

PART I

Why We See Red



I

HOW BLOOD MARKS THE BOUNDS
 OF THE CHRISTIAN BODY

Overtures and Refrains

THIS BOOK HAS THREE GENESES: SIMIANS, SEX, AND SACRIFICE. All three came unbidden, presenting symptoms or unsought oracles of blood.

In the winter of 2008, trying to get a break from theology, I found myself in a boat on the Kinabatangan in Borneo, looking for orangutans. Having heard the (misleading) statistic that humans are “98% chimpanzee,”¹ I couldn’t lose the idea that the biblical word for DNA might be “blood.” And that brought on questions like, “What if the blood of Christ was the blood of a primate?” And “Why did God become simian?” (See Chapters 6 and 9.) I tried to treat the questions. They weren’t academic, and I had other books to write. But they wouldn’t go away, and my husband told me I was writing a book despite myself.

In the fall of 2008, assigned, for my sins, to write a “theology of same-sex relationships” for the Episcopal House of Bishops, I heard that “the trouble with same-sex couples is, they impugn the blood of Christ.” What did that even mean? And who were these people with their strange blood-fixation? (See Chapter 5.)

In the fall of 2009, I remembered Michael Wyschogrod, whom I had first read twenty years earlier. I had been telling granting agencies I would figure out what Hebrews 9:22 meant by “without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.” (See Chapters 3 and 7.) I discovered that the most interesting thing about Christian commentary on that passage is how thin it is. If you look into Christian

¹ For a hilarious takedown of that pseudo-statistic, see Jonathan Marks, *What It Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and Their Genes*, with a new preface (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Ra’anan S. Boustán and Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Introduction to Theme-Issue,” *Blood and the Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Identities in Late Antiquity*, published as *Henoah* 30.2 (2008): 229–42 is elegant and compatible. Unaccountably it came to my attention only as the book was in production.

commentaries on “without the shedding of blood” you find either *domestication*, so that, in Aquinas, bloodshed needs no explanation at all, or *evasion*, as in Calvin, where “blood” means something entirely different from physical blood; it means “faith.” This is a choice of frustrations: so blasé as to take sacrifice for granted, or so offended as to dismiss it outright. Briefly I hoped that Philoxenus of Mabbug interpreted the “labor of blood” as that of childbirth, but colleagues with Syriac said it wasn’t so simple. (See the excursus to Chapter 4.) Origen is wonderful, but everything means something else. None of the Christian commentators I read were trying to understand what Wittgenstein called the “deep and sinister” in the appeal to blood.²

Then I remembered how Wyschogrod, the Jewish Barthian, does something better than all the Christian commentators I consulted. He finds blood strange. Wyschogrod neither evades blood, nor does he, by repetition, disarm it even more effectively. Here is a sample, longish but abridged:

A dumb animal is to be slaughtered. [It emits no] sound of terror because it does not understand the instrument. It is then swiftly cut, the blood gushes forth, the bruited begins [the sound of an artery’s turbulent flow, blood rushing past an obstruction]. [T]he animal’s eyes lose their living sheen. The blood is sprinkled on the altar, the animal dismembered, portions of it burned, [others] eaten by the priests who minister before God in the holiness of the Temple. This horror is brought into the house of God. [What leads from] slaughter to the holy?

Sacrificial Judaism brings the truth of human existence into the Temple. It does not leave it outside. It does not reserve sacred ground only for silent worship. Instead, the bruited, bleeding, dying animal is brought and shown to God. This is what *our* fate is. It is not so much, as [often] said, that we deserved the fate of the dying animal and that we have been permitted to escape [that] fate by transferring it. It is rather that our fate and the animal’s are the same [fate] because its end awaits us, since our eyes, too, will soon gaze blindly and [fix] in deathly attention on what only the dead seem to see. In the Temple it is [we human animals] who stand before God, not as [we] would like to be, but as we truly are, [realizing] that our blood will soon enough flow as well. [We see, not the animal in place of us; we see ourselves with the animal. It is not one who dies that another may live; it is both who die together.] Enlightened religion recoils with horror from the thought of sacrifice, preferring a spotless house of worship filled with organ music and exquisitely polite behavior. The price paid for such decorum is that the worshipers must leave the most problematic part of themselves outside the

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über Frazers Golden Bough/Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, German and English on facing pages, ed. Rush Rees, trans. A. C. Miles (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1979), 8. See Chapter 7.

temple, to reclaim it when the service is over and to live with it unencumbered by sanctification. Religion ought not to demand such a dismemberment of [*the human being*].³

Here endeth the reading from Wyschogrod. I note that it defends Second Temple Judaism from Christian supersessionism not by mishnaic means but according to the modern pattern of aligning sacrifice with solidarity rather than sin. I return to it in Chapters 3 and 7. Here I only hope it makes blood strange.

IN REFERRING TO WITTGENSTEIN'S "DEEP AND SINISTER," I DO NOT mean to agree with what you might call the vulgar Girardian theory that sees violence all the way down. That would be hamartiocentric, sin-centered. Theology knows a protology before sin and an eschatology after it; the sin-story receives a frame and cannot stand in for the whole. The frame makes donation or offering broader than "sacrifice" – and it makes blood, the life-giver, wider than sacrifice too. Sacrifice does not go all the way down, but marks a subset of life-giving: life-giving under conditions of sin. Sarah Coakley's work in *Sacrifice Regained*, I think, seeks to restore sacrifice to that frame, to connect the Garden at the beginning to the Feast at the end.⁴

In any case, I work here on another front. I want to recover the strangeness of blood and then, perhaps, its even stranger logic. Part of the strangeness I want to recover is that of quantity. Why so much? Why not less? My target is not those for whom violence goes all the way down but those who would so familiarize the language of blood as to domesticate or evade it. My inquiry *relies* on the sin-free frame but now and then takes place within it, where sin gains enough reality to need remitting, and that sometimes in terms of blood.

Within the frame, we – as human or at least religious beings – can admit our solidarity both with Aztecs, who seem actually to have practiced human sacrifice (Chapter 7), as well as with any who would restore animal sacrifice in a Third Temple. I'm not in favor of either, but I want to understand what

³ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 18–19. In several editions from different publishers, the subtitle varies but the text remains the same. For ease of reading I have cut words without using ellipses.

⁴ Sarah Coakley, *Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God*, Gifford Lectures (Edinburgh, 2012), esp. lectures 1 and 6 at www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/sacrifice-regained-evolution-cooperation-and-god.

they tell us about what it means to be human, to admit that their deep and sinister thing is our thing, too.

CONSIDER THE LOGIC OF THE CLAIM “WITHOUT THE SHEDDING OF blood there is no remission of sin” (Heb. 9:22). The sentence makes blood instrumental to the remission of sin, but it’s a queer sort of instrumentality. Nancy Jay suggests a thought experiment. Replace the words about blood with words about wood, and compare:

“Without the cutting of trees, there is no building of clapboard houses.”
 Surely that’s sensible enough. But this:—?
 “Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.”⁵

The substitution has the virtue of estranging the obvious question: How then do we use blood? To remit sin? Blood does not work like wood after all. Nor does the blood of Christ reduce to the wood of his cross (Chapters 4 and 8).

Elsewhere I warn about grandiose theory. I confess it here; later comes the part where I take it back. Emile Durkheim, Mary Douglas, Nancy Jay, and Bettina Bildhauer can help us think about the structures that blood makes in Christianity and other social groups, that cause the body individual or the body sacrificed to represent the body social.

Mary Douglas takes as axiomatic that anomalies generate pollution, taboo, and sacredness: purity and danger. But what’s the *mechanism*? It’s the image of the boundary. Not the boundary “itself,” but its socially available *image*, its appearing in socially constructed space. The image of the boundary is the boundary salient, the boundary seen. It is first of all, for Douglas, a social boundary: a force field that society both makes and feels. But the bound that society makes, and that makes society, recruits individual bodies to represent that society in small. The business of boundedness makes both society and individual a “body,” a self-enclosed unit of humanity.

As Bettina Bildhauer notes, the *Oxford English Dictionary* collects hundreds of uses of the word “body” and sums them up like this: “the material frame of man.” The definition, Bildhauer comments, “singles out materiality and humanness as main features, with the word ‘frame’ suggesting a bound entity, carrying and unifying the human being. But this idea of a body as a material, bounded entity,” she concludes, “is far from self-evident.” The body takes in

⁵ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1.

food, water, air, and expels waste. “Far from providing a smooth envelope, skins constantly receive and emit fluids through pores and cells, so that it is impossible to determine which atom, say, is still part of the epidermis and the intestinal lining and which is not, and which pork molecule has turned into a human molecule. Even the ‘inside’ of a body is full of skins, opening up many surfaces. . . . We live ‘as much in processes across and through skins as in processes “within” skins.’ . . . Despite the usefulness of the . . . body as a separate, enclosed unit, . . . this view is not at all obvious, and *instead needs a lot of cultural work to be upheld.*”⁶

FOR A GENERATION, HUMANITIES SCHOLARS HAVE IMAGINED “THE body” bounded as an envelope, not seeping with a fluid to alarm its orifices. In Bynum, Biale, Bildhauer, and Anidjar, “the body” has yielded to blood. Historians like Bynum confine blood-talk to the past; critics like Anidjar would ban it altogether. Historians or critics, those scholars hardly address the anthropological problem that blood *persists*. Strategies that only confine or sanitize are designed to fail. Blood persists because it provides a fluid to think with, a key to the scriptures, and a language in which to disagree. Internal and external critics of Christianity have protested for half a century and more that Christian blood-signaling is dangerous.⁷ Yes, it is dangerous, but the protest has been anthropologically naïve. I intervene in their critique to say that Christian blood-signaling is not going away, and that the options are not exhausted by reprimanding it, on the one hand, or deploring it, on the other. A third option remains: to repeat blood’s language subversively, to free it from contexts of oppression or violence. This option reclaims or “mobilizes the signifier for an alternative production.”⁸

ONLY THE BODY’S UNREMARKED BOUNDARY IS THAT OF SKIN. ITS *salient, defended, or fertile* boundary is that of blood. When something foreign penetrates the skin, or when it “leaks” (verbs I interrogate later), the envelope

⁶ Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 1–3, my italics, quoting Shannon Sullivan, *Living across and through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), x.

⁷ An example I taught for years: Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1–30.

⁸ Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” in Seyla Benhabib, et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 35–57; here, 51–2.

turns red. Blood trickles, flows, or floods, prompting self and others to react with more or less alarm. Blood attracts attention – or society attends to blood – on the skin: the boundary of skin becomes salient with blood. The vigor with which society marks its boundaries is the vigor with which the body reacts to blood.

Moderns, medievals, and ancients all pictured the body as a sack of blood. When the sack leaked, or something punctured it, what had been inside emerged to coat the exterior. If this coating is sweat, it may draw little notice. Spittle doesn't draw much notice either, at least in a baby; more in someone older. Tears call forth concern. The leakage of sexual fluids we hide under clothes or behind doors. But blood reliably brings alarm. Unlike sweat, spit, or tears, blood is not clear. Blood's color makes it useful. Blood marks both society's investment in the individual and the individual's in society, blazes that relationship in red.

Blood is red because iron compounds transport oxygen. But society has recruited its bright, saturated color to rubricate the body and interpret life and death in terms of blood. It is not just that blood loss can lead to death. It is not just that society must care about its members. Many things share those qualities without becoming to the same extent as blood a fluid to think with. We also care about breathing and dialysis – but they do not define society as blood does. Breath is not visible. Dialysis is not natural. The importance of blood is that it combines life and death with the marks of enclosure and breach: its color and its tendency to flag the body's bounds in red when something penetrates the body, or leaves its bounds, give blood an imaging function that little else can match. “[T]he dominant medieval view of the body, as today, was that of a closed container,” but “the awareness that this model could not always be upheld caused more anxiety than enthusiasm. . . . Both affirmation and challenges to the dominant view of the body . . . played out, crucially, through blood.”⁹

WE SEE ANOTHER PATTERN OF AFFIRMATION AND CHALLENGE PLAY out in terms of blood when liberals contest evangelical models of atonement. Evangelicals insist that “blood” in the New Testament means “death,” because “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin” or, in vulgar Anselmian terms, because they regard the blood of Jesus as a death that pays a

⁹ Bildhauer, 7.

debt for sin. Liberals insist that blood means “life,” citing cross-cultural studies as well as Gen. 9:4, Lev. 17:11, 14, and Dt. 12:23.¹⁰ Indeed, Lev. 17:11 says *both* that “the life of the flesh is in the blood” *and* that “as life, it is blood that makes atonement” – complicating the claim that, in sacrifice, what makes atonement is death. Part of blood’s power is to represent opposites: life *and* death, health *and* disease, kin *and* alien, treasure *and* waste. A historian lets the paradox stand: “Blood is, both physiologically and symbolically, more complex and labile because [why?] finally contradictory. Blood is life and death.”¹¹ That is, as far as descriptive data lead – to the productive contradiction.

An anthropologist and a theologian will, however, both want to know more – more than the descriptive historian may think quite decent. *Why* does blood represent life and death? Especially when “humans much more frequently experience non-lethal blood-loss and non-bloody deaths”?¹² What is the underlying social necessity to locate the productive contradiction *here*? Why not (as an anonymous reviewer noted) in water? Or (in Vedic sacrifice) breath? Neither is red like blood. According to Bildhauer, the underlying social necessity is to uphold the body as stable. If the individual or social body is fraught with orifices, leaks, penetrations, and transfusions, they cry out to be stanching or stabilized by social *work*: society casts the complexity and instability onto “blood.” The pairs of opposites always “rely on and enforce the concept of the bounded body,” creating, sociologically, an “inside” and “outside” for blood to be on; “instead of seeing blood to be [intrinsically] ‘more complex,’” Bildhauer contends, “the seeming complexity of blood depends on the seeming stability of the body, and vice versa. Blood was only separated into matter ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the body because its movement was crucial” to maintaining the body as a stable sack across the boundary of which blood could move, “and the body appeared as a closed container because one location of blood is perceived to be outside and another inside.”¹³ Those opposites prove neither intrinsic nor innocent. Rather society invests in them all. Society creates the opposites to define, stabilize, establish something that society and individual find of high importance: their picture of themselves – their picture of themselves as bounded – as “this” and not “that,” “us” and not

¹⁰ Alan M. Stibbs, *The Meaning of the Word Blood in Scripture*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Tyndale Press, 1963).

¹¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages,” *Church History* 71 (2002): 685–714; here, 706–7. See extensively *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

¹² Bildhauer, 6.

¹³ Bildhauer, 6.

“them.” *Much religious creativity consists in enlarging this boundary, so that those formerly “them” are now “us,” and out of death comes life, so that “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:57) — that is, finds itself enclosed within a larger body.* (See Chapter 3.)

With larger bodies we do not exactly get beyond that picture, but we can extend it productively to sublimate itself. We can never leap right out of the society in which we think, but we can often use its categories in novel ways to reach beyond themselves. Judith Butler (in a passage I have quoted before, and will quote again) puts it like this:

To deconstruct [a pair of opposites] is not to negate or refuse either term. To deconstruct these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. Here it is of course necessary to state quite plainly that the options for theory are not exhausted by presuming [for example, the concept of the body], on the one hand, and negating it, on the other. It is my purpose to do precisely neither of these. . . . [My procedure] does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term; on the contrary, it provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative production.¹⁴

That’s what Jesus does at the Last Supper. He takes the language of violent execution and turns it to a peaceful feast. “This is my body, broken for you.” “This is my blood, poured out for many.” He mobilizes the signifier for an alternative production. But the right mobilization and the right alternative for the signifier are hard to predict. How do we do that again?

BLOOD MAY BE RED BECAUSE IRON COMPOUNDS MAKE IT SO, BUT societies draft its material qualities, its color and stickiness, for multiple purposes of their own. I would say it in every chapter if I could. We imagine individual, social, and animal bodies as securely bounded. Inside, blood carries life. Outside, blood marks the body fertile or at risk. According to Bildhauer, society’s work to maintain bodily integrity thus takes place in blood. It’s the body’s permeability that leaves us bloody-minded; it’s in blood’s terms that society makes a body. The body becomes a membrane to pass when it breathes, eats, perspires, eliminates, menstruates, ejaculates, conceives, or bleeds. Only bleeding evokes so swift and public a response: blood brings mother to child, bystander to victim,

¹⁴ Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” 51–2, paragraph boundary elided.

ambulance to patient, soldier to comrade, midwife to mother, defender to border. If society is a body, society's integrity is blood's work.

WHEN I WRITE, NEW IDEAS RARELY SPRING FROM NOTHING. THEY bud on old growth. I want to include the budding matrix, even when several branches spread from there. I don't mind the repetitions, I like them: I call them refrains. Like refrains in hymns, I print them in italics. You can skip them once you know how they go. Or, if you like them, you can sing along.

To modify the metaphor, this chapter, like an overture, plays for the first time the principal tunes, to make them recognizable when they come back.

I JUST WROTE THAT "IT'S THE BODY'S PERMEABILITY THAT LEAVES US bloody-minded." But we'll see in Chapter 4 that permeability, however often feared, isn't always bad. Jeff Stout, in a chapter called "Blood and Harmony," contrasts two organizations with different initiations into purity and permeability. One is a gang that requires new members to qualify by having killed someone different from themselves. Another trains organizers by requiring them to join two by two in mixed-race pairs. In that case, "the group was inculcating a habit of bridge-building, so that the identity-conferring boundary around the group was already rendered permeable in the very act of defining it."¹⁵

READERS OF GRANT PROPOSALS WANTED TO KNOW, ARE WE TALKING about "real" or "symbolic" blood? The short answer is, we're talking about any version of blood that carries social meaning. A distinction between "real" and "symbolic" blood only comes up once social meaning is in play: the two arise together. Consider some examples in which symbolic blood competes with physical blood for the compliment of being treated as the most "real."

In the *Dauerwunder* of late medieval Germany,¹⁶ pilgrims regarded the substance in certain reliquaries as real, human blood miraculously kept fluid

¹⁵ Jeffrey Stout, "Blood and Harmony," in *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 181–5; here, 182–3.

¹⁶ For this paragraph: Caroline Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).