

Washed In the Blood

In 2007, Louisiana became the last of the fifty states to declare cock-fighting illegal. It's estimated that until very early in this century there were at least half a million fans in this country.

It still is a big part of the culture in the Philippines, in Bali, and Puerto Rico. George Washington and Andrew Jackson were fans. Abe Lincoln was a referee, and when asked if cockfighting ought to be banned replied, "As long as God permits intelligent man created in his own image to fight in public and kill each other while the world looks on, it's not for me to deprive the chickens of the same 'freedom'."

Cockfighting involves taking two roosters, specially bred to fight, strapping surgical steel blades, called gaffs, to their legs, putting them in a ring and watching as they slash one another to bits.

They're penned up for two days in total darkness and injected with testosterone before a fight (*the feminists will love that*). They're also injected with vitamin K to make wounds clot quickly.

It often takes only a few minutes for one cock to kick and claw another to death, but sometimes the blood and feathers fly for a half hour. Not many cocks leave the ring alive, **even the winners**. It's pure blood sport.

St. Augustine tells of noticing a couple of barnyard cocks in bitter battle just outside his front door. "I chose to watch" he said. And he confessed his choice to watch was visible evidence of his sin.

It's sometimes horrible what people will do to entertain themselves. I don't know about you; but, I feel pretty much the same way about "Ultimate Fighting."

If only we could pin sin on some gaggle of grinning rednecks clustered around a bloody pit. But I ate sausage for breakfast. I wouldn't call it sin, but my meals quite often are eaten at the cost of blood.

And, we make sport of stalking and killing. It *is* about the killing; because, with supermarkets full of beef, pork, poultry and fish, virtually *none* of us need the food (besides: at the price of licenses and equipment, it's cheaper to buy the meat at the butcher counter). Still, walk into my **office** and look at my pictures and figurines. I have no intention of getting rid of my fishing tackle. I draw blood for sport. We are washed in the blood—up to our elbows!

So when a so-called "theologian" from Union Theological Seminary declares "We don't need some man bleeding on a cross to save us," I say, "Well, I sure do."

"**Blood Atonement**" is one of the most confusing and hotly debated topics in Christianity. It's only one of several New Testament metaphors that explain what Jesus did on the cross and, personally, I find it the least consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Many of us (and I include myself) want to avoid "blood

theology" altogether; and we don't like to sing the "blood" hymns.

Essentially, "blood atonement" is a spinoff from the old **sacrificial** system; it says sin brings with it the death penalty. But in God's grace, there's an "out." We can substitute our death by killing an animal and offering its blood as a gift to God—to appease God's wrath. And, of course, Jesus' death on the cross is seen as the ultimate, once-for-all blood sacrifice.

But, from at least as far back as the prophet Amos and Isaiah in the 8th century BCE, and Jeremiah 150 years later, it had been proclaimed that God did not require blood sacrifice. Jeremiah speaks for God and says, "I never asked for this! This was your idea! Yes, I blessed it, because I accept and bless every effort intended as an expression of love and devotion. But the most loving thing you can do for me is to love each other and to do justice and have compassion and to care for the poor." (Jeremiah 7:22ff)—Almost 600 years before Jesus was born!

And yet, at the Lord's Table, the traditional liturgy incorporates Jesus' own words spoken over the cup: "This is my blood of the covenant;" or, in Luke, "This cup is the new covenant—the new promise—guaranteed by my blood.

I think it also is significant that the cup over which Jesus made this comment is "the cup after supper"—the third of four cups of wine poured during the Passover Seder. It is called "the Cup of Blessing."

In his first Letter to Corinth Paul refers to this cup: "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?*" (I CORINTHIANS 10:16)

First of all: it's not blood. It's a cup of wine—or in our case, grape juice. Remember: context, context, context! In those days—and for all of human history up to that point—blood was considered the essence of life—the basis, the core, the fundamental element. There's something about that cup that Jesus blessed—something that goes to the core of life, and in every scripture, Jesus uses the term, "blood of the covenant" or, in Luke, "the new covenant."

Let me tread lightly here: our lives are not "atoned" because Jesus' shed his blood. Jesus shed his blood because atonement is part of creation—our lives already are atoned—and he came to tell us that, and those who represented us "back then" didn't like it. They had it all worked out so they could use the fear of God's wrath to control the rabble (and even make a buck or two in the process, which was what was going on in the Temple when Jesus ran them out). And Jesus exposed their Ponzi scheme; **so they** crucified him. And, yes, it was bloody.

And, yes, the shedding of Jesus' blood says our sin is a life-and-death matter. It would be one thing if we could contain our carnage to a few bloody gamecock arenas. Maybe then we could be improved. But, God help us, we can't.

God help us, when our response to human carnage by ethnic cleansing is

human carnage by bombing. God help us, when the only response we can think of is evil for evil. The word is as clear as can be, but we don't hear it; or **won't hear it:**

(MATTHEW 5:38-41 NRSV) "*You have heard it said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'*
³⁹*But I tell you, 'Do not return evil for evil. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'.*"

We have no intention of abiding by that word, do we? We teach our children, "If he hits you, hit him back." And still we don't really consider ourselves **sinners**.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?
⁴*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.* (PSALM 24:3-4 NRSV)

I don't qualify. Earning one's way to heaven doesn't require being good; it requires being perfect! How's that working out for you?

Jesus **taught**, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*" (MARK 2:17 NRSV) NOW I qualify.

Tex Sample, retired professor from St. Paul's Seminary in Kansas City, offers a different perspective on "Blood Atonement". He grew up among the poorest of the poor in Mississippi, and knows how to "talk to the folks." He's a story teller.

One of my favorite stories is about his Uncle John, who was a bootlegger in a dry county. The local police chief was a heavy drinker, and John provided him with free booze, so John operated without much worry about getting caught.

He had a big house with a circular driveway at the edge of town. He built a six-foot wall in front of the driveway so that cars pulling in would be hidden from the road. Tex said—Tex said—the wall was there so the Baptists could pull through and pick up their booze without anybody seeing them. Tex is Methodist.

One night some boys were bored, and decided to have some fun. They filled a coke bottle with gasoline, and stuffed a bandanna in the opening. They waited 'til there was no one in Uncle John's driveway, and drove through. Two of the boys were in the bed of the pickup, and they lit the bandanna and tossed the Molotov cocktail through the front window, and the truck sped off into the night.

I guess their thinking was that, after all, it was just old John, the bootlegger; and what would it hurt to burn his house? They'd be doing the community a favor. Such is the nature of self-righteousness.

What those boys didn't know was that just inside, under that same window, John's two children, three and five years old, were playing on the floor.

By the grace of God the coke bottle didn't break, and the bandanna didn't ever catch, so the only damage was the broken window and a small scorched area on the carpet. The children weren't hurt.

Well, it was a small town, and by morning, everybody'd heard the news—and

knew which boys had done the deed. Tex says, "I have another uncle, named Bob. He stands about six, six; weighs about 275; and he's a preacher. Not just a preacher, he's a *Baptist* preacher! Not just a *Baptist* preacher, he's a *Southern Baptist* preacher from Mississippi!"

Uncle Bob went looking for those boys, and he found two of them in the pool hall, and got 'em cornered. He put his big hands on their chests and pinned them to the wall, and said, "Boys, I don't approve of what my brother does. But he *is* my brother; and I want you to know: **BLOOD IS THICKER THAN ALCOHOL!** If you ever try anything like that again, you'll have me to deal with."

"Blood is thicker than alcohol". That's "blood theology" I can live with. Our relationships take precedence over anything we may do to **each other**—good or bad.

A cup is lifted over a table filled with sinners, over the broken body of the paschal lamb. The one who lifts the cup turns to those at the table (who also include the one who would betray him and the one who would deny him) and gives us the good news, "***This cup is the new covenant, guaranteed in my blood.***" (LUKE 22:20 NRSV) **WITH THIS CUP, WE BECOME 'BLOOD BROTHERS AND SISTERS' WITH JESUS.**