

On Sacrifice by Moshe Halbertal.
Princeton University Press, 2012.

On Sacrifice is quite a short book, some 134 pages including notes and index, but the text is beautifully written, profound and likely to arouse long discussion and debate about its ideas.

Parts of the book were delivered to a colloquium at New York University Law School, led by the late Professor Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Nagel.

Moshe Halbertal, Professor of Jewish Thought and Philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and of Law at the aforementioned School in New York, divides the book into two parts, preceded by an Introduction which sets the scene for what he calls an 'essay', and explains his approach.

Part I is called Sacrificing To, and is divided into three sub-sections: Offering, Rejection, and Ritual; Sacrifice, Exchange, and Love; Sacrifice and Its Substitutes. Part II is called Sacrificing For and is similarly divided, the sub-sections being: Self-Transcendence and Violence; War and Sacrificial Logic; Sacrifice and the Political Bond; The State and the Sacrificial Stage.

Sacrificing To starts with the offering of animals to a god or gods and reaches its apotheosis with the preparedness of a human being to sacrifice their life and suffer a martyr's death. Sacrificing For begins with the self-transcendence of martyrdom and proceeds through the concepts of self-sacrifice in war, for one's comrades or one's country and the symbolic contract that exists between the State and those prepared to die for it.

On Sacrifice is an intensely satisfying analysis of a subject whose complexity and the implications thereof likely eludes most of us who think they know what 'sacrifice' is really all about. It is a worthy addition to Professor Halbertal's already impressive bibliography.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh