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Sins of our Fathers:
A Short History of Religious Child Sacrifice

I. Origins

The central and most prominent myths of the Western Civilization are of attempted or actual parental sacrificial killing of children (paedocide) that receive mostly religious legitirmization. The most prominent symbol of the Western civilization is a sacrificed son. In Judaism the most vivid image is of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. In Greek mythology and drama Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia and the relation between Laius and Oedipus are just as significant.

I follow here the historical development of religious sacrificial paedocide from the perspectives of the sacrificing parents and the sacrificed children. The structure of paedocides in each case is tripartite: The institutional formation of parental paedocide; the form of legitimization; and the reaction of the children, the search for meaning out of the abyss of the absurd. I follow here the evolution of this structured religious paedocide from antiquity to the present through deciphering the structure of sacrificial narratives. Vico posited a pre-civilized humanity in which:

parents, since they are held together by no necessary bond of law, will proceed to cast off their natural children. Since their parents may separate at any time, the children, abandoned by both, must lie exposed to be devoured by dogs [...]

Vico’s natural state (like Hobbes’s state of nature) is not historical. But positing this ideal situation brings into relief certain features of actual historical societies by contrasting them with their negation. Vico held that three principles, the institutions of religion, marriage, and burial prevent this natural state and preserve civilization. Following Vico, I assume a natural tendency to deny responsibility for one’s children. The institutes of family and religion check such irresponsibility, but they do not eliminate it. Civilization institutionalizes parental irresponsibility in a form that does not threaten the community, paedocidal religious sacrifice, the socially sanctioned killing of children.

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2 Ibid, 330-337.
II. The Pagan Stage

The rational Lucretius denounced Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia, as a paragon case of superstitious religion.

It was her fate in the very hour of marriage to fall a sinless victim to a sinful rite, slaughtered to her greater grief by a father's hand, so that a fleet might sail under happy auspices. Such are the heights of wickedness to which men are driven by superstition.\(^1\)

Lucretius regarded Agamemnon's ritualistic killing of his daughter as ultimate religious barbarity. Vico criticized Lucretius's naive misunderstanding of the role of the sacrifice of children in the initial stage of civilization. The sacrifices of children at the dawn of civilization were "necessary to tame the sons of the cyclopes and reduce them to the humanity of an Aristides, a Socrates, a Laelius, and a Scipio Africanus".\(^4\) Vico recognized that the ritualistic sacrifice of children by their parents is a feature of pagan morality. Once society is able to control and check parental irresponsibility by religious institutionalization it makes a first step on the ladder of civilization.

From this early morality of the superstitious and cruel gentile world came the custom of sacrificing human victims to the gods. This we have from the most ancient Phoenicians, among whom, when some great calamity was imminent, such as war, famine, or pestilence, the kings sacrificed their own children to placate the wrath of heaven [...] Such sacrifices of children were regularly offered to Saturn [...] the custom was continued by the Carthagians [...] After their defeat at the hands of Agathocles, they sacrificed two hundred noble children to placate their gods. The Greeks fell in with this impious custom of the Phoenicians and Carthagians in the votive sacrifice Agamemnon made of his daughter Iphigenia. This should cause no surprise to anyone who reflects upon the cyclopean paternal power of the first fathers of the gentile world; a power exercised by the most learned nation, the Greeks, and by the wisest, the Romans. In both these nations down to the time of their most cultivated humanity, fathers had the right to kill their newborn children.\(^5\)

The bible describes the Canaanite cult of the god Moloch (meaning king), practiced, among other places at Gei-Ben-Henom (the etymological root of the Hebrew Gehejnom = hell), a valley near Jerusalem, where the worshipers sacrificed their children by throwing them into the mouth of a hollow statue of the Moloch in which a fire burned, and of similar worshiping of the god Baal. Despite continuous efforts of the biblical prophets to put a stop to this custom, the Israelite tribes continued to practice sacrificial paedocide during the period of the bible.\(^6\)


\(^3\)Ibid, 517.