Aztecs and us

by Martin E. Marty in the September 27, 2000 issue

In a *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* article titled “Capital Punishment and Human Sacrifice” (March 2000), Brian K. Smith explores “whether, in the practice and the ideology surrounding capital punishment, modern executions in the United States are comparable to the ideology and practice of those traditional religious rituals that have been deemed ‘sacrifices.’” He hopes to “show that some new light can be shed on a contemporary and ‘secular’ practice . . . by comparing it to traditional and ‘religious’ forms of killing.”

In the best phenomenological, religious-studies manner, he does not tell us whether he thinks ritual human sacrifice is wrong. Instead he wants to help us see why capital punishment is such a hot issue. He believes that “when the category of ‘sacrifice’ is brought to bear,” moral and political evaluations stand out and have to be reckoned with in fresh ways.

Religion is big on ritual, and “there is a ritualistic quality to the killings central to both human sacrifice and capital punishment.” Ritual is a “focusing lens” that heightens everything. In ritual, “humans imitate the ‘omniscience’ and ‘omnipotence’ they often attribute to their gods.”

The exact, exacting, publicized and predictable features of capital punishment serve to enforce the community of those not being sacrificed. David Carrasco observed that Aztec human sacrifices “had the effect both of generating social solidarity and intimidating potential renegades.” Punishment is secondary—there are countless noncapital ways to punish—to the ritual effect.

Note that executions are conducted behind closed doors, with ritual specialists and carefully chosen witnesses present; the description of the last ceremonial meal; the administration of last rites; the noting of the victim’s last words; the covering of the prisoner’s head; the protection of the identity of the executioner; the dispersal of the responsibility for the death. Are any of these necessary in mere punishment, Smith asks? In Missouri, for example, the condemned are called “patients,” and the lethally injecting surgeon swabs their arms with alcohol, “presumably to prevent infection!” All this for “ritualistic focus.” “Ritualized death is made to appear as unlike killing in the extra-ritual world as possible.”

“Sacrificial victims are typically selected from groups that have a liminal or marginal status within the society,” Smith says. René Girard noted that the sacrificed human or animal “must bear a sharp resemblance to the human categories excluded from the ranks of the ‘sacrificeable,’ while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion.” Formerly, domestic animals, slaves, small children and captured warriors served as sacrificial victims. In capital punishment here and now “a disproportionate number [are] non-white, single, young, poor and relatively uneducated and in some cases seriously mentally disturbed . . . and/or retarded.” They are “both ‘us’ and ‘not us.’” The killee is carefully described as both “monster” and subject of “humane killing.”

Smith’s point is “simply to emphasize that how we classify things matters. . . . The power of categories to change the understanding—and therefore the very nature—of events is nowhere more obvious than in the case of ‘sacrifice.’” If so, pay less attention to politics, statistics and argument, and more to the ritual surrounding the killing of the marginal. And ask why our society, almost alone among our colleague-republics, seeks to reinforce communal solidarity in this way. Maybe the Aztecs are our closer kin than contemporary nations are.