KILLING IN SACRIFICE: THE MOST PROFOUND EXPERIENCE OF GOD?

BY

BRUNO W. W. DOMBROWSKI
Bedford, Nova Scotia, Canada

Walter Burkert, co-editor of the outstanding monograph series Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, 1) recently advanced a hypothesis which, on account of its apparently revolutionary character, deserves a critical evaluation that goes beyond what is usually expected and offered in an ordinary book review. In his study Homo Necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen 2) Burkert claims that in "der Religion der Griechen" as in others "der Gott am mächtigsten erlebt <wird>" , "nicht im frommen Lebenswandel, nicht in Gebet, Gesang und Tanz allein ... sondern im tödlichen Axthieb, im verrinnenden Blut und im Verbrennen der Schenkelstücke", and that the "Grunderlebnis des 'Heiligen' ... die Opfertötung <ist>. Der homo religiosus agiert und wird sich seiner selbst bewusst als homo necans." 3)

Dr. Burkert's book has been published by a company of particular stature and renown in a high calibre monograph series, a fact which already by itself would appear to recommend it for special attention in the world of learning, and, as far as the formal aspects of Burkert's treatise are concerned, one might not expect to be disappointed. Text and footnotes attest that the author has widely read and gathered a lot of information in his own fields of interest (Greek religion and the comparative study of religions) and in such others he considered relevant for his study.

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However, one cannot but dispute not only matters, terminology, and semantics of detail, but even more so Burkert's principal method

2) Volume 32 of foregoing series, 1972, xii. 356 pp. DM 88.oo.
3) Ibid. 8 f.
and, in the process of its employment, his interpretations of passages and/or facts which, in view of the communis opinio of scholars in the fields concerned, are untenable, because Burkert did not respect their relevant contexts appropriately.

For instance, I note that one should, surely, not refer, as Burkert does on p. 19 of his book, to relics from pre-Islamic times in the ceremonies connected with the *Hadjdj*, especially the mass-slaughter of sheep, goats, and the occasional camel on the 10th *Dhu-l-Hidjdja*, the *jawm al-adahi*, as evidence for the importance of sacrifice and, in particular, the act of killing for the religious inter-communication between Muslims and their god. Even Burkert cannot and does not claim that one could consider the sacrifice at Mina other than just one element among many. Yet, as he marshals his arguments, the whole matter seems to have much greater significance for Muslimic life than it has in reality: “Der Geheiligte ist es, der tötet, der Akt des Tötens ist sakralisiert. ‘Im Namen Allahs’, ‘Allah ist gnädig’, das sind Formeln, die jedes Schlachten der Mohammedaner begleiten”. As a matter of fact, not only are phrases such as “bismi -llah” and “*Allāhu -rrahimu*” common place in all affairs in the daily life of the Muslim, the continuing custom of Muslims to sacrifice at the occasion of a religious festival of highest rank need not and does not by itself attest to the motive(s) for such acts. Nor does Dr. Burkert appear to have recognised that the form of the slaughter of the victims differs markedly from such in other cults. There is no altar, the ritual is rather indistinctly prescribed and followed, if so at all — one can also fast instead. If “Entsetzen, Beseligung und Anerkennung absoluter Autorität, mysterium tremendum, fascinans and augustum ..., das Erlebnis des Heiligen, am packendsten und eindringlichsten ... im Opferritual verbunden <sind>: der Schock von tödlichem Schlag und verrinnendem Blut, die leib-seelische Wonne festlichen Essens, die strenge Ordnung, die das ganze umgibt: das ... sacra schlechthin <sind> “*tā lepā*” and “vor allem die Jugend ... diesem ‘Heiligen’

4) Ibid. 19.
5) If this were not so, one might, perhaps, think of an intention to create communion which seems to have been recognised first as a distinctive type of its own by W. Robertson Smith in his famous *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, London 1889 (reprint: New York: The Meridian Library/Meridian Books, 1956); cf. through index.