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0521626099 - Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag

Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle

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This compelling book argues that American patriotism is a civil religion of blood sacrifice, which periodically kills its children to keep the group together. The flag is the sacred object of this religion; its sacrificial imperative is a secret which the group keeps from itself to survive. Expanding Durkheim's theory of the totem taboo as the organizing principle of enduring groups, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle uncover the system of sacrifice and regeneration which constitutes American nationalism, show why historical instances of these rituals succeed or fail in unifying the nation, and explain how mass media are essential to the process. American culture is depicted as ritually structured by a fertile center and sacrificial borders of death. Violence plays a key part in its identity. In essence, nationalism is neither quaint historical residue nor atavistic extremism, but a living tradition which defines American life.

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Totem rituals and the American flag

Carolyn Marvin

The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

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Acknowledgments

The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard observed strikingly different levels of religious belief among members of the Azande tribe. In so doing he challenged our modern predisposition to think of so-called primitives as religiously uniform. Writing this book has provided David W. Ingle and myself with not so dissimilar encounters with members of our own American tribe, among whom there are also strikingly different levels of belief in the religious power of nationalism. In general, we had only to announce the subject of this book to elicit suspicions that we were either unabashed patriots, fundamentalist believers in what Harold Bloom has called our unacknowledged civil religion, or flag-destroying iconoclasts. That we were in the presence of religious taboo was often signaled by awkward silences and jokes as both non-believers and the faithful tried to figure our take on that delicate topic, the deep, unspeakable meaning of the American flag.

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xiv Acknowledgments

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This is our project. We have watched the flag wave and the totem system operate since 1989, when this project began with a classroom exercise. From the standpoint of flag study, we were lucky that during the period of the

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formulation and writing of these ideas, the United States engaged in several calendrical rites of renewal and one crisis of the gods. That is, the country waged war, participated in the Olympics, and conducted two presidential campaigns unusually full of totemic doubt, all major occasions of patriotic practice for our observation.

Carolyn Marvin
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