

# SACRIFICE

*in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*



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#### Instructor's Guide

Sacrifice is the cost of religion, paid in many ways, including donations, ascetic self-denial, prayer, fasting, mystical ecstasy, imitative suffering, ritual offerings, and martyrdom. In common discourse “sacrifice” describes a wide array of events and actions that exhibit common features, such as: signifying what transcends the world by giving up what is valued in this world; making offerings in suspense under conditions of possible failure; and giving part of oneself in the gift. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam the story of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham preparing to offer his son to God as a burnt offering is a primary example of sacrifice. Each tradition appropriates that story in creative ways, but they all uphold sacrifice as a means of relating to the sacred and as an ideal of human conduct. Most theories of sacrifice emphasize its function in the formation and maintenance of social order; but this book interprets sacrifice as the exchange of concrete natural and human goods for abstract spiritual benefits, whether for community or an individual. Sacrifices of personal comfort by ascetics, of mortal life by martyrs, and of individual identity by mystics occur in all three traditions and demonstrate extreme forms that sacrificial exchange can take. More commonly, in Judaism and Christianity, sacrifice is practiced by acts of devotion to God and charity toward others. While in Islam animal sacrifice remains a religious duty during pilgrimage to Mecca, it is understood as an expression of gratitude to God and a donation to those in need throughout the Islamic world. Thus, each tradition interprets sacrifice as religious ideal and moral obligation. The problem, this book concludes, is that some religious people make sacrifices to impose on others what they imagine as the divine ideal for all human life, thus contributing to the history of religious violence. A more hopeful future may be possible if we think of sacrifice as the virtue of giving for the welfare of others, whether they share our visions of abstract perfection or not.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

The book begins with an example of sacrifice enacted in the Roman Catholic Mass, celebrated and lived out by young nuns from India of the order of Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa, caring for elderly Arabs in Cairo. Their sacrificial self-giving is compared to the “costly signalling” of rigorous demands made by religious communes studied by the sociologists Richard Sosis and Eric Bressler. The introduction argues that the “costly signal” of sacrifice in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also signifies risk, as exemplified in the story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son. Interest in that story characterizes each of the religions of Abraham. Because those who sacrifice seek to establish a relation with a supremely free personal deity, they cannot be certain their offerings will yield the benefits they seek—any more than human devotion can cause a miracle to occur. Sacrifice, then, signifies religious intention to give up individual desires, possessions, even identity, in the hope of achieving spiritual ideals.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What acts of self-giving, whether religious or not, have you observed or practiced? Do you consider any of those acts as a sacrifice? Why or why not?
  - Why do you think that religious groups which make high demands of their members (“costly signalling”) tend to be more successful in promoting group loyalty and attracting new recruits?
  - What religious group do you think requires the highest degree of sacrifice from its members? What is your evidence for that judgment? Do you admire or question that level of commitment?
  - Why do some scholars object to the use of the term “Abrahamic religions,” even though it is common in ecumenical discussions among Jews, Christians, and Muslims? Which side of that argument do you think is more compelling?
  - Why does the text claim that sacrifice is one way religious persons construct themselves as “artificial creatures”? What other practices also shape distinctive religious identity?
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## CHAPTER 1. COMMON FEATURES OF SACRIFICE

This chapter identifies elements that are common to sacrificial practices and events: signifying transcendence by discipline or denial of human desires and interests; offering sacrifices without assurance of the intended outcome, illustrated in Pascal's wager and Kierkegaard's leap of faith; bringing offerings with the risk of rejection because the gift does not meet certain qualifications or the ritual is not performed correctly or the sacred recipient refuses to reciprocate; and requiring self-sacrifice through partial identification with what is offered. This chapter offers a working definition of *sacrifice as a costly act of self-giving, in denial of natural inclinations, that is offered in suspense, under conditions that threaten failure, for the purpose of establishing a relation with transcendent reality*. This definition is not intended to be normative, but an example of what Jonathan Z. Smith calls "polythetic classification" as applied to ritual sacrifice by Kathryn McClymond. Sacrifice for others is the noble gesture that provides a necessary basis for community and provision for future generations, but it also arouses moral ambivalence when religious people sacrifice themselves and others for an abstract ideal that proves destructive.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you agree that *transcendence* is most clearly signified by consuming, destroying, or otherwise “giving up” what is valued in our ordinary experience? What actions or events other than sacrifice might effectively point to what is *transcendent*?
  - Do you agree that every gift you give is, in part, a sacrifice of yourself? What counter-examples can you think of?
  - Søren Kierkegaard believed that religious faith requires a “leap” beyond reason and morality. Do you agree? If so, then how are religious views different from illusions or religious acts different from crimes? If not, what does religion offer that is not provided by philosophy or art or ethics?
  - Why do Smith and McClymond think that “polythetic classification” is a more satisfactory way of describing *sacrifice* than a “definition”? If you agree or not, can you explain why?
  - How is the moral ambivalence of sacrifice demonstrated in discourse about war?
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## CHAPTER 2. THEORIES OF SACRIFICE

Most theories of sacrifice regard the practice as contributing in some way to social formation. This chapter examines examples of functional theories offered by Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, William Robertson Smith, René Girard, and Nancy Jay. Unlike most reviews of theory, this one also devotes considerable space to the view of Georges Bataille that sacrifice seeks to restore individuals to a “lost intimacy” with the sacred realm by releasing both what is offered and the one making the offering from economies of exchange in which their value is determined by productivity. The offering is the “accursed share” of excess goods that must be abandoned in a gesture of liberation from humanly constructed systems of meaning, whether social, political, or religious. For Bataille, sacrifice enacts the mystical “way of negation” (*via negativa*) taken to the extreme of denying the enduring reality of either God or the self as defined by conventional theology or ethics.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does Keegan mean by “the sacrifice of sacrifice”? Do you think it is possible to make a sacrifice or offer a gift without some interest in reciprocal benefit for yourself? Can you cite an instance of “pure altruism” that you regard as free from self-interest?
  - Durkheim taught that sacrifice was a ritual means of symbolizing and enacting the social values of a community. Do you find his explanation of the practice adequate? Does his theory apply to examples of sacrifice in your experience?
  - Why did Girard believe that every culture begins with the murder of a selected “scapegoat”? Do you find his account plausible? Do you know of instances when a community enforced its own values by the sacrifice of innocent outsiders? Do such sacrifices prove effective in the long run?
  - Why does Nancy Jay regard the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son as an assertion of patriarchal authority over women? Do you find her interpretation convincing?
  - What does Bataille mean by calling sacrifice “the antithesis of production”? Does that phrase seem a fitting description of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son?
  - How does Bataille interpret mystical experience as both the sacrifice of self and the death of God? Do you find his conclusion persuasive or hyperbolic? Defend your judgment.
  - The following sentence from Bataille's *Theory of Religion* was deleted from this book: “The warrior's nobility is like a prostitute's smile, the truth of which is self-interest.” Do you agree with that editorial decision? Is Bataille too cynical? Or is self-sacrifice in warfare a form of risking one's body for the gain of honor and glory?
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## CHAPTER 3. SACRIFICE IN JEWISH TRADITION

After Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Jewish tradition reimagined animal sacrifices as devotional acts, such as prayer, fasting, and study of Torah, as well as giving up individual desires to fulfil God's will. Rabbis interpreted the story of Abraham's binding Isaac for sacrifice (*Akedah*) as the model of absolute obedience to divine commands and as the basis for the selection of the Jewish people to bear witness to the one God. Their commentary, however, included the horrified reaction of Sarah's scream to the news of Abraham's act, indicating dissent from sacrifice as religious ideal. Rabbinic teaching transferred the site of sacrifice from temple to synagogue in rituals of High Holy Days, to the family table in Passover and Sabbath rituals, and to the individual will in submission to Torah. In mystical teachings of Kabbalah, God sacrificed to create the world and Jews are called to sacrifice to redeem the world (*tikkun olam*). Such vocation of redemptive suffering was called into question by the Holocaust, a term signifying "burnt offering." Some contemporary Jews have returned to the term *Shoah* ("catastrophe") to name the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe as sheer disaster. Some Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, interpret the founding of the State of Israel as a divine gift in response to the atoning sacrifice of millions of Jewish lives. They await the resumption of animal sacrifices in a restored Temple in the messianic age, and call for sacrificial service to the state in the meanwhile. In protest, however, some Israeli poets use the image of the *Akedah* to express profound misgivings about sacrificing themselves and others in defense of the nation.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How did Jewish teachers use what Stroumsa calls the “leaven of interiorization” to transform the practice of sacrifice after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem?
  - What indications are there in rabbinic commentary on the Akedah of misgivings about sacrifice as a religious ideal? How do contemporary Jewish poets use those indications to express their own reservations about Israeli nationalism?
  - Do you side with those, like Buber, who argue that religious convictions should be guided by moral considerations or with those, like Levenson, who object to moral criticism of Abraham’s loyalty to God? According to your understanding of faith and reason, should obedience to the will of God take priority over moral conscience shaped by human culture? Why or why not?
  - What references to the Akedah are found in ritual actions on High Holy Days? How does the story of sacrifice link Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?
  - How does Luria’s version of Kabbalah link the suffering of the Jewish people in diaspora to the self-sacrifice of God? What consolation did Luria intend to offer through his interpretation of divine *tsimtsum* in creation? How did his theology lead to the ethics of *tikkun olam*?
  - Why do some Jews object to the use of the term *holocaust* to refer to the Nazi genocide of European Jews? Does their preference for the term *shoah* provide them with a more coherent understanding of the event?
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## CHAPTER 4. SACRIFICE IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Sacrifice is pervasive in Christian theology and ethics, as the redemptive significance of Christ's death and as the ideal of self-giving love. Paul emphasizes both meanings in his letters, and the Gospels of the New Testament focus on the sacrificial death of Christ as the climax of their narratives. The Epistle to the Hebrews presents Christ's death as the fulfilment and displacement of Israelite ritual sacrifices for atonement of sins. That approach was opposed by Gnostic Christians who located Christ's significance in his esoteric knowledge leading to immortality; thus, they regarded martyrdom as foolish. Nevertheless, the dominant Christian view honored martyrs, such as Polycarp and Perpetua, as models of imitation of Christ. Sacrifice is also the primary category in the orthodox theologies of Athanasius and Anselm, but Abelard replaced the teaching that Christ died as a sacrifice to God with the view that the crucifixion was an example to humans meant to influence them to reform their moral conduct. Christian mystics, like Teresa of Avila, appropriated sacrifice as the ideal of self-offering in union with transcendence. Controversy over the Eucharist as sacrifice erupted in the Protestant Reformation and was rigorously opposed by Luther and Calvin, but the Roman Catholic Church, following Aquinas, regards the Mass as a re-enactment of Christ's death, offered to God on behalf of believers who in turn give themselves in sacrificial service. Finally, Abelard's view of Jesus's death as exerting moral suasion was revived in the theology and social activism of Martin Luther King, Jr.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How does Paul interpret the crucifixion of Christ as “sacrifice” in the context of religious views current in the Mediterranean world?
  - What alternative account of Christ’s death did Gnostic Christians develop? In the context of your own values—and granted neither interpretation may be persuasive to you—do you consider the orthodox or Gnostic view of Christ’s significance as more coherent?
  - Do you find the willingness to die as a martyr for one’s religious faith admirable or delusory? In your judgment, does the death of a martyr lend credibility to the beliefs he or she died for?
  - Evaluate this book’s interpretation of Teresa’s mystical ecstasy as more sacrificial than sexual. Is that reading exaggerated to make her experience consistent with the claims that mystical union is self-sacrifice made elsewhere in this book? Defend your assessment.
  - What was Abelard’s primary objection to Anselm’s substitutionary theory of atonement? Imagine yourself in that medieval debate among Christian theologians: whose view would you find more coherent? Granted this book tilts in Abelard’s favor, what arguments from Athanasius or Anselm could be offered against his “moral influence” theory?
  - How does Martin Luther King, Jr. derive his nonviolent resistance to evil from his interpretation of Christ’s death as demonstration of divine love? Is he fully consistent in limiting Christians to the persuasive power of sacrificial suffering, while promising the inevitable triumph of divine power in creating the beloved community?
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## CHAPTER 5. SACRIFICE IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

In Islam animal sacrifice is a religious duty during the pilgrimage to Mecca. The ritual slaughter recalls Abraham's offering of his son and expresses thanks for God's merciful substitution of an animal. Saudi authorities preserve and distribute the meat to needy Muslims across the world as an act of charity. The Qur'an represents Ibrāhīm (Abraham) and his son, identified by most Muslims as Ismā'īl (Ishmael), as both submitting to the command of Allāh (God) and thus ranked with true prophets. Islamic interpretive tradition, however, indicates some reservations about Ibrāhīm's act, including protest by Sarah and challenge by Iblīs (Satan). In wars during the formation of the Islamic community in Medina, sacrifices were required of Muslims and their enemies. The Prophet Muhammad established ritual procedures for animal sacrifice during his Farewell Pilgrimage and set precedents for armed struggle (*jihād*) in defense of Islam as governor of Medina. Like Jews and Christians, most Muslims also apply the term "sacrifice" to acts of self-denial, such as almsgiving and fasting during Ramadan. In Shi'a Islam, however, literal self-sacrifice demonstrates their loyalty to the House of Ali and inspires imitative suffering of his son Husayn in ritual reenactment. Sufis seek union with God so complete that it constitutes annihilation (*fana'*) of individual consciousness. Contemporary jihadists employ sacrificial imagery to describe their deaths in the "cause of God" and the destruction of their victims. But Islam also teaches that promoting the welfare of others reflects the beauty of God.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Why does the ritual sacrifice of animals continue in Islam, while Jewish and Christian traditions gave up the practice long ago? In what ways has the “leaven of interiorization” transformed Muslim understanding of sacrifice as a religious ideal?
  - How does the telling of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son in the Qur’an differ from the account of the event in the Bible? On what points do the religions of Abraham agree on the meaning of the story? What are the major differences among their appropriations of the story?
  - How does the ritual of animal sacrifice during Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*) confirm the identity of Muslims “as Muslims,” in Ådna’s sense of the phrase? Do you agree with her and Rappaport that rituals are means by which humans signal their commitment to certain values? What rituals do you perform that enforce your sense of identity?
  - How did self-sacrifice for the sake of the House of Ali become the highest value in Shi’a Islam? What parallels do you detect between Shiite identification with Husayn through ritual suffering and Christian self-sacrifice in *imitatio Christi*?
  - Based on Sufi interpretation of *shahādah*, why is mystic union with Allāh total self-sacrifice? Is the parallel this book draws between the flame of Rabi’a and the scream of Sarah as indicating protest from sacrifice a valid point of comparison? How are the two tropes different?
  - How do Islamic jihadists demonstrate sacrifice as the exchange of concrete goods for abstract benefits? What similar exchanges have you noted in Jewish and Christian traditions? What specific cases of sacrificial exchange evoke moral ambivalence in you? Why?
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# CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

Each of the religions of Abraham has appropriated the “deep symbol” of sacrifice in different ways and, despite misgivings about its practice, has elevated it as a religious and moral ideal. As such, sacrifice has been used to sanction violence against those who oppose religious visions of social perfection or utopia. The story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, while being prevented by God from doing so, demonstrates the moral ambivalence and profound risk in every exchange of concrete good for abstract benefit. To the five warning signs of dangerous religious ideals Charles Kimball identified, this book adds another: the call to sacrifice. Only when that call is for the welfare of humanity, particularly our children, does it signal hope for a more peaceful future.

## FINAL DISCUSSION QUESTION

- For what or whom would you sacrifice your life? As witness to your religious faith? In defense of your nation? To save the life of a near family member: mother or father, husband or wife, daughter or son? To rescue a friend or a stranger? For nothing or no one? Justify your choice.