Chapter 5
Offerings: The Metaphysics of Giving

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ABSTRACT

The chapter will discuss the key role that offerings play in everyday life in Asian and Byzantine traditions, and the ontological and eschatological beliefs behind it. Other examples of metaphysical gifts are discussed, like the Biblical notion of sacrifice, which is present both in the Old and the New Testament, that is in the Avraam-Isaac episode and Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, respectively. Some relevant pagan rituals will also be mentioned, before reflecting on what all these have in common. Since they are observed through a personal journey, and reflected upon through philosophical analysis, findings do not claim to have the ‘objectivity’ of an anthropological study. Instead, they might lead to a kind of practical understanding similar to that, which narratives or images provide. Indeed, Andrey Tarkovsky’s last film, Sacrifice, will serve as an illustration of the existential and, at times, eschatological meaning of the range of acts of giving that we discuss – from spiritual gifts, to offerings, and ultimately to sacrifice.

INTRODUCTION

There is a memorable scene at the beginning of Tarkovsky’s Sacrifice, which is a good metaphor for both pagan and religious beliefs about the meaning and the power of offerings. Somewhere on the shores of Sweden (in fact, on the Baltic island of Gotland), the main character, Alexander (a former academic) is planting a Japanese tree, together with his mute son, telling him a story about a monk in an Orthodox monastery who would ask his disciple to water a barren tree every day – until one day, the barren tree bears fruit. Alexander interprets the parable to suggest that any method or system has its value – even the most banal one such as waking up at the same time every morning, going to the bathroom and flushing the toilet. Likewise, in a monastery, disciples do something simply because their mentor asked them to, for their own spiritual development – or for the saving of the whole world, through obeisance; they may, for instance, read a psalm at the same time of the day every day, or do some manual work – in the fields, or else. The actual details of the act are irrelevant; what matters is doing it, religiously, at the same time.

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and without questioning why – it is the ritual as such (its repetitive, cyclical nature) and our commitment to it that has the power to change things. Some may call it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Others, like the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1992b, p. 319), explain that rituals, in fact, repeat the moment of creation, they annul time and represent a return to that initial moment of cosmogonic plenitude. That is the source of power in any sacrificial ritual – whether it is for regeneration (as with agrarian sacrifices), or remembrance (as in the ‘final’ ones, used at funerals): that, which is given – either as an actual sacrifice, or symbolically as an offering – coincides with the primordial being, hence – a transfer of power, which can heal, save, or regenerate.

OFFERINGS IN BALI

“Marrakesh... Marrakesh... 41 à l’ombre.” This song would make a good soundtrack for a film set in Lovina, north Bali, this time of the year. It is a hot Christmas day, and one cannot help feeling somewhat out of place on this far away island, where nature is so lush and people are so poor and yet so happy and tranquil at the same time. But one can relate to the simple message of their offering for the New Year. Number one is not only for first of January, but also for God.

Everyday life is so simple and so undisturbed in Bali. Local people go about setting their spices in place; bringing offerings to their gods; making flower arrangements (a different pattern each day) for their shrines, whether at home, by the sea, or in public places; selling their fruit and their art – their wooden statues, sarungs and paintings, their shell bracelets and coral necklaces; but most of all, telling their stories.

Each little detail – a petal in the hair, a syllable at the end of a song, an insect on the wall – gets as much care and patience as a whole ritual or ceremony does. You almost get the feeling that each and every detail counts more, in fact, than the whole. They don’t mind if you don’t like one song – they have
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