

H-France Review Vol. 3 (May 2003), No. 48

Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice. Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002. ix + 228 pp. Notes and index. \$37.50 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 0226777367.

Review by Stephen Schloesser, Boston College.

Ivan Strenski argues that a continuously existent and intransigent catholic subconscious centered on the discourse of “sacrifice” constitutes the “Catholic bedrock of France.” “In indicating the link between the Catholic right and the classic Catholic sacrificial theology of the Eucharist, along with its Maistrean variant, I submit that I have reached that ‘bedrock’” (p. 45). Arguing that there has been a persistent “hegemony of a rightist Catholic conception of sacrifice in the political life of France” (p. 44), Strenski locates its origins in the sixteenth-century Tridentine teaching (against protestantism) that the sacrifice of the mass was propitiatory for both the living and the dead.[1]

In chapter two, “Catholic Politics, French Sacrifice,” Strenski traces this notion of sacrifice through four periods: 1) a Baroque period of “Royal Religion” and “Classic” spirituality, exemplified by Pierre de Bérulle’s *Bref discours de l’abnégation intérieure* (1597) and centered on the “interior abnegation” or *anéantissement* (translated by Strenski as “total annihilation”) of the devotee (p. 19); 2) an eighteenth-century Jesuit-sponsored Rococo cult of the Sacred Heart whose “passionate, vivid, albeit ‘bloody’ imagery” Strenski interprets as “a spiritual movement bound intrinsically to Jesus as the perfect and total sacrificial offering for the expiation of the sins of humanity” (p. 25); 3) a French Revolutionary transformation of sacrificial discourse linked by Strenski through Jesuit and Oratorian humanistic education: “Why then should we doubt that other Jesuits or Oratorians used their advantages in the classroom to influence their young charges to accept a ‘Catholic’ sacrificial reading of tales of Roman civic duty and heroic self-sacrifice?” (p. 35); 4) and finally, Joseph de Maistre’s post-revolutionary reformulation of the principles underlying “royal religion” during the “Classical” period—namely, that the state “of necessity requires patriotism, which de Maistre believes entails ‘individual abnegation’” (p. 39). This post-revolutionary merger of “political and religious discourses” into a “common discourse of political sacrifice”—a hegemonic “intransigent Roman Catholic theology—”becomes the nineteenth century’s “historical baggage in hand,” which “most French thinkers had no other choice but to address” (p. 51).

Most importantly for Strenski, this discursive constriction limited the parameters of *fin-de-siècle* “Durkheimian polemics,” best exemplified in Hubert’s and Mauss’s *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (1899). In both the beginning and conclusion of *Contesting Sacrifice*, Strenski cashes out the seemingly esoteric problem of “sacrifice” in an everyday distinction between “giving up” and “giving of”: a catholic “ideal of sacrifice was not the calculated, prudent, ‘giving of’ part of one’s life or treasure typical of bourgeois morality. It was, rather, a total annihilating surrender of the self, a complete ‘giving up’ of oneself” (p. 4). Thus the crucial question posed by the Durkheimians: “Does citizenship in a liberal democratic society require the total ‘giving up’ of individual life and treasure, assumed by the

intransigent view, which the Durkheimians opposed? Or does it only demand a sincere but prudent ‘giving of the goods and lives of its citizens, closer to the Protestant and free thinker views of a Renouvier? How much, if any, sacrifice is required?’ (p. 157). This question serves both as the site of discursive “contestation” alluded to in the book’s title as well as an example of the more general “struggle to control the meaning of symbols, such as sacrifice” (p. 175). Strenski’s narrative ends as a tragedy for his protagonists: “while Hubert and Mauss described ‘sacrifice’ as a prudent ‘giving of the self, I accept on anecdotal evidence that most people these days (and surely the intransigent catholics of Durkheim’s time) still prefer to think about sacrifice as the sterner act of a total ‘giving up’” (p. 175). Hegemony resists hybridity.

Strenski, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside, employs a methodology more structuralist than historical: he goes in search of an unshakeable “bedrock” in France and he finds it—an unchanging substratum that promises to offer a dependably reified meaning of “sacrifice” deployed by players in various epochs. He explicitly rejects the need for causal narrative: “The argument of this book does not depend on claims of direct ‘influence’ or putative continuity, unconscious or otherwise. Indeed, as I shall argue in conclusion, the persistence of discourses about sacrifice testifies perhaps more eloquently to the structural requisites that human social life places on us all. . . . many believe that it is in the very nature of viable social life that sacrifice—in some description—will be required” (p. 6).

However, the structuralist’s unchanging bedrock proves to be a problem as well as a promise. Strenski must conjecture when trying to locate Joseph de Maistre as a pivotal transmitter of “sacrificial Eucharistic theology” and “devotion to the Sacred Heart” from early to late modernity: “While I have been unable to trace a direct lineage between them and de Maistre nor find explicit reference to them in Maistre’s major writings on sacrifice, this may not be of much consequence. . . . we must presume that a pious Catholic like de Maistre was informed by them” (p. 190, n. 159). Linking the early nineteenth century to its *fin-de-siècle* is troublesome too: “Although it is not necessary to my argument, since I admit that attitudes toward sacrifice can arise independently of ‘influences,’ perhaps Durkheim owes de Maistre his due as well” (p. 40)?

Strenski arranges his material thematically: chapter three covers nationalist uses of the “sacrifice” discourse over a broad sweep from 1870-1918; chapter four goes back in time to the Dreyfus Affair (ca. 1894-1905); chapter five discusses how “even the Protestants” adopted the discourse at the end of the century (p. 153); the final chapter six covers “Durkheim and Social Thought Between Rome and Reform.” This thematic trajectory allows Strenski to pose his “liberal v. intransigent” contestation over the meaning of sacrifice in a climactic way. His sense of a French “bedrock” eventually wins out as an intractable structural hegemony.

However, had the book’s chapters been arranged chronologically—post1870 trauma, Dreyfus, *fin-de-siècle* protestants, the Durkheimians, and finally the Great War’s catastrophe—Strenski might have arrived at a more complex conclusion. The war produced a variegated world that included both the antisacrificial “literature of disenchantment” (Barbusse, Bourdeaux, Duhamel [pp. 52-54]) and a proliferation of monuments and memorialization in service of mourning, nostalgia, and contested memory.[2] In the face of the 1914-1918 slaughter, horrifically out-of-proportion with any liberal ideologies capable of offering meaning, the French looked back to ancient tropes that offered the possibility of mourning beyond melancholia.[3] As recent work by Annette Becker and Martha Hanna demonstrates, religious imagery of *la mystique* as well as a neoclassicist revival offered “invaluable moral solace to a nation in mourning.”[4] Commenting on a 1916 piece in *Archives israélites*, Strenski laments that Jews too embraced the catholic hegemony: “Not even the gloom of a continued and increasingly inconclusive war dampened the rhetoric of sacrificial devotion in the Jewish community” (p. 85). But was it not precisely the gloomy catastrophe of the unanticipated stalemate in the trenches that demanded adequate cultural meanings? Among the most poignant illustrations in Becker’s book is a painting by

the Jewish artist Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer. In this scene, the Rabbi Abraham Bloch of Lyons offers a crucifix to a dying catholic soldier; in his turn, Rabbi Bloch would later die cradled in the arms of a Jesuit priest, Father Jamin. Changed material conditions of shared bereavement necessitated sacralization—"sacrifice" and "sacred union."

Although Strenski refers to Jay Winter's seminal work on postwar cultural productions as being primarily vehicles of mourning, he does not incorporate its fundamental revisionist point. During what has been conventionally seen as *les années folles* of the 1920s, "the enduring appeal of many traditional motifs—defined as an eclectic set of classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas—is directly related to the universality of bereavement in the Europe of the Great War and its aftermath. The strength of what may be termed 'traditional' forms in social and cultural life, in art, poetry, and ritual, lay in their power to mediate bereavement." [5] If we see the Great War and its aftermath as engendering a profound "crisis of the European mind" in which the very existence of "civilization" was thought to be in jeopardy or already perished, we can offer a postwar explanation for the apparent triumph of "sacrifice" as "giving up" one's life without resorting to structural hegemony. [6]

Put simply: a nation needed to mourn. In such horrifically changed material circumstances—not only the countless dead but the *mutilés de guerre* who, with missing limbs and sight lost to mustard gas, populated the streets—the calculated, prudent, "giving *of*" part of one's life typical of bourgeois morality was capable of offering neither solace nor meaning to the bereaved. Horrific numbers of youth had already been led into a complete "giving *up*" of themselves. This fact engendered a bitter contest of memory to follow: Had this slaughter been ultimately senseless? Or was it capable of being memorialized in such a way as to offer meaning? Retrieving the rhetoric of a "sacrifice" of one's life for the *patrie* allowed many to make sense of slaughter as they filled France with monuments that shaped memory and meaning. For this to happen, however, the story must end in the postwar and not in the *Belle Époque*.

Many historians will find Strenski's story of an unchanging "bedrock" discourse of "sacrifice" both frustrating and unpersuasive. His argument might benefit from a wider historiographical foundation: for example, his assertion of a pivotal rupture at Trent with past thought on sacrifice in the Eucharist (e.g., Aquinas) rests on references to encyclopedia entries (p. 17). [7] But can "sacrifice" be located as such a rupture in the sixteenth century? Continuity is suggested by other readings: the primary texts of both Thomas Aquinas (refining Anselm's juristic theory of "satisfaction" or "atonement" by sacrifice) and Trent; and secondary studies of feudal economic arrangements that depended thoroughly on "redemptions" obtained through requiem masses and indulgences. [8]

Or again: Strenski interprets the crucial function of the Sacred Heart image as being primarily a carrier of "sacrificial" meaning partly because its primary patrons, the Jesuits, represent "the vitality of Catholic determination to affirm the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist and the centrality of sacrifice as a spiritual trope" (p. 22). He finds evidence for this in the Jesuits' tendency to "emotional and public displays of piety"—motivated by their "inclination to strategize and propagandize for the faith"—such as "the practice of frequent communion and confession, or in the many sorts of public devotions encouraging support for the Eucharist as the center of Catholic religious life" (pp. 223). However, a reading of recent historiography on both the Jesuits and early modern catholicism suggests a radically different interpretation: thoroughly imbued with Renaissance culture and a distaste for the dry abstractions of scholasticism, the early Jesuits envisioned a religion of emotional intensity based on a belief in direct contact of the soul with the Divine. Early modern catholicism's embrace of frequent communion (with the body of Christ), confession (as intimate conversation), and devotion to the Sacred Heart—the heart being (as Strenski notes in his discussion of Bérulle) "the seat of affectivity" and "the meeting place between a person and God" (p. 25)—extended the extreme incarnationalism originating in the Italian Renaissance. Where Strenski finds violence others might discern a fervent intimacy. [9]

Strenski's use of primary sources can also be frustrating. In presenting "five aspects of the sacrificial conception of the mass, developed by Bérulle and his school," a glance at the endnotes shows that the quotations are not from the seventeenth-century theologian but rather from a certain "pious Abbé Kerné" writing in (not insignificantly) the year 1902, i.e., the beginning of the Radical government's bitter anticlerical campaign (p. 18). Or again: in his account of the seventeenth-century Père Amelote (p. 21), all quotations are from a 1921 volume of Henri Bremond's massive *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*. Bremond reached back to the seventeenth century with a specific task in hand. Although he felt compelled to leave the Jesuit order in 1904 during the Modernist Crisis, he wrote the Baron Friedrich von Hügel that he still wanted to demonstrate "the unconscious mysticism, deaf and mute, but nonetheless real in the most simple Christian lives." The central thesis of his eleven-volume *Histoire* was that "all dogmatism has vanished, all mysticism remains." Bremond's use of primary sources needs to be seen within this prism--namely, one Jesuit's attempt to engender a religion of emotional vibrancy and intimacy in the early twentieth century. [10]

Finally, the book could benefit from closer editing. Strenski writes that "the First Vatican council and its 1864 Syllabus of Errors put its official seal on the work of the intransigents" (p. 50). While the Syllabus was published in 1864, the First Vatican Council did not meet until 1869-1870. It was suspended when the Franco-Prussian War broke out and eventually altered the structures of catholicism in radical ways: the end of the Papal States, the laicist Third Republic, and Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*. The Act of Separation of church and state was published not in 1906 but on December 9, 1905--the culmination of four years of measures passed (p. 45). The name of Richard Griffiths--whose work on religious language in the same contexts as Strenski's has been seminal--receives two variants even within the same paragraph (p. 100; cf. p. 204 nn. 32-34). For the reader who believes that historical changes in material culture lead to alterations--sometimes radical alterations--in the meanings of concepts, it is vital that the changes be accurately recorded. Editorial lapses undo the reader's ability to track the ever-evolving interplay between material fact and cultural rhetoric.

The problem of contextualization shows itself succinctly in Strenski's use of Georges Goyau. Within the first fifty pages of *Contesting Sacrifice* this catholic partisan appears three times: 1) "Thus, writing in a time of virulent anticlericalism, Georges Goyau, that public commentator of the contemporary scene of the end of the last century, refers confidently to a 'subconscious' catholicism that 'still survives in the soul of France.' That 'subconscious' Catholicism, says Georges Goyau in 1918, is the very thing which 'invites' the French 'to sacrifice'" (p. 5).

Writing in the context of the eighteenth-century Rococo, Strenski quotes Goyau a second time: 2) "It is then much easier to imagine that one can uproot the national traditions of centuries than actually to eliminate what Georges Goyau called the 'subconscious' Catholicism that 'still survives in the soul of France'" (p. 27).

Finally, within the context of 1870-1900 and Sorelian violence, a third reference appears: 3) "Perhaps Georges Goyau was even correct when he claimed in 1918 that a continuously existent intransigent, 'subconscious' catholicism was the very thing which 'incites' the French 'to sacrifice.' If so, then although catholicism in France has never been one uniform thing, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became so on the issue of sacrifice and carried the same message of annihilation and expiation" (p. 50).

Georges Goyau's *The Church of France during the War* was published in English translation in 1918 by the Paris editors Bloud & Gay, the same house that published works for Msgr. Alfred Baudrillard's "Catholic Committee of French Propaganda Abroad" [*Comité Catholique de Propagande Française à l'Étranger*]. From the war's outbreak, the French saw the Germans as winning the propaganda war abroad. Church and state walked hand-in-hand in Germany [*Gott mit uns!*] whereas Republican France had just recently (1905) confiscated church properties and ungraciously exiled its religious (especially

the Jesuits) to foreign lands. Msgr. Baudrillart's *Comité Catholique* set out to convince Catholics abroad that "France was still Catholic."

The Committee's objectives and method were best summarized in the 1915 work, *The German War and Catholicism* [*La Guerre allemande et le catholicisme*], published simultaneously in English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and German translations by Bloud & Gay. Baudrillart set out its purpose in the introduction: "The volume which we here offer to the public is a book of French propaganda. It is addressed especially to the Catholics of the neutral countries. Many among them, and we are suffering from it, judging by certain exterior acts that we are the first to deplore, feel inclined to believe that France has ceased to be a Christian and Catholic nation. . ." The rest of the volume was dedicated to demonstrating the underlying substratum of Catholic France. In the words of an anonymous missionary, "As soon as the cannon's powerful voice was heard at the frontier '*l'Union sacrée*' [the sacred union] was concluded; the official label [i.e., atheism] our country bore in the eyes of the world was torn, and beneath an artificial France apparently in decay [*la France artificielle et décadente*] appeared another France partly hidden before, but which represented the real country much better. All of a sudden the old race turned round [*la vieille race s'est retournée*] and revealed to the surprised world what lay concealed in the depths of her children's baptized souls." [11] In short: despite all appearances to the contrary, France was still Catholic.

Georges Goyau's English translation, also published by Bloud & Gay, was not written (as Strenski suggests) during a time of "virulent anticlericalism" at "the end of the last century" but rather during the wartime "Sacred Union." Published in English, it aimed at convincing Anglophone Catholics that they could rally in good conscience to the support of France in spite of its bitterly anticlerical measures. Read within this context, Goyau's words do not indicate a structural hegemonic discourse that withstands surface change as a bedrock beneath history's shifting fortunes. Rather, his appeal to a "subconscious" Catholicism that "still survives in the soul of France" and "invites" the French "to sacrifice" should sound somewhat desperate as it hopes against hope: a plaintive propagandistic appeal to support a Catholicism that had, in fact, been vilified and marginalized by a Republican culture nourished by a hegemonic scientific positivism during the *Belle Époque*.

Strenski's book provides a wealth of research on the many uses and occurrences of sacrificial discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and historians of the period will find it stimulating. His use of Benedict Anderson to arrive at insights about the sacred that migrates from religion to "nation" is especially thought-provoking. He should be read in tandem with Richard Griffiths' works on both the nineteenth-century Catholic literary revival [*renouveau catholique*] and on rhetoric in the Dreyfus Affair. [12] Strenski's work provides the wider cultural framework, while Griffiths' linkage of "vicarious suffering" with Romantic and Decadent literary developments will suggest an alternative reading to Catholic hegemony—in the hands of the Decadents, seemingly grotesque religious imagery of suffering (e.g., in Huysmans) provided a youthful reaction to the perceived hegemony of "Sorbonne positivism" and bourgeois values.

In the end, however, Strenski's tragic narrative of liberal defeat in the contest over "sacrifice" is overshadowed by another infinitely greater tragedy. In the wake of the Great War's massacres, the Durkheimian idea of sacrifice would prove to be an inadequate source of meaning. A mourning populace would return to deeper places—a "bedrock," perhaps—out of a necessity less hegemonic than humane.

NOTES

[1] Council of Trent, Session 22, c. ii: "And inasmuch as in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner the same Christ who once offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross, the holy council teaches that this is truly propitiatory and has this effect, that if we, contrite and penitent, with sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence, draw nigh to God, 'we obtain mercy and find grace in seasonable aid.' For, appeased by this sacrifice, the Lord grants the grace and gift of penitence and pardons even the gravest crimes and sins. For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different. The fruits of that bloody sacrifice, it is well understood, are received most abundantly through this unbloody one, so far is the latter from derogating in any way from the former. Wherefore, according to the tradition of the Apostles, it is rightly offered not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions and other necessities of the faithful who are living, but also for those departed in Christ but not yet fully purified."

[2] See especially Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and also Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[3] For proportionality see Paul Fussell's study of British soldiers in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); on melancholy and mourning see Martin Jay, "The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Inability to Mourn," in *Force Fields. Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (London: Routledge, 1993): 84-98.

[4] Martha Hanna, *The Mobilization of Intellect. French Scholars and Writers During the Great War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996): 143; Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930*, tr. Helen McPhail (New York: Berg, 1998); originally published as *La guerre et la foi: de la mort à la mémoire, 1914-1930* (Paris: A. Colin, 1994).

[5] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory. Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 5.

[6] Barrie Cadwallader, *Crisis of the European Mind. A Study of André Malraux and Drieu La Rochelle* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981); and Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes. Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[7] Notes 19 and 20 (p. 184) reference "Sacrifice in Christian Theology," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967): 837-40; 839.

[8] For example: Bernard Poschmann's magisterial work on the evolution of "redemptions" in *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*; tr. and rev. by Francis Courtney (Freiburg: Herder ; London: Burns & Oates, 1964); Gary Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period. A Study of the Salvific Function of the Sacrament according to the Theologians c. 1080-c. 1220* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); and Jacques LeGoff on the function of requiem masses and indulgences as a solution for usurers: *The Birth of Purgatory*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[9] John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Afterward in Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[10] See *Sanctity and Secularity during the Modernist Period: Six Perspectives on Hagiography around 1900*, ed. Lawrence F. Barmann and C. J. T. Talar (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1999).

[11] A Missionary, "The Catholic Rôle of France in the World," in *The German War and Catholicism*, ed. Msgr. Alfred Baudrillart (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1915): 63-96, particularly 65-66.

[12] Richard M. Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution. The Catholic Revival in French Literature, 1870-1914* (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1965); and Griffiths, *The Use of Abuse: the Polemics of the Dreyfus Affair and its Aftermath* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1991). On youthful constructions of a gerontocracy of Sorbonne positivists, see also Richard Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Stephen Schloesser
Boston College
schloess@bc.edu

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172