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# Sacrifice in a Post-Moral Society

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Sacrifice in a Post-Moral Society  
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About a year and a half ago, Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* was republished in celebration of its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. When Rauschenbusch first published his work in 1907, he reasonably could draw upon the resources of Christianity and the Biblical tradition to urge American citizens to address the critical social problems of his time. He viewed his society as a Christian one, and claimed that his religion was "the salt of the earth, the social preservative" (Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 226). The problems his society faced were significant. Industrialization and urbanization, with all the social dislocation and economic injustice that these entailed, were taking a toll on working men and women (and children for that matter) across the country. To have a more just society, sacrifices would have to be made. Not just sacrifices for one's friends and families, but sacrifices for fellow citizens one did not know—for strangers. Rauschenbusch saw religion, specifically Christianity, as critical to the task of making sacrifices. For him, religion "is a tremendous generator of self-sacrificing action" (Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 5).

Reading Rauschenbusch's work today, one cannot help but think of our own social crises and how we can address them. Today we face different but equally serious (if not more serious) challenges—the dramatic decline in the U.S. financial institutions, the loss of our manufacturing base, the decline of American diplomacy and our stature in the world, the constant energy crisis, and the unprecedented environmental concerns. Facing these challenges and overcoming them will not be easy, and sacrifices for the common good will have to be made.

But what are our resources now to motivate and legitimate such sacrifices? In a secular society—where many people don't believe in religion or at least consider it a private matter, separate from public or political concerns—can we even talk about sacrifice? Can we talk effectively about sacrifice in our consumer society? Upon what traditions could our political leaders draw in order to lead American citizens to make the kind of sacrifices needed today? In this paper I will paint a picture of the current situation and

why I think sacrifice for the common good is an endangered idea in our society. Just as with efforts to save an endangered animal, the first step is to recognize that it is endangered and why it is endangered. In the end, I would like to have a sense of the viability of sacrifice for the common good in a secular society as well as in a society increasingly defined by consumption. In short, my goal is to come to an understanding of sacrifice in what I will call a Post-Moral Society.

There are two key elements of a Post-Moral Society. First, there is what I would call a narrative element or lack thereof. Postmodern theorists argue that we have lost faith in any grand narrative that unites us as a people or nation. Such theorists might argue that our inability to *really* believe in a single grand narrative—whether it is a religion or a providential understanding of the history and destiny of our nation—isolates us from one another. Such isolation means that we no longer have a common framework within which we can talk about sacrifice, because sacrifice can only make sense, have meaning, within a framework or symbolic order that forms a community and to which we give our assent. For example, sacrifice for my country might make sense if I believe it is part of fulfilling God’s will, if I imagine that God established our nation as a “beacon upon a hill” to lead all the peoples of the world. How can I sacrifice myself without belief in such a framework or symbolic order that makes sense of my sacrifice?

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that moral judgments and actions only are justified within a framework or symbolic order of an actual community with its distinctive history, traditions, and rituals. His book *After Virtue* generated an incredible response from philosophers, theologians, and many others. It is arguably one of the most important works in moral theory written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in many ways its culturally relativist position in moral theory has won the day. Fewer scholars seem to be engaged in Kantian efforts to establish transcendental moral principles, for example, and the American Philosophical Association’s job market seems to be inundated with virtue ethicists who are indebted (whether they acknowledge it or not) to MacIntyre.

For MacIntyre, the thing to do is not to reveal or discover or impose some transcendental moral principles, but to find a good community that you can believe in and that can provide the framework or symbolic order for your own moral development. In the end we must find our own moral enclave instead of imagining a national moral community, let alone a world community. While many people find MacIntyre to be correct in his description of the moral life, it is with this prescription that they might differ. Jeffrey Stout does not differ greatly from MacIntyre in terms of the description of moral life (see his *Ethics After Babel*), but he certainly disagrees with MacIntyre’s prescription. Like many of MacIntyre’s critics, Stout wonders how we can think about moral life in a religiously and morally pluralistic country like the United States. Can we really function effectively as a people if we are

isolated in our little enclaves? In his recent work *Democracy & Tradition*, Stout argues that democracy itself *is* our tradition—that it forms (along with its founders and proponents and poets) the framework or symbolic order within which we can morally develop. Thus, it is democracy itself that can make sense of sacrifice. But is that enough? Can I imagine myself making sacrifices for the common good, for strangers, because I believe in the democracy of which those strangers are a part?

This reminds me of the claim made by the philosopher and pseudo-theologian Gianni Vattimo who states that he believes that he believes. The first “believe” is in the sense of opinion or possibility. The second “believe” is in the sense of firm conviction. So, we might translate, Vattimo believes or thinks that maybe he really believes in something—God, religion, whatever. Now Vattimo wants to argue that this is as much as we legitimately can expect today. From the end of colonialism to religious pluralism to the shrinking of the world through advances in technology and communication, we increasingly have come to understand that our views on the world and human nature are interpretive—that there is no foundation or ground to which we might appeal, no metaphysics, to bolster or justify our most deeply held beliefs. In other words, we are incapable ultimately of defending or proving the validity of our beliefs to others. Thus, we necessarily will hold those beliefs at a certain distance—merely believing, kind of believing, that we really believe in them. But if we do, can those beliefs possibly be a source for concerted social action on our part? Can they support the notion of sacrifice for the common good?<sup>1</sup>

The second element of the Post-Moral Society is economic. An underlying assumption of ethical theories is a scarcity of resources. If there is more than enough to go around, then there generally is much less conflict. If Frank and I are sitting under an apple tree and 100 apples fall on us, I probably won’t care much which one he grabs or if he grabs 10 of them. But if only two apples fall, we might end up in conflict (especially if we’re both really hungry). We tend to live in a society with lots of apples and relatively little conflict. Without conflict, we increasingly are not put in the position of having to take the moral

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<sup>1</sup> A very different perspective comes from a reading of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard. The faith of Abraham that Kierkegaard celebrates in *Fear and Trembling* is not a believing that one believes. It is simply belief—wholehearted, undoubting, unflappable conviction. Kierkegaard argued in another work that if a person “shall in truth will the Good, it is demanded that he must be willing to suffer all for the Good” (Kierkegaard, *Purity*, 148). Whether or not that made any sense to most people in Kierkegaard’s context, we still can ask if it makes sense in our own. Can we talk about *the Good* in a society more focused on *goods*—individual goods and commercial goods?

point of view (usually understood as the view from the other's perspective or the God's-eye view).

So what happens when most people get most of what they want or at least most of what they can reasonably expect? We end up with a condition of luxury and leisure where we simply don't have to worry or even think morally very often or even at all. By this I don't mean the day-to-day moral quandaries that we all face—whether or not to turn in those cool sunglasses to “lost and found,” whether or not to say we have a “conflicting meeting” to a colleague who needs our help (even if we really don't), or whether or not to deny eating the last piece of cake when we know we did. Rather, when I say we don't have to think morally I mean thinking about the common good, thinking about how our levels of consumption affect the depletion of available resources around the world, about how getting our share of the nation's wealth leaves others with less, about how cheating on our taxes or even taking every little deduction we can means fewer public funds to help those really in need—in short, how our actions, both great and small, affect the commonweal.

We live in a society in which we are inundated with advertising that continually drives us to greater and greater desire. To a certain extent we can never get enough. Yet, we do have the good fortune to live in a society where we can consume an incredible array of the goods that we are manipulated into desiring and craving. Even those with modest resources are satiated to some degree at the local Wal-mart. That bright yellow face is not smiling for nothing. Buying makes us happy. It fulfills short-term and even some long-term desires (for example, the big screen television that you may have been saving for over the last few months). These desires are never satisfied in the end. Once one is, then another pops up. And our culture is very good at cultivating new ones for us.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophy rock star Slavoj Žižek likens all consumer goods to Coca-Cola. They never really satisfy us. He writes:

[Coke's] strange taste does not seem to provide any particular satisfaction; it is not directly pleasing and endearing; however, it

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<sup>2</sup> Rauschenbusch saw this in his time. Writing about what he called “competitive commerce,” Rauschenbusch concluded: “It spreads things before us and beseeches and persuades us to buy what we do not want. The show-windows and bargain-counters are institutions for the promotion of covetousness among women. Men offer us goods on credit and dangle the smallness of the first installment before our eyes as an incentive to go into debt heedlessly. They try to break down the foresight and self-reliance which are the slow product of moral education, and reduce us to the moral habit of savages who gorge today and fast tomorrow” (Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 215).

is precisely as such, as transcending any immediate use-value (unlike water, beer or wine, which definitely do quench our thirst or produce the desired effect of satisfied calm), that Coke functions as the direct embodiment of 'it': of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise. (Zizek, *Fragile*, 22)

Whether or not we agree with this negative assessment of Coke, Zizek's point is clear: consumption never ultimately satisfies us. As he concludes, "every satisfaction opens up a gap of 'I want more!'" (Zizek, *Fragile*, 22). But the problem is not simply that we can never consume enough, it is that there is a fundamental lack in all consumption.

We cannot just blame big corporations or advertising agencies or even Wal-mart and Coca-Cola. It's a culture-wide phenomenon, and the culture is made up of individuals who play an active role in all this. We are culpable as well. But for what are we culpable? We are culpable for the fact that we now live in a society *not* predominantly oriented by a moral perspective, but one governed by the individual pursuit of consumer goods. We are culpable for being a bit on the selfish side, the opposite side of self-sacrifice. In contrast to previous generations where our duty was to suspend our pursuit of enjoyment in order to serve the common good, today we have a duty to enjoy. Zizek claims: "[I]n a 'permissive' society, subjects experience the need to 'have a good time,' really to enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty, they feel guilty if they fail to be happy" (Zizek, *Fragile*, 135). He finds that we end up with an interesting overlap "in which the command to *enjoy doing your duty* overlaps with the *duty to enjoy yourself*" (Zizek, *Fragile*, 135). We see this new kind of duty in the increasingly common strategies of non-profit organizations to provide gifts in exchange for charitable donations (Is it still charity if I receive consumer goods in return?). We also see this new kind of duty in the current economic crisis where citizens are encouraged (explicitly or implicitly) to purchase consumer products in order to stimulate the national economy. In short, to do your patriotic duty is to enjoy Coke (or Pepsi, A&W root beer, etc.). What binds us together is that we all consume for the common good.

So the Post-Moral Society is a society where we no longer have a narrative that effectively aids moral development and where we have the leisure and wealth as consumers to avoid having to take the moral point of view. Does this mean that we stab one another in the back, that we are blatantly immoral, or that we have become friends of the devil? Hardly. What it does mean is that we no longer are able to see the big picture from a very moral perspective. We no longer have a common framework or symbolic order through which we share a common moral perspective. And we haven't had to see the big picture for quite some time anyway, because American prosperity

has allowed most of us to live comfortably in our ranch homes and with our consumer goods. The Post-Moral Society also means that we rarely if ever have to make sacrifices for the common good and we wouldn't have a common framework or symbolic order to make sense of such sacrifice anyway.

In the summer of 1979, things weren't so good. Unemployment was on the rise (nearly six percent); people waited in long lines at gas stations to pay nearly a dollar for a gallon of gas; and inflation was at a whopping 13 percent. On July 15 of that year President Jimmy Carter gave a national address that has famously come to be known as the "Malaise Speech" because of the supposedly dour picture it painted of American society and the possible effect it had on his audience. However, a closer reading of the speech indicates something very powerful—primarily, a bold call for a national commitment to energy independence (yes, that was 30 years ago, and we've come so far). Besides our dependence on foreign oil, Carter also talked about "a fundamental threat to American democracy." This threat is a "crisis of confidence," a crisis that he saw in the "growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose in our Nation." In his analysis of the crisis, I think Carter got it right:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

Carter also talked about sacrifice. He talked about how Washington consistently fails to adopt "a balanced and a fair approach" to legislation if it requires asking their constituents to make any kind of sacrifice. While he did not see his colleagues in Washington willing to ask for sacrifices, this is exactly what Carter chose to do. As he concluded, "there are no short-term solutions to our long-range problems. There is simply no way to avoid sacrifice."

For Carter, it was the common American story or narrative of hard work, family, community, and faith that provided the context of purpose to our action. This narrative was the common framework or symbolic order in which sacrifice could make sense. He also saw the energy crisis—the inability of domestic oil production to keep up with demand along with the impending scarcity of foreign oil—as the economic context in which sacrifice would be necessary. But Carter's speech never generated significant support for the ambitious energy policy it advocated. He was not able to convince the American people (let alone Washington legislators) that they needed to make

sacrifices for the common good. Thirty years later the overwhelming majority of Americans still are not prepared to make the sacrifices that are necessary to secure energy independence. And *that* issue directly affects *every* citizen. The question of sacrifice becomes even more problematic when we look at issues that are for the good of only a segment of the population. For example, 37 million Americans are living below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> John Edwards made this one of the key issues of both of his presidential campaigns. Was this message successful? No it wasn't. One might blame the failure on Edwards' own political shortcomings (including the \$400 haircuts), but I'm not even sure a more skilled politician could have pulled it off. Barack Obama certainly didn't make the poor a significant part of his successful presidential campaign. Everything was directed at the middle class. The lesson, I believe, is that as long as most of us can consume what we want (at least enough of what we want), then it seems unlikely we'll worry too much about those who cannot.

Another example of our unwillingness to seriously face sacrifices we must make is our foreign policy—a foreign policy based predominantly on the idea of “our national interest.” What is “our national interest”? Shouldn't we admit that this often is simply doublespeak for our ability to purchase goods at low cost (especially oil)? Given our alliances and our spending on defense (which far exceeds that spent by any other nation, including the world's most populous nation, China), do we really think we're going to be subject to any kind of conventional attack? The threat of terrorism is real and should be taken seriously. But our huge military budget certainly is not needed simply to fight terrorism. Our huge military budget, in part, is used to maintain a world order that serves us *as consumers*. Let's face it, many of those tax dollars we send to the federal government to pay for national defense come back to us in sharp discounts on consumer goods. What good might our nation do in the world if we sacrificed our own consumption to use that military funding to help others instead?

Am I saying then that people no longer are moral? Of course not. In countless instances of individual and group efforts, Americans make wonderful and meaningful moral decisions (and act on them) every day. After Hurricane Katrina, individuals and groups made significant sacrifices to help those displaced by the storm. The same was true after 9/11 as well. But our

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<sup>3</sup> Rauschenbusch wrote in 1907 that “Men learned to make wealth much faster than they learned to distribute it justly. Their eye for profit was keener than their ear for the voice of God and humanity” (Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 182). He added that “No nation can allow its natural sources of wealth to be owned by a limited and diminishing class without suffering political enslavement and poverty” (Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 190). Even a quick glance at the current distribution of wealth in the United States would suggest that not much has changed in 100 years.

actions during these exceptional instances are not the true measure. While they indicate our capacity to take a broader moral perspective, we exercise this capacity much too infrequently. Instead, we generally act out of concern for our interests—for our consumption. Our everyday and persistent social crises (more than 12 percent of the population living in poverty; approximately 15 percent without health insurance; the largest disparity between “haves” and “have nots” in the history of the nation; a foreign policy driven by economic interest rather than moral concerns, etc.) are a much better indicator of our moral atrophy.

So I’m not saying that we have become loathsome and despicable creatures, but I am saying at least that in a Post-Moral Society the idea of sacrifice for the common good makes increasingly little sense. Certainly we have brave men and women making sacrifices all over the world today in the name of our “war on terror” or as we now call it “Overseas Contingency Operations.” And their families are sacrificing too. But an overwhelming percentage of Americans have not been asked to make any sacrifices for the war on terror. The formerly fiscally conservative Republicans had control of the government for most of this young millennium. They took us into a war and spent billions to do it. Yet they insisted on having future generations foot the bill for it. They asked for very little sacrifice from the American people. Instead, the national debt skyrocketed.

It would be easy to blame our government officials. They continually choose cowardice rather than courage, never asking us to make sacrifices (Carter being a relatively recent exception) but instead pandering to our self-interest. For example, President Bush once was asked what the American people were sacrificing as part of the war on terror. He said we were sacrificing our “peace of mind.” Really? When many Americans are dying in Iraq and elsewhere on our behalf, do we really want to pat ourselves on the back because of the “sacrifice” we make of our “peace of mind”? In another revealing interview Bush indicated that he sacrificed playing golf because he felt it was not in solidarity with our men and women in uniform who were risking the ultimate sacrifice every day. Really? Is giving up golf the kind of sacrifice we should emulate? And what did President Bush urge us to do after 9/11 in order to restore our nation? Shop. He took a lot of heat for this, and rightfully so. But we need to think carefully and seriously about what we were really prepared to do, and what we did, and what we continue to do.

Our government officials (not just Bush) often have failed us by not asking us to sacrifice, yet they also are responding to the character of the constituency that elects them. If they don’t imagine that people are willing to make sacrifices, most of them are not going to ask us to make them. President Obama has sought to change the conversation in ways that I think open the door for the possibility of sacrifice, though this usually is described as “responsibility” and “service” rather than sacrifice. In this sense, I think he

really is in the mold of President Carter. Like Carter 30 years previously, Obama asks American citizens to sacrifice their self-interest for the common good. In a speech on January 8<sup>th</sup> of this year, he said “I’m calling on all Americans—Democrats and Republicans—to put good ideas ahead of the old ideological battles; a sense of common purpose above the same narrow partisanship; and insist that the first question each of us asks isn’t ‘What’s good for me?’ but ‘What’s good for the country my children will inherit?’”

But even Obama is careful to avoid using the word “sacrifice.” In his press conference of March 24<sup>th</sup>, NBC White House correspondent Chuck Todd asked Obama: “Why, given this new era of responsibility that you’re asking for, why haven’t you asked for something specific that the public should be sacrificing to participate in this economic recovery?” In his response, Obama said:

I think folks are sacrificing left and right. . . . you’ve got a lot of parents who are cutting back on everything to make sure that their kids can still go to college. You’ve got workers who are deciding to cut an entire day and entire day’s worth of pay so that their fellow co-workers aren’t laid off. I think that across the board people are making adjustments, large and small, to accommodate the fact that we’re in very difficult times right now.

Though Obama certainly is right, this falls far short of the kind of frank discussion of sacrifice that might be needed right now. “Adjustments” are not necessarily sacrifices. And as we look at Obama’s fiscal strategy, we must ask whether or not his reticence to talk about and expect sacrifices for the common good *right now* is going to lead to budget deficits that will be the burden of *future generations*.

I am left then with more questions than answers, more in doubt than with confidence in the future of sacrifice in our society. Rauschenbusch, using different language and with slightly different concerns, perhaps presaged our current situation when he wrote:

[A]mong the masses who are being ground up in this evolutionary mill [of competitive commerce, industrialization, etc.] there will be a growing sense of the inexorable cruelty of natural law and a failing faith in the fundamental goodness of the universe. And if the universe is not at bottom good, then the God who made it and who runs it is not good. Or perhaps there is no God at all. Goodness is folly. Force rules the world. Let us use what force we have, grasp what we can, and die. The Church in the past has been able to appeal to the general faith in a good and just God and to intensify that. If that half-unconscious religion of the average man

once gives way to sullen materialism, there will be a permanent eclipse of the light of life among us. (Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 256)

If Rauschenbusch was concerned about religion's ability to turn things around in 1907, how much more forlorn might he be in today's hyper-consumer society? And who is going to be our "Rauschenbusch"—our prophet calling us not only to abide by the dictates of religion but also to tap again the deeper springs of our humanity. Whoever that may be, we only can hope that he or she will bravely identify for us what we need to do, including making sacrifices, and find those resources that might inspire us to make them. Rauschenbusch had hope that he could do some work like this, and maybe these words from him will give us hope that we too might be able to overcome our own crises:

In the last resort the only hope is in the moral forces which can be summoned to the rescue. If there are statesmen, prophets, and apostles who set truth and justice above selfish advancement; if their call finds a response in the great body of the people; if a new tide of religious faith and moral enthusiasm creates new standards of duty and a new capacity for self-sacrifice; if the strong learn to direct their love of power to the uplifting of the people and see the highest self-assertion in self-sacrifice—then the entrenchments of vested wrong will melt away; the stifled energy of the people will leap forward; the atrophied members of the social body will be filled with a fresh flow of blood; and a regenerate nation will look with the eyes of youth across the fields of the future.  
(Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*, 229)

Whether one is religious or not, the appropriate response here might be "amen."

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