris and public relations uttered daily in a barrage of smooth lies and insidious perversions?

Among other hypotheses is a claim that the sacred poetry of temple priests was the first spoken language. If true, then archaeology shows us that the first universal media was located in the urban ceremonial centre. The pyramids of Egypt and Mexico, ziggurat of Mesopotamia, wats of Southeast Asia, hang-tu or rammed-earth mounds of Shang China and North America and the acropolis of Greece were not places devoted exclusively to the rituals of sacrifice but rather stages for the general articulation of all human social and cultural potentials. Their performances

and rituals embodied a sacrosanct quality derived literally from their association with a blood-drenched altar, symbolic of a death that gave life to others.

At its origins, language conveyed the rules for economic exchange, social kinship, craftsmanship, the rhythm of music and science of knowledge. As poetry became tradition, the rules of cooperative labour were instituted in the recitation of ritual code. In this way, temple priests broadcast a divine message from their altars by calling their subjects to pay tribute in cultivating the sacred precincts and offering their bounty, including children, as sacrifice to the deity. Their instructions were disseminated to the limits of the territorial realm as codes of standard measures, personal obligations, and hierarchical privileges. The central requirement was to fulfil ritual - a singular, violent act that converted hunting-and-gathering bands into clans, then tribes and eventually confederacies of social labourers capable of an ever-increasing abundance. From our critical perspective, it could be said that the sacred language of prayer was indeed the key to the accumulation of material wealth. Fealty to the divine commands meant violent sacrifice, yet it promised relief from scarcity. More generally, it was 'war and domination, rather than peace and cooperation [that] were ingrained in the original structure of the ancient city.'

This structure, hang-tu or 'rammed earth' in its most primitive form, and its adjacent habitations was the city and hub of a communication network surrounded by walls that represented both 'defensive fortifications and social restraints.' Violence and consent, sacrifice and well-being, death and life were symbolized within the walls of this sacred city where entry was forbidden to the uninitiated. Its limits were defined precisely by Plato and Aristotle as the radius of the audible human voice cast from a platform elevated above the tallest human head. This natural form of sound amplification caused the sacred incantations to echo through the baked-stone alleys and rebound from the perimeter walls. This resonating voice was material confirmation of the infinite power of the temple. It held townsmen, especially newcomers, in its thrall. The city functioned as a massive architectonic machine, harnessing the kinetic power of social labour and instructing its residents to extract, build, exchange, and concentrate the arts of life. The greatest crimes were those that violated or ignored the sacred codes of its rigid order. The universal polis was for Plato a geometrical absolute, his code 'a sterile monologue of totalitarian power.'

Revolutionary creeds and religious dogma

Throughout antiquity, this vision was copied to varying degrees by the mechanisms of trade, conquest, slavery, and violent sacrifice. The imperium was enshrined in the arts and letters, myth and ritual all reaffirming, among other rules, the idea of a central political authority directly associated with possession of the divine codes. Occasionally, revolutionaries or marauders disrupted this process but soon learned to construct their own altars and intoned new prayers, always demanding new sacrifices. Embarking on this paradigm, their myths varied and their incantations appeared strange at first but returned inevitably to familiar rituals of the sacrificial centre.

In this sense, Christianity revolutionized Rome by rewriting its code for conquest and domination into a scenario for gaining providential hegemony. Seeking tribute from far-flung nations was

transformed by the vehicle of the gospel word into 'spreading the good news'. More than just an exercise in public relations, this revolutionary doctrine transformed the Appian Way from a one-way supply line into the trunk of an interactive network resonating with the messages of a singular, transcendental power. At maximum capacity, this network fed cities throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. It unleashed the fires of resentment and rebellion on the periphery but also kindled the creative energy of Renaissance symbolism in the centre.

Islam participated grandly in the ensuing rebellion, its force proportional to its distance from the imperial centres of Rome, Byzantium, and Persia. In less than three centuries it would eventually overrun two of these centres and camp for a millennium on the doorstep of the third. The Qur'an was a new scriptural code, and it rejuvenated the project of civilization around an expansive periphery describing an arc around the outer limits of Christendom to the southern, eastern and western oceans and up to the Great Wall of China. In their respective histories, Rome and Mecca functioned as centres of immanent divinity, broadcasting their divine messages through the sacred media of scripture.

Religious dogma travelled quickly by means of recitation and ritual practice; armed conquerors followed apace accompanied by merchants and missionaries eager to complete the job of social and political transformation. Pilgrimage enshrined this ritual forever. Obstacles to the exploitation of natural wealth and human resources were either subsumed or pulverized and dispersed. The very notion of forward historical progress, codified by Giambattista Vico in the West and Ibn Khaldûn in the East, was forged within the ecumenical whirl of a sacred imperium. Knowledge and customs were evaluated for their similarities or differences according to the sacred codes. Some societies assimilated quickly by syncretically merging their deities with those of the conquerors. Others resisted and either perished or migrated to the periphery.

The great world-historical transformations - the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions - depended on a sacred media to amalgamate the sciences, ethics and aesthetics of diverse peoples into tool kits, assemblages, and what archaeologists refer to as cultural traditions that could address material and social challenges. From the perspective of information theory, we could refer to cultures as massive data bases always capable of generating innovative solutions to once-intractable problems. The impact of religious conversion, for instance, on the evolutionary schema of population genetics might confer adaptive advantage through the merging of once-distant peoples. On the other hand, we must acknowledge the violence inherent to this process as in the abrupt colonial intrusions into Africa and the Americas.

Evolution hard-wired us to operate according to an axiom of survival. It is a universal source code composed of simple yet brutal formulas. We are often ignorant of the violent consequences of these rules and pursue them blindly, groping along the way for moral and ethical justifications. The only guarantee is the diversity that creates new problems, new mergers, and renewed hope for survival. The opposite movement of isolation equals extinction. 'The unique fault which can afflict a human group and prevent it from completely fulfilling its nature,' wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'is to be alone.' We see this principle at work from the tragedies of Sophocles to the lonely-hearts columns of our daily newspapers. The sacred media unites us, but it is indifferent to the order that also separates us and crushes the weak.

This paradox is a defining theme of the modern era. Once our rationality and technical prowess could be codified and disseminated by maps and the printed word, a new group of revolutionaries upgraded the continental-wide operating system. The Protestant Reformation translated and democratized worship, in essence, turning the Holy Scriptures into a translatable text, a type of 'open source free ware' for the human spirit that was amenable to various interpretations including those manifest in Calvinist and also socialist utopias. Above all else, these codes enabled self-conscious historical reflection and the liberation of science from religious dogma. The laws of society could be viewed in historical perspective, then rewritten or upgraded in conformity to changed conditions. The resulting power of the Enlightenment was fuelled by the immanent vision of an anthropocentrically ordered universe.

Property, profanation and commerce

Max Weber understood clearly the cosmological implications of this spiritual revolution which liberated humanity from direct control by the ritual centre. For him, maximum personal liberty signified the advantages of a portable code that was exchanged from place to place and person to person in the form of commodities and currencies. This code universalised the language of property. What men owned was what they made for themselves rather than what they received as gifts from the gods. In its alienability, private property was profane and all the more attractive for its association with a power that seemed to escape from the dogma of jealous gods.

During the colonial era, zealous invaders armed with their contemporary weapons of mass destruction reduced the old sacred altars to objects for commercial trade. How else can we characterize the work of Napoleon in Africa or the British in India except by noting the violent profanation of ancient monuments as so many demonstrations of the power to dismantle, crate and export an obelisk or even an entire temple? Are the recent outrages in Mesopotamia not symbolic of this systematic looting? Different in scale only to the Taliban's dynamiting of Buddhist shrines in Afghanistan?

The desecration of the old, sacred architectonics was depicted by Gustave Flaubert as the rape of the temple priestess Salammbô by a starving mercenary soldier. In other cases, the colonizer saw his own profane objects misappropriated as sacrosanct as in the fetishistic cargo cults of Micronesia. I am thinking here too of the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* where an empty Coca Cola bottle falls from the heavens onto a Bushman in the Kalahari desert, symbolizing the deity's resigned collaboration in the act of pollution, his sheer disgust at the profanation of traditional virtues. The sundering of cultural and intellectual traditions - whether we call it colonialism, imperialism or globalism - always signals fresh waves of chaotic bloodletting. Disdainfully assisted by the international weapons trade, the process continues to set the stage for new episodes of mechanized extermination.

But even the most primitive tools can be honed into weapons of mass destruction whenever the mass media injects its codes. In Rwanda, for example, the principal murder weapons were panga, primitive field implements, employed to the ends of genocide. As revealed during the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, the executioners were incited to carry out their grim work by the rhythms of popular susu music broadcast by Radio Mille Collines with intermittent messages identifying and dehumanising a phantom enemy. Over 800,000 souls perished in that media-inspired frenzy that has been deemed more technically efficient at mass

murder than even the Nazi death machine.

The forensic inquiry into mass murder provides forceful evidence of an unbroken continuity of these sacrificial events at a distance of a half-century from each other. The identity of the victims and executioners changes constantly. By framing them as historical performances, the media mythologizes the present. It declares the performance over when there is no ending at all, just a shift in location and schedule. By deflating a sense of immediacy, the sacred media dissolves our role as historical agents and render us powerless.

The temples lie in ruins

Lurking behind the modern bourgeois media is a silent authority. It teaches that technique exists only to facilitate desire. Be it desire for industrial accumulation or mechanised death, the audience is clearly awed by technique and paralysed when it comes to questioning the ethical legitimacy underpinning its production. We ought to be concerned about this new individual whom Kafka portrayed as confused about his own physique, perplexed by his own laws, and continually frustrated in his attempt to reach an inaccessible sacred centre. Nietzsche disdained this individual's surrender to an ideology of victimization that bore only faint traces of religiosity and has become today a technique for managing identity as another form of property. Modern religion, Nietzsche claimed, has evacuated its authentic past and replaced sacrosanct meaning with a mechanical impulse to genuflect at any display of power no matter how banal. Loss of nerve, loss of faith, declining respect for philosophy and science (but not engineering), public morality boiled down to questions of personal security - the temples lie in ruins while the gods have left to search elsewhere in the cosmos for signs of intelligent life!

We have moved further down this road in a century of war and genocide. Each eruption of the abominable spectacle of human suffering and dying is labelled as a dilemma to be overcome by technical competency. As the media's capacity to project images of conflict increases, so does its own ability to interfere and distract by proclaiming the obvious: the mass media is responsible for communicating these images and therefore assumes responsibility for ending them. This myth is nurtured by two facts.

First, the multinational media is an instrument wielded by corporate monopolies with budgets rivalling those of many sovereign nations. It assists, indeed it is essential, in the administration of consumption and political representation. I would not say that telecommunications has deliberately undermined the free market or subverted democracy because its audience has consented loudly to a world defined as much by markets as geography. A monopoly creates its own centre. Within the theatrical format, its leading personalities can orchestrate programming to resemble sacred ritual. This is the case with computer manufacturers like Apple who organize semi-annual pilgrimages to mesmerize loyal consumers with the latest innovations and products. They have borrowed these techniques in part from televangelism or the electronic church where liturgy and scripture are overdetermined by the commercial television format. Every day throughout the cable universe, hundreds of thousands of 'believers' purchase their indulgences from fiery preachers. Their money encourages a politics of social reaction and neocolonialism; it also fosters a sense of greed and tremendous interpersonal mistrust. Yet there can be no question about the profound influence of these dystopic visions upon the foreign policy of the United States and other crypto-theocracies.

Secondly, an important consequence of the global media is its tendency to evade our conscious

perception, to integrate itself into our daily lives with as much regularity as the need for electricity and water. The elaboration of the axiom has not yet reached its limits, but we are already witnessing the contraction of the visible instruments of media power as cables are sunk deep underground while communications satellites orbit beyond ordinary eyesight. The desire to hide from the audience is fed by a seemingly automatic expansion of capacity and the miniaturization of the necessary electronic circuitry. Accordingly, 'Moore's Law' - a business formula that has attained the practical status of a scientific theorem - predicts that the storage capacity of a microchip doubles every eighteen months while its average price falls by half. This principle now drives research in nanotechnology and promises to soon bridge the silicon-carbon frontier between machine and human.

In brief, microchip production is the technological equivalent of a perpetual motion machine whose primary effect is to persuade consumers that its idealized perfection conquers all risk. When the salesmen for this technology guarantee a future life better than this life, they are unquestionably promoting a sacred technology. The ultimate commodity-fetish is manmade artificial intelligence. Its insertion into every corner of social space betrays a sense of godlike ubiquity similar to the spirit-worlds of primitive tribal worship. The 'divine' wisdom of this technology is quite simple. The gadget always responds to human supplications. The high-tech world is the ultimate theme park for an alienated existence, the nirvana of commercial idolatry and paradise of a mass eroticism overflowing with kinetic desire. We pray daily via computer, phone, television, and countless interactive devices that redefine the meaning of education, medicine, and civic life. These activities merge pedagogical and therapeutic interactions with technology, making it no longer possible to distinguish doctors and teachers from air traffic controllers.

This religion is a global network connecting millions of small decentralised worshippers to gargantuan corporate monopolies whose executives realize that the one act of divine retribution we most fear is disruption of service. A case in point was the Y2K hoax, a technological bluff of vast dimensions perpetrated by a handful of monopolists to extort billions of dollars from code-ignorant primitives. Such use of knowledge ought to give us an idea of how priests once frightened illiterate peasants and monarchs alike into believing that the earth would end on a given date. This phobic relationship is typical of contemporary worship. The new priesthood is preaching a market theology, warning us not to stop consuming lest the sky fall down. They do not counsel confession or any form of introspection. All thinking, in fact, is anathema to them. They are smooth operators and are rarely seen doing anything except posing narcissistically.

What distinguishes the sacred media from archaic sacrificial religion is the absence of a central sacred subject. No Christ, no Buddha, neither Muhammad nor Moses. Sacred media mythologizes reality in the guise of a thousand or two satellite channels and a hundred thousand celebrities. It does not even demand nor does it encourage our presence at the altar. This relationship to the real transforms ontological being - ongoing historical presence or Dasein - into a variable of time and space. Propinquity is a matter of subjective choice and therefore infused with ethical, political, and aesthetic considerations. We eat and breathe at a safe distance from the turmoil of conflict and famine, yet we are virtually present.

As an audience, we accept the rationing of information because its enforced scarcity follows the logic of profit. Once the cameraman has panned a full 180°, the aesthetic limit according to industry standards, we are already bored with his images and we switch channels. When the text begins to instruct rather than stimulate, we close the book. Rather than ask the difficult questions concerning the agency of the violence before our eyes, we disappear from the scene in the moral equivalent to hit-and-run driving. Our consent to this violence is an ethical decision to which we have become politically acquiescent.

The sacred media, in other words, embodies many aspects of sacrificial religion, particularly its fixation on violent acts, but it fails ultimately where the ancient rituals such as Greek tragedy succeeded in sustaining our attention before, during, and after the performance. Faith in the sacred media invites us to skip to the next scene without resolving a single crisis. Formerly, our unmediated participation was obligatory (and there are many examples of rituals where the participant falls asleep at the risk of death); today our participation is optional and limited.

The results of the bureaucratically programmed attention span are everywhere contradictory. Global connectivity has sharpened our awareness of ecological catastrophes, but the profits earned by disseminating this knowledge contribute directly to the very same corporate polluters. Even the highly effective tactic of mass consumer boycott has disappeared from the repertoire of popular resistance. Late last year a massive international antiwar movement coalesced and then disappeared just as suddenly. These were temporary happenings whose creative force evaporated before a media determined to undermine their legitimacy. I invite you to reflect on the many other examples of this interplay between ethics and propinquity that result all too often in capitulation to superior technological force.

It seems that the only sustainable media actions are those that are profitable, in other words, content programming, electronic surveillance, mapping and classification. Their political rationale follows the logic of national security and the permanent state of emergency that has taken hold since September 11, 2001. Many of these techniques and devices are commonly employed not only by governments but also corporate monopolies and global criminal cartels. The latter engage in smuggling everything from narcotics, weapons, and human organs to slaves and even industrial pollutants. It should come as no surprise to discover that sacred media is also a tool for international terrorism!

What are our choices?

I think the alternatives are fraught with risk while retreat or surrender would signify immense tragedy. The media is something we have created. Unlike scripture there cannot be a debate concerning its origins. Set into motion, liberated from its Platonic constraints, the media has evolved into a universal source code that competes successfully with established religious practices. Although it never replaces completely the 'fear and trembling' characteristic of a sacrificial faith, it can amplify and modify messages and sometimes distort them beyond recognition. This is the lesson of so-called fundamentalism, which distorts history to legitimise a reckless adventure toward the ethical precipice. The same process controls the market, politics, esthetics, and science. In all instances, the power of knowledge underlies the sacred - both

abstract universal knowledge and traditional localized knowledge. In the only game that really counts - the game of evolution - real power can be found not just in systematic knowledge but also at the margins of autistic and pathological thinking. It is with the goal of understanding the dialectic between these contradictory forms of knowledge and human creativity that we can speak of searching for a sustainable media, a technology that transmits but does not distort the self-realization of its authors and their permanent obligation to preserve and expand human freedom.

Though often maligned and usually for very good reasons, the televangelists of the electronic church instruct us how to use technological and economic rationale to build hospitals and universities, to furnish electricity and water, to educate and clothe children in the most devastated areas of the planet. These agencies may lack transparency and conceal nefarious political agendas, but structurally they can become one of many models for the reinvention of civil society based on democratic organization and imbued with an ethics of human rights and economic justice.

It seems one route to resuscitating the hope for world peace and transforming the present international disorder leads to the reconstruction of civil society and the domestication of the sacred media. We ought to proceed as if the programming absolutely depended upon drama because aesthetics is fundamental. The media can inform a world-wide audience that those who wield power are not above the law. There are good examples already including the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and former Yugoslavia and the extraordinary South African Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. Yet despite the compelling drama of these trials, their media coverage has been negligible. Opposition to such open transmissions originates within the politically reactionary board rooms of the media cartels. But that does not imply certain defeat. Even Washington had to abandoned its campaign against the International Criminal Court in the face of the nearly unanimous consent of the world community.

There is a full docket for these tribunals and their work is urgent. I am not suggesting that merely settling accounts justifies the process because that would simply lead to further escalation of the cycles of vengeance. It is precisely against this spiralling of violence and counter-violence, however, that the individuals responsible for genocide and other instances of mass murder ought to be identified and confronted with the evidence of their deeds, allowed to defend themselves publicly, and then judged.

The dramatization of real events does not require actors, makeup or costumes. There is a long list of defendants, complex charges and allegations, familiar and unfamiliar scenarios that require a generation of young professionals to inform and educate according both international principle and local cultural tradition. In so doing they can build new international accords while expanding and multiplying the number of forums devoted to social and human affairs. In the scope of the last quarter century, the sacred media faces difficult choices in its programming schedule, but each case is compelling in its own right: Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Timor, Algeria, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Chechnya, China, Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and Iraq, also the named and unnamed international criminal and terrorist cartels. The fear to those in power is that in the final analysis not even the best spin doctors or public relations agents can throw sand in the eyes of an attentive public.

As a forum for the revival of agonistic democracy, the media will become instrumental to a restoration of sacred ritual. This is the first necessary step to rewriting the universal code in a

language that preserves the human dimensions of history. There is no reason for continuing to sacrifice women, children, the infirm and poor. There are many lawful scapegoats worthy to acknowledge the pain they have sanctioned. Some we call terrorists, others men of affairs or state. Either way, they are dangerous characters!

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