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Good and Bad Bread: Sacrificing the Sacred and Abject Other in Jean-Pierre Camus

This essay examines the ways in which Jean-Pierre Camus (1582-1652) translates the theological issues of the Catholic Reformation into collections of short stories written for the general reading public. Through a study of *Les Evenemens Singuliers* (1628), *L’Amphithéatre Sanglant* (1630), and *Les Spectacles d’Horreurs* (1630), I foreground two sacrificial paradigms that frame many of Camus’s stories: first, that of a Catholic God sacrificing his own son, or sacrifice of the sacred other; and second, that of God punishing the unrepentant, or the sacrifice of the abject other. In both cases, sacrifice relates back to the larger preoccupation with the centrality of the Eucharist and/as sacrifice within theological debates of the period.

The notion of sacrifice was not an issue to be taken lightly in early modern France. In the written *Conferences* between Charles Drelincourt, minister of Charenton, and Jean-Pierre Camus, Evêque de Belley, one of the main points of argument revolved around the sacrifice of mass. Rejecting the notion that the host indeed is the body of Christ, Drelincourt states that consequently, no sacrifice takes place during mass, for “un homme ne peut mourir qu’une seule fois, et un sacrifice se fait une seule fois, donc Jésus ne peut pas se sacrifier au cours de chaque messe” (*Conferences* 29). Camus, in his response to
Drelincourt’s rejection of the traditional Catholic signification of the Eucharist, posits sacrifice as the very condition of religion:

Il n’y eut jamais de Religion vraie ou fausse sans sacrifice, le sacrifice estant l’acte exterieur de Religion, le plus exprés, & le plus authentique. Jugez de là si cette communion se peut appeller Religion, & Religion reformée, qui a non pas reformé, mais aboli, evacué & aneanti tout sacrifice. (Conferences 86)

Camus thus refuses Protestantism the very status of a religion — even a false one. In Counter-Reformation France, sacrifice served as an essential concept in the legitimation of Catholicism as the one, true faith, which explains the abundance of sacrificial images in the short stories of Jean-Pierre Camus.

Within the broader context of religious tensions, the theological notion of the Eucharist as sacrifice takes on meaning that goes beyond a debate about transubstantiation. In her analysis of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre, Barbara Diefendorf found that Catholic sermons were replete with references to the “Protestant heresy,” which was viewed as a threat to “not just individual salvation but the entire social order. God will punish those who deviate from his teachings or allow such deviations to take place, and his punishment will be collective as well as individual” (Beneath 153). The theological underpinnings of this fear were based on the powerful idea of the church united in the body of Christ — an idea that we have already seen to have been central to eucharistic devotion. The church was conceived as an organic unity, with each part necessary to the whole. It was likened to a human body with Christ as its head and the Holy Ghost as its soul. Just as the human body is only recognized as healthy when all of its parts or members are in “mutual sympathy,” so the church is healthy only when its members are joined by brotherly love. Hatred and division among Christians, the inevitable products of heresy, consequently represent a rupture of the body of Christ, “which should remain whole on the trunk of the cross.” By extension of the corporeal metaphor, heresy is a cancer or gangrene that has to be rooted out. (Beneath 150)

Thus, in order to maintain the integrity of the Catholic Church, and by extension the body of Christ, priests legitimated violence against Protestants, who were viewed as malignant parts of this holy body. In