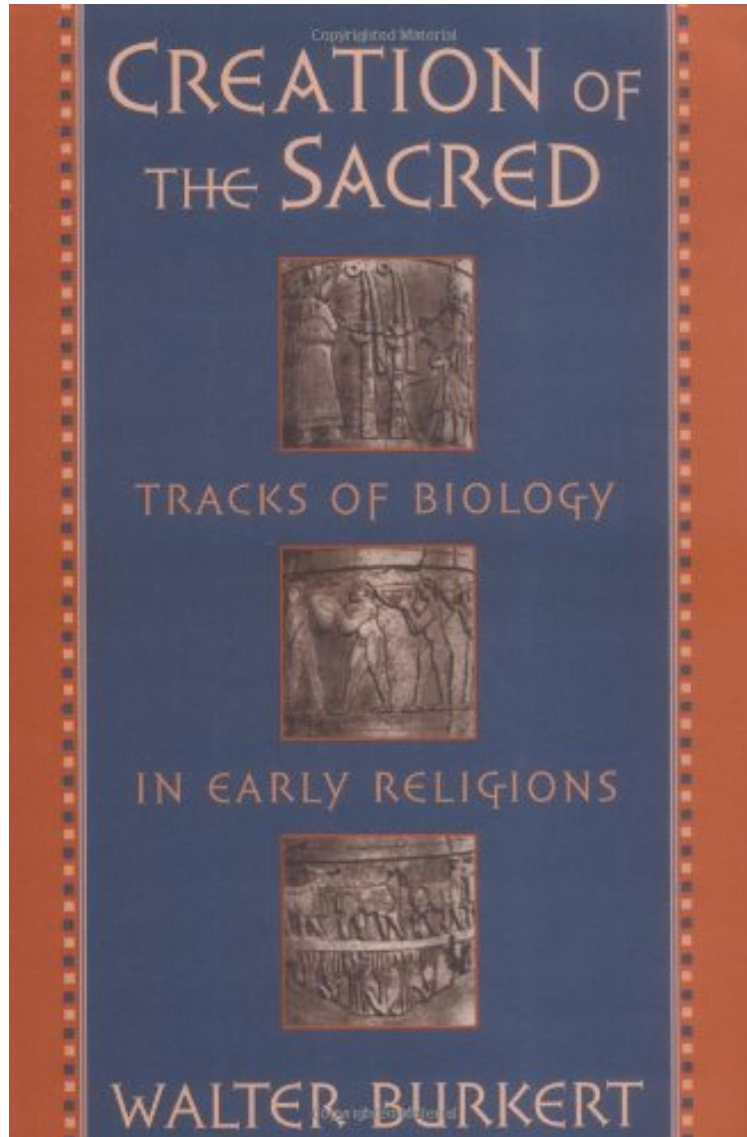


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Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions

Walter Burkert

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Sacrifice--ranging from the sacrifice of virgins to circumcision to giving up what is most valued--is essential to all religions. Could there be a natural, even biological, reason for these practices? Something that might explain why religions of so many different cultures share so many rituals and concepts? In this extraordinary book, one of the world's leading authorities on ancient religions explores the possibility of natural religion--a religious sense and practice naturally proceeding from biological imperatives. Because they lack later refinements, the earliest religions from the Near East, Israel, Greece, and Rome may tell us a great deal about the basic properties and dynamics of religion, and it is to these cultures that Walter Burkert looks for answers. His book takes us on an intellectual adventure that begins some 5,000 years ago and plunges us into a fascinating world of divine signs and omens, offerings and sacrifices, rituals and beliefs unmitigated by modern science and sophistication. Tracing parallels between animal behavior and human religious activity, Burkert suggests natural foundations for sacrifices and rituals of escape, for the concept of guilt and punishment, for the practice of gift exchange and the notion of a cosmic hierarchy, and for the development of a system of signs for negotiating with an uncertain environment. Again and again, he returns to the present to remind us that, for all our worldliness, we are not so far removed from the first Homo religiosus. A breathtaking journey, as entertaining as it is provocative, *Creation of the Sacred* brings rich new insight on religious thought past and present and raises serious questions about the ultimate reasons for, and the ultimate meaning of, human religiousness.

From Library Journal Like earlier works (e.g., *Greek Religion* (LJ 9/1/85) from the well-respected Burkert, this book uses ancient religions to learn more about what is fundamental in all religions today, but it also looks at animal behavior as a potential signpost as to why human religion is structured as it is and why it is common to all human development. Burkert postulates that basic animal instincts may underlie sacrifice, rituals of hierarchy, the idea of guilt, and even gift exchange. He does not say that the religions that developed were preordained in a Kantian sense but that they were likely outcomes of biological tendencies. To support this thesis, he demonstrates themes that are common across various religions and then presents a biological parallel. Burkert presents a very interesting, if not convincing, history of religious practice. Recommended for academic and large public libraries. ?Eric D. Albright, Galter Health Sciences Lib., Northwestern Univ., Chicago Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. Walter Burkert is a scholar of great distinction. He is also a man of remarkably wide interests. Works of his that have already been published in translation by American university presses cover matters as various as the anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth, ancient mystery cults, and the penetration of Near Eastern religions into archaic Greece The aim of *Creation of the Sacred* is even more ambitious: to uncover the very origins of religion Meaninglessness is in the long run intolerable: if that is how the world is, people are impelled to pretend otherwise. That is Burkert's central theme, and his treatment of it is immensely impressive. As a study of the various ways in which human beings have, by their religious beliefs, attitudes, and behavior, endowed the world with meaning and imposed order on chaos, *Creation of the Sacred* is a triumph. (Norman Cohn *New York of Books*) I have got much pleasure and much profit from the study of [Burkert's] deeply learned and intelligent book. (Hugh Lloyd-Jones *Times Literary Supplement*) Remarkable Burkert's mastery of the material (especially from the unsystematized, and so more revealing, ancient religions of Greece, Rome and the Near East), together with his eye for detecting the same pattern in different cultures, would make this a fascinating text, even without the ethological speculations at which he is also adept [T]he power of Burkert's book derives from crossing boundaries between cultures and disciplines. (Richard Seaford *Times Literary Supplement*) Walter Burkert, in *Creation of the Sacred* boldly challenges the nature/culture standoff and brings biological research to bear on religious belief and cult: provocative, compressed and telling. (Marina Warner *Times Literary Supplement*) [A] wide-ranging and elegantly written book. (*Washington Post Book World*) [A] dazzling display of textual learning and an intellectually stimulating look at the universal phenomena of religion through the lenses of sociobiology and ancient Mediterranean religions. (America) [A] fascinating exploration based on a lifetime's learning. (Andro Linklater *The Spectator*) Like most of Burkert's books, stimulating in its ideas and engaging in its style, *Creation of the Sacred* attempts to trace the origins of religion back to behavior patterns of our simian ancestors. (John E. Ziolkowski *Classical World*) In general terms, Burkert's work reminds us that, through most of history, religion has had less to do with the dismantling than with the erection of boundaries; less with peace than with violence; less with spirituality than with the efforts to manage physical reality A lack of interest in ancient Greek or Near Eastern religions is no excuse for ignoring Burkert's work. Reading *Creation of the Sacred* and his earlier books, scholars will realize the extent to which a combination of old-fashioned massive learning, a healthy disregard for disciplinary boundaries, and, last but not least, the willingness to go against fashions, is likely to illuminate the

problem of the origin and functions of religion. (Gustavo Benavides Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion) Why does [religion] exist? With *Creation of the Sacred*, the distinguished historian of ancient religion Walter Burkert joins the impressive ranks of scholars who have addressed the question. Unlike most of the others, though, he believes that the perspective of contemporary evolutionary biology can sharpen the questions and illuminate the issues. He is right. Dozens of insights leap from the pages of this fascinating book, arresting observations that cut across the standard banalities. (Daniel C. Dennett *The Sciences*) [*Creation of the Sacred*] is an architectonic text, an impressive attempt to construct a credible natural theology through a detailed and rational study of religious phenomenology in classical antiquity. Using examples from ancient religions, Burkert speculates that rudimentary animal impulses may underlie the entire history of religious practice. Focusing on sacrifice, rituals of escape, the concept of guilt and punishment, the notion of a cosmic hierarchy, and the practice of gift exchange, he argues that all religions are the consequence of biological tendencies. (Darren Middleton *Southern Humanities*) This book is a brilliant comparative account of the social and biological functions of religion throughout human history; philosophically, scientifically, and historically interesting. (Choice) From the Back Cover Sacrifice- ranging from the sacrifice of virgins to circumcision to giving up what is most valued- is essential to all religions. Could there be a natural, even biological, reason for these practices? Something that might explain why religions of so many different cultures share so many rituals and concepts? In this extraordinary book, one of the world's leading authorities on ancient religions explores the possibility of natural religion- a religious sense and practice naturally proceeding from biological imperatives.