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Themes, Theories, and Controversies

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Sacrifice
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Elements in Religion and Violence
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ABSTRACT: After more than a century of grand theorizing about the universal dimensions to the practice of ritual sacrifice, scholars now question the analytical utility of the notion writ large. The word “sacrifice” itself frequently is broken down into its Latin roots, sacer, sacred, and facere, to do or make – to do or make sacred – which is a huge category and also vague. Presuming it is people and places that are made sacred, we must question the dynamics. Does sacrifice “make sacred” by summoning the presence of gods or ancestors? By offering gifts to them? By dining with them? By restoring or establishing cosmic order? By atoning for personal or collective sins? By rectifying social disequilibrium through scapegoating? By inducing an existential epiphany about life and death? While this short Element cannot cover all complexities and practices, it does treat critically some prominent themes, theories, and controversies concerning sacrifice from ancient to present times.

KEYWORDS: sacrifice, ritual killing, ancient and contemporary sacrificial theories, Iliad, Near eastern oath-curses

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