

## *Sacrifice as Final Gamble: Abraham's Offering His Son and Buddha's Giving His Body*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contribute to the formulation of a theory and critique of religious sacrifice by identifying two distinctive characteristics of sacrifices as *cost* and *suspense*. Religions require sacrifice as the price of membership in their communities, as a way of marking difference between divine and human, and as a means for humans to participate in divine or transcendent reality. Because sacrifice signifies the sacred, it transcends human values, needs, and desires. Thus sacrificial actions cannot be regulated by rational or moral order—specifically, their effects cannot be reliably predicted. Sacrifices, then, are offered in suspense. I illustrate these broad claims by examining two examples from different cultural contexts and textual traditions: the story of Abraham binding Isaac for sacrifice known in Hebrew as the *Akedah* and a tale of self-sacrifice by Buddha in an earlier life from the *Jātaka* tales. Next, we consider objections to these acts by the wives of the two spiritual heroes. The women's voices challenge the ideal of sacrifice as the condition for spiritual attainment. Sarah and Yasodhara speak for humanity in concrete immediacy against divinity in abstract transcendence. Their cries require us to reflect on whether the cost of sacrifice is too high and its risk too great to provide a stable basis for a religious way of life.

### INTRODUCTION

One primary problem sacrifice poses as a topic for theoretical reflection is the psychological bind of the gift: if what is given entails an obligation to reciprocate and an expectation of return, then is it really a gift? In his classic study of gift giving in pre-industrial cultures, Marcel Mauss argued that contract sacrifice obligates tribal chiefs and deities alike to reciprocate with benefits; thus, “just as these gifts are not freely given, they are also not really disinterested.”<sup>1</sup> In this form, sacrifice can be exhaustively explained as economic exchange. The Romans, who were as pragmatic in religious negotiations as in road building, put the dynamics of sacrifice in a slogan: *do ut des* (“I give that you may give”).

This paper challenges the economic account of sacrifice as a gift with strings securely attached by rethinking elements of *cost* and *suspense* as signifiers of the radical

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 17.

otherness of the sacred. For most religious believers, whether the transcendent is imagined as a personal agent or the non-personal source of reality, it commands respect because it cannot be contained within rational order. Neither the bestowal of God's mercy nor the awakening of Buddha mind can be entirely regulated by human piety or discipline. Reflecting on the failure of the first sacrifice recorded in the Bible, Cain's offering of grain to Yahweh, Moshe Halbertal comments: "the risk of rejection is inherent in the act of sacrifice" and "it is essential to this form of rejection that it remains inexplicable, as if nothing could be done to either predict or overcome it."<sup>2</sup> It follows, I maintain, that sacrifice cannot guarantee its own success without canceling its religious value. I will test that claim by comparing Abraham's binding of Isaac (*Akedah*) with an instance of self-sacrifice by Buddha to demonstrate that both entail cost and suspense: elements that disrupt gift exchange in an economic order of reciprocity.

### I

First, we consider *cost*. No matter how freely sacred texts speak of love or grace, there is always a price to pay to enter the path of salvation: hoops to jump through. The high cost of religious sacrifice is one way religions mark the immense value of their benefits, and the daunting difference between ordinary existence and life lived in relation to transcendent reality. As George Heyman writes, "To be sacred is to be *other*. Like *holiness*, *sanctity* is a societal code word for alterity—a valorized otherness ...."<sup>3</sup> But *how* does sacrifice signify "otherness"?

For the surrealist philosopher, Georges Bataille, sacrifice frees humans from systems of production which reduce us to objects or "things" rather than sovereign persons. Bataille insists that "the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing—only the thing—is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice ... draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice," that is, divine freedom.<sup>4</sup>

For Bataille, most accounts of sacrifice are tales of trade driven by cunning self-

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<sup>2</sup> *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>3</sup> George P. Heyman, "Sacrifice, Social Discourse, and Power," *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, edited by Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 136.

<sup>4</sup> *Theory of Religion*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 43.

interest. In his memorable phrase, every sacrificial act that functions as the condition of a benefit is “like a prostitute’s smile, the truth of which is self-interest.” For Bataille, the bond of sacrifice can be unraveled only through uncalculating destruction with no expectation of future good. For that reason, he wrote, “Sacrifice is the antithesis of production.”<sup>5</sup> For Bataille, sacrifice destroys every system of mediation, including religion, in which the value of individual life is determined by contributions to the system. Sacrifice thus returns both gift and giver to a state of pre-conscious immanence, a state of nature prior to self-consciousness. The return cannot be permanent, however, because human consciousness requires awareness of the other and the utilitarian order that awareness creates. Hence, we yearn for intimacy with the sacred through loss of self, but grasp it rarely. As a result, we exist in sacred anguish, in Bataille’s phrase, living “the truth of a scream.” The irony, or tragedy, of our situation, is that the very self-awareness that enables us to create, to love, and to have compassion also introduces alienation and manipulation of others.

What distinguishes Bataille’s view is that he understands for the sacred to be *other* than human, it must be *non*-human (but not *anti*-human). Sacrifice is the way by which we enact our desire to be as free as the gods are from human systems of production by wasting what those systems value. Only extravagant destruction of wealth, time, even life, enacts our liberation from social and economic orders that we construct to allay our anxieties about the uncontrollable future. Unlike theorists from Émile Durkheim to René Girard, Bataille argues that religious sacrifice does not support social solidarity; it marks the negation of utilitarian values on which societies are founded.

Thus, religious sacrifice requires not only loss of self, but also loss of the world that forms and sustains the self. Buddha taught that, because all things arise in dependent co-origination, neither self nor world is separable from the other. That insight is echoed by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who affirmed embodiment as the basis of subjectivity and extended individual embodiment to include the physical and cultural environment in which consciousness takes shape. The religious philosopher Leszek Kołakowski captured the point in an aphorism: “I cannot think of myself without

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<sup>5</sup> *Theory of Religion*, 49.

discovering myself in the world.”<sup>6</sup> If that is so, then I cannot lose myself without losing my world. Sacrifice is apocalyptic; it reveals the sacred as the end of history, the human story consumed by flames.

The cost of religious sacrifice is so high, not only to mark the difference between sacred and human, but for a more practical reason as well. Call it the “Chivas Regal effect”: as with that vaunted brand of blended Scotch whiskey, the more expensive an item, despite its quality, the more valuable consumers consider it. The social scientists, Richard Sosis and Eric Bressler describe this strategy in the practice of religious communes as “costly signaling” and argue that the more stringent the demands placed upon the members of a group the greater their sense of cohesion and loyalty to the community’s teachings and practices.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the members experience to a greater degree the benefits of the community’s solidarity, in turn confirming their investment: what began as perceived value because of the cost ends in real value created by the individual’s commitment to the group’s ideals.

While the steep cost of sacrifice marks the difference between sacred and human, it also signals human willingness to pay any price to overcome that difference and enact an identity with the sacred. Any theory of religious sacrifice—if indeed one is even possible—must include both elements of its cost: expression of the radical otherness of the sacred and exertion of human will to overcome the difference by denial of comforts, possessions, family, even life itself.

## II

Second, we turn to an analysis of *suspense* in two examples: Abraham’s offering of Isaac and a story of self-sacrifice by Buddha in an earlier life.

The well-known story of Abraham obeying God’s command to offer his only son as a “burnt offering” inevitably provokes readers to ask: what, exactly, was the old man thinking? In the modern era no one worried more about the question of Abraham’s

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<sup>6</sup> *Metaphysical Horror*, revised edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 66.

<sup>7</sup> “Cooperation and Commune Longevity: A Test of Costly Signaling Theory,” *Cross-Cultural Research*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2003), 211-239. I am indebted to Professor Zachary Simpson for this source.

subjectivity than Søren Kierkegaard in his work called *Fear and Trembling* (1843). While Kierkegaard emphasizes the love the father had for his son, he notes that Abraham acted without hesitation to raise a dagger over Isaac's bound body. Kierkegaard describes Abraham's state of mind as one marked by simultaneous movements of infinite resignation of Isaac to death and infinite hope for his restoration. There was no possibility of reconciling this opposition and no miraculous benefit Abraham could count on as a reward for passing the test. There was only the unrelieved strain of risking all in order to obey the divine command with no assurance that once he sacrificed Isaac he would be justified. Even as he raised the knife he was in suspense. Nevertheless, Abraham prepared to kill his son as an unconditional offering in obedience to divine command.

Over the centuries, rabbis have insisted the point of the story was to demonstrate that God did *not* want Israelites to sacrifice their children to Yahweh as Canaanites did to Moloch. Their moral restraint was to be a mark of distinction between them and other people and their God and other gods. That is the moral lesson philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas draws from the story: "Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama ...."<sup>8</sup> Levinas resolves the dilemma of the sacrifice by denying it was required at all. In his reading, nature and religion are harmonized; faith lies down in peace with ethics. But that proposal merely transfers the moral scandal of the *Akedah* (from Hebrew for "binding") from Abraham to God who issued the terrible command in the first place. Abraham is still faced with an uncertain choice.

A similar attempt to harmonize can be found in the note to Genesis 22:1 in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, where we are complacently assured that Yahweh's "command is not in earnest, but Abraham does not know this." But how do the esteemed editors at HarperCollins know what divine commands are "in earnest"? No, Abraham knows with terrible clarity what God has demanded. Jon Levenson argues that child sacrifice, commanded by Yahweh, was often enough practiced in ancient Israel that the narrator of Genesis 22 would have had good reason to believe that God was altogether

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<sup>8</sup> *Proper Names*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 77.

serious.<sup>9</sup> Further, it is precisely Abraham's willingness to kill his innocent son that calls forth divine approval.

Kierkegaard read the text at face value: God tested/tempted Abraham. But which is it? Is the sacrifice a test to be passed by performing it, or is the call to sacrifice a temptation to be resisted? Or is there a third possibility: that Abraham obeys the divine command because he regards his privileged relation to God as excluding the protection of his son?

That is Jacques Derrida's reading: since "every other is entirely other," then Abraham cannot attend to God with full loyalty and care for his son at the same time.<sup>10</sup> To obey God he must abandon Isaac and in doing so give up his own rationality. "Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice," Derrida writes, "the exposure of conceptual thinking to its limit, to its death and finitude. As soon as I enter into a relation with the other... I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is to say by sacrificing whatever obliges me also to respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others." Derrida ends this remarkable passage with the claim that Abraham "would not be able to opt for fidelity to his own, or to his son, unless he were to betray the absolute other: God, if you wish."

But this is an odd way to think about God in monotheistic traditions: as a limited and limiting being in competition with other finite objects for human loyalty. It is also a very odd way to think about human relationships as if love for one person requires betrayal

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<sup>9</sup> *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 17. Levenson points out that, while not all Israelite fathers obeyed the command of Exodus 22:28—"You shall give Me the first-born among your sons"—some did. Jacob Milgrom, on the other hand, insists that God never commanded sacrifice of the first-born on the common-sense ground (first cited by Roland de Vaux in *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice*, 1964)) that no people could routinely kill the first-born of every family without threatening their collective survival. Milgrom also argues that children "given" for service in the sanctuary were never killed, but "ransomed" by offerings of animals ["Were the Firstborn Sacrificed to YHWH? To Molek? Popular Practice or Divine Demand? In Martin Baumgarten, ed., *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 52–53]. Milgrom acknowledges, however, that there was a "popular belief" among Israelites that Yahweh, like Moloch, required child sacrifice. The question is whether Abraham was likely to have shared that belief. If so, my point stands.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Gift of Death* (Second Edition) & *Literature in Secret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Derrida writes, "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre]*; everyone else is completely or wholly other" (69).

of all others. Derrida even supposes that we are incapable of making discriminating choices among the urgency and legitimacy of multiple ethical demands. “I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other,” he continues. “I will always be in secret ....”<sup>11</sup> Such secrecy may preserve the mysterious freedom of individual choice, but it can hardly serve as a basis for ethical conduct; most of our decisions are a matter of sorting out what philosophers call *prima facie* duties, and one of the most compelling of those is to refrain from killing other human beings.

Derrida’s interpretation undercuts the possibility of ethical reflection on sacrifice. He insists that “there is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads us to absolute sacrifice ....”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, his intention is to make more pressing—thus more “general”—our responsibility for every human by making every individual as transcendent to the other as each is to God. The choice to help one person rather than another cannot be justified if each lays an absolute claim upon one’s time and resources. As one scholar astutely observes, in the moment of radical responsibility, “the Kierkegaardian sphere of absolute duty to God is reconstructed as the sphere of the absolute duty that any human being has to every other ... we cannot distinguish as easily between the ethical and religious spheres; we cannot distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and the otherness of every human being any more.”<sup>13</sup> In a reversal of the Enlightenment move to demystify religious claims as exaggerated moral prescriptions, Derrida intensifies ethical duty to the point that facing the call of any other human is the functional equivalent of encountering the sacred, “God if you wish.”

By this provocative reinscription of religious language into ethics, as we saw above, Derrida cannot also avoid imprinting the mystery and ambiguity of the sacred on to human relations—with the result of removing Abraham’s sacrifice from moral judgment or constraint, as well as from the coherence of theoretical understanding. In this view, sacrifice is unconditional and unintelligible. Further, on this view, Abraham cannot even exercise deliberate choice. What considerations of piety or prudence or duty could he consult? There

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<sup>11</sup> *Gift of Death*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Gift of Death*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> Andy F. Sanders, “Kierkegaardian Reading of the Sacrifice of Isaac,” *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, 179–180.

is no suspense where there are no alternatives. Just as anything may follow logically from a paradox, so nothing follows morally from an utterly unique action hidden from view by Abraham's secrecy.

Before we conclude that there is no way beyond paradox in theory of sacrifice, however, let us consider our second example. In the collection of tales about Buddha's previous lives (*Jātaka* or "birth stories"), we find many examples of self-sacrifice. The stories present Buddha in various forms: as god, king, teacher, ascetic, and animal. These 547 tales are often retold in sermons to illustrate moral virtues.<sup>14</sup> The central figure in each story follows the way of a Bodhisattva, one who dedicates life to cultivating spiritual and moral perfections.

*Bodhisattva* is a title of religious leadership that is composed of Sanskrit words that indicate primary virtues of Buddhism: wisdom (*bodhi*) and compassion (*sattva*). In one tale, Buddha-to-be appears as a Bodhisattva, who gives his body to a starving tigress so that she will not resort to devouring her new-born cubs in order to satisfy her hunger. As he reflects on the sacrifice he is about to make; he faces the bind of the gift without resolving it:

By offering up my very own limbs,  
I can also fulfill my wish of benefiting other beings  
And come nearer to attaining the highest awakening.<sup>15</sup>

His desire to show compassion toward the tigress and her cubs is joined with his own interest in reaching enlightenment. In further rumination, he resolves the tension in favor of pure altruism.

It is neither ambition nor desire for fame,  
Nor the attainment of heaven nor kingship,  
Nor my own perpetual happiness that motivates me.  
My sole concern is to benefit others.<sup>16</sup>

Here the bind of the gift is cut by abandoning every hope of benefit from the sacrifice.

Later Buddhist reflection on this story led some devotees to imitate Buddha

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Arya-shura, *Garland of the Buddha's Past Lives*, translated by Justin Meiland in the Clay Sanskrit Library (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1:42.

<sup>16</sup> *Garland*, 1:44.



literally. A “motivating force for self-sacrifices among Buddhists,” writes one scholar, “were the *jātaka* stories about the Buddha, who, in his former incarnations as a Bodhisattva, offered his body to feed starving animals. Eager to follow the model of the Buddha, practitioners in China offered their flesh to wolves, tigers, and even starving humans or exposed themselves to blood-sucking animals such as mosquitoes. This latter form of self-sacrifice clearly connects the ‘perfection of charity’ with the ‘perfection of patience’ and thus with asceticism proper.” But the extreme practice of self-sacrifice was “regarded as *kuxing*, or ‘painful practice’ . . .”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the Bodhisattva pays the ultimate price to relieve suffering.

Further, he employed “skillful means” in his sacrifice to demonstrate compassion for the tigress. He hurled himself off a nearby cliff so that the sound of his shattering body attracted her interest. “Delaying her impulse to butcher her young, she cast her eyes around her and when she caught sight of the Bodhisattva’s lifeless body, she rushed forward suddenly and began to eat it.”<sup>18</sup> In this way the tigress was not required to take violent action against a living being and was thus spared from accumulating karmic debt.

One can hardly imagine a less problematic example of disinterested self-giving; nevertheless, the sacrifice had two purposes: relieving suffering of the tigers and furthering liberation of Buddha-to-be from ignorance and fear. But neither outcome could he know in advance. The tigress might have found his body insufficient to still her hunger and so turned on her cubs after all. In the act of flinging himself over the cliff he might have been seized with fear and so reverted to self-concern. Finally, by committing violence against his own body, he may have added to his karmic debt.<sup>19</sup>

My focus here is not as much on the transgressive liberty of an enlightened being as on the unknown effect of the sacrifice. Buddha-to-be plunged into the abyss in

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver Freiburger, ed., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 159.

<sup>18</sup> *Garland*, 1:49.

<sup>19</sup> That risk, however, only someone on the Bodhisattva path is justified in taking. As the eighth-century Buddhist master, Shāntideva, counseled, “always labor for the benefit of all beings. The Compassionate One farsightedly permits, To this end, even what has been proscribed” [cited in Tenzin Gyatso (Dalai Lama), *For the Benefit of All Beings: A Commentary on The Way of the Bodhisattva* (Boston: Shambhala Classics, 2009), 48].

unrelieved suspense. Acting in suspense, however, is not the same as acting without reason or intention. While reducing sacrifice to a commercial exchange removes its scandal, mystifying sacrifice as an “absolute relation to the absolute” in Kierkegaard’s phrase, or “without mediation” in Derrida’s words, exempts it from rational and moral assessment and, more seriously for the traditions that cherish these stories, prevents its serving as an example for others. As noted earlier, nothing follows from a unique action. That observation returns us to the challenge in forming a theory of sacrifice: if it is neither a calculated commercial transaction nor an irrational moral transgression, what is the meaning of sacrifice? We may get a clue by attending to two voices that resonate in the background of our stories.

### III

Derrida notes what he calls “the absence of woman” in the story of the binding of Isaac, leaving him to speculate whether sacrifice entails “an exclusion or sacrifice of woman”; but he is content to “leave the question in suspense.”<sup>20</sup> Let us correct that omission by attending to the voice of Sarah, wife of Abraham, and the voice of Yasodhara, wife of Siddhartha: one sounds as a scream, the other as a lament. Both tell us something about the cost and suspense of sacrifice.

According to tradition, Abraham persuaded Sarah to let Isaac leave home but when he returned safely, she was horrified by his story. When she heard what nearly happened to her son, she wailed six times and died. According to tradition, her wails provide the tones of the *shofar* on High Holy Days.<sup>21</sup> Why does Sarah die? Avivah Zornberg, an Orthodox

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<sup>20</sup> *Gift of Death*, 76. Nancy Jay famously argued that sacrifice aimed precisely at the exclusion of women by substituting the blood of women shed in childbirth with the blood of animals shed by men in sacrifice to establish lines of paternity [*Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)]. Following Jay, Heleen Zorgdrager states that “Sarah is, symbolically speaking sacrificed as the mother of this child ... The principle of patrilineal descent has (for the moment) defeated the matrilineal” (“The Sacrifice of Abraham as a (Temporary) Resolution of a Descent Conflict? A Gender-motivated Reading of Genesis 22” in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, 195–196).

<sup>21</sup> According to rabbinic commentary, “Isaac then returned to his mother and she said to him, ‘Where have you been, my son?’ He answered, ‘My father ... took me to the top of one mountain, built an altar and laid it out, and arranged the wood, and bound me on top of the altar, and took the knife to slaughter me ....’ She said, ‘Were it not for the angel, you would already be slaughtered?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ At that, she screamed six times, corresponding to the six *shofar* notes. She had not finished doing this when she died” (*Va-yikra Rabbah* 20:2).

woman in Jerusalem who has published three volumes of *midrash* or commentary on the Pentateuch, attributes Sarah's death to the shock of the fragility of human life.<sup>22</sup> Sarah gave voice to the truth of a scream; for her, even the near sacrifice of Isaac was apocalyptic, revealing the end of her world.

But what did she learn that she had not known before? Levinas argued that the *Akedah* is a story of restoration of moral order, the foundation of the ancient Israelite social world, not its destruction. If so, that insight escaped Sarah. The *midrash* may indicate that she died of horror at Abraham's ferocious loyalty to Yahweh by which he overcame his natural inclination and moral responsibility as a father; he ceased to be human for the love of the divine. Perhaps Sarah foresaw the horror of human will, apart from the constraint of sympathy, sacrificing children for God or Enlightenment or Nation.<sup>23</sup>

While Yasodhara did not die when Siddhartha left on his quest for liberation—without even looking at their newborn son, Rahula—she gave voice to a bitter lament that is preserved in an early account of the life of Buddha:

Even if I am unworthy to look on my husband's face ... still is poor Rahula never to roll about in his father's lap? Alas! The mind of that wise hero is terribly stern—gentle as his beauty seems it is pitilessly cruel—who can desert of his own accord such an infant son with his inarticulate talk, one who would charm even an enemy!<sup>24</sup>

Both wives reveal a secret at the heart of sacrifice. Abraham's binding of Isaac and Siddhartha's abandoning Rahula signify the triumph of Religion over Nature achieved in every bloody offering, every ascetic torture, and every hermetic isolation from human companionship; in short, every sacrifice. Each story involves violation of the moral code of its tradition, and that conflict with social ethics is inevitable insofar as sacrifice is a means of establishing a relation with transcendent reality: to go beyond the human, to

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<sup>22</sup> *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 123–143.

<sup>23</sup> A dramatic linkage of the *Akedah* to the death of innocents in war was George Segal's memorial sculpture for the students killed at Kent State University during a protest against the Vietnam War. In the work Abraham points the knife at the throat of his draft-age son. The sculpture was rejected as too controversial by the trustees of Kent State and is now installed in the garden of modern sculpture at Princeton University.

<sup>24</sup> Text reprinted in *The Portable World Bible*, ed. Robert O. Ballou (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 102, from Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915).

become sacred, requires surpassing the self and its moral identity. The spectacle evokes the shout of a scream or the sigh of a lament.

#### IV

Bataille embraces the anguish of sacrifice. For him, it is the necessary consequence of the contradiction that we come to clear individual awareness only when we are liberated from systems that define us entirely in terms of our usefulness, yet we require those systems to sustain our lives as historical beings. We are dependent, in other words, on the very economic, social, military, and religious institutions that threaten to absorb our freedom and creativity into their ends, regarding us as mere means. While there is no permanent escape from this anguish, except death, Bataille insists that through sacrifice and festival we can return for a brief time to the pre-human state in which self-consciousness and the attendant awareness of others as objects has not yet arisen. Self-consciousness emerges at the moment we become aware of objects over against us. Bataille believes that from that moment all our relations are those of subjects and objects; thus all our cultural structures are built on employing each other as tools.

The extravagant destruction of sacrifice signifies rejection of utilitarian values—and in that moment of violence we regain momentarily the loss of self that mystics say they also yearn for. For Bataille, intimacy involves violence, crossing the boundary of the other and entering private space. Intimacy with the sacred is no different, but the penalty of trespass is annihilation. While mystics describe their union with God in a vocabulary of love and beatitude, their ascetic exertions “violate” personal identity, ideally erasing it altogether. For Bataille, sacrifice is the only act of “sovereign self-consciousness that, precisely, no longer turns away from itself.”<sup>25</sup> Sacrifice is designed for one purpose: to remove the individual from the role of implementing the programs of others, human or divine. “The thing—only the thing—is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim.”<sup>26</sup> But being a subject in relation to others to whom one is an object is the condition of human consciousness. So whether religious ecstasy is achieved by violating moral order in relation to the *supra*-human or it is attained by shattering systems of utility in a return to the *pre*-

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<sup>25</sup> *Theory of Religion*, 111.

<sup>26</sup> *Theory of Religion*, 43.

human, the result is the same: religious sacrifice negates the *human*.

One theoretical conclusion to draw from these considerations is that relation with the sacred requires the disappearance of the human as a sovereign self with embodied interests. Ludwig Feuerbach proclaimed, “Thus does man sacrifice man to God! The blood human sacrifice is in fact only a rude, material expression of the inmost secret of religion”—by which he meant that the human cannot be drawn into the sacred realm without being consumed.<sup>27</sup> In as much as union with the transcendent entails liberation in the form of annihilation of ego, crucifixion of self, or erasure of individuality, the fitting symbol of becoming sacred is sacrifice, giving up, and over, and away, human identity.<sup>28</sup> Is that the truth about sacrifice that is revealed in Sarah’s mortal scream and Yasodhara’s bitter complaint? The cost of attaining transcendence is forfeiture of human needs, desires, even responsibilities; but even so the risk of failure cannot be eliminated. Every sacrifice, therefore, is offered in anguished suspense.

The risk may be worth the potential benefit for the lone spiritual hero, like Abraham or Siddhartha; but the wails of Sarah and the lament of Yasodhara remind us that the cost of such sacrifice is never born by the hero alone. That is especially true when the hero, in apocalyptic fervor, seeks to destroy the world that formed him in order to eliminate his own will and interests in that world. By abandoning their sons Abraham and Siddhartha, for vastly different reasons, rejected the moral and social orders that had defined their identities. In destroying those worlds of conscious human construction, they freed themselves for an opening to the transcendent, but at the expense of their humanity. As Bataille saw clearly, such unconditional sacrifice liberates from ego but only by returning one to a primal immanence that is close to the pre-conscious awareness of animals. Once one has truly merged one’s will with mysterious divinity, as Abraham, or achieved the selfless state of “transcendent wisdom,” as Buddha, it is no longer possible to tell the

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<sup>27</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), translated by George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 272.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Kripal comments on Feuerbach’s line of thought: “It is not for nothing that so many religious traditions begin with or focus on the theme of human sacrifice, for this is what religion *is*—the sacrifice of the human, which really does exist, to the divine, which really does not” [*The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 69].

difference between a consciousness that has advanced beyond what is possible on the plane of nature or history and an amorphous sensibility not yet focused as self-awareness. A mind vacated of individual needs or desires could not judge one way or another.

Neither could such a mind reflect upon its sacrificial actions, bringing rational, moral, or even economic considerations to bear. Again, Bataille is instructive in pointing out that the very excessive violence of sacrifice is what brings humans into the presence of the sacred. It is no surprise to him that sacrifice resists rational and moral evaluation; it returns those who sacrifice to a state prior to the emergence of reason or morality. In that state, “like water in water,” we have no desires, no purposes, and no anxiety about the meaning of life. In the immanent order we are free from the world, and its utilitarian values immolated in sacrifice. In that respect, Bataille’s immanent order is indistinguishable from mystic ecstasy.

But why should we humans, faced with enormous challenges of constructing just societies and making happy lives for ourselves, want to be either animals or gods? Perhaps we need to rethink a religious practice that entails such cost and is undertaken at such risk. What if the way to the divine is not by sacrificing what we value as human—freedom, sexuality, reason, family, possessions—but by protecting and enhancing them?<sup>29</sup> Ascetic mystics, like Buddha, counsel us to eradicate desires as the root of suffering; the story of Abraham encourages us to give up our judgment and human relationships to satisfy divine will. Given the unregulated power of sacrifice, perhaps the world has seen enough stern heroes willing to offer themselves and others for transcendent ideals. Perhaps it is time to

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<sup>29</sup> My argument leads to a critique of sacrifice as a religious ideal. For another view, see Sarah Coakley, *Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Coakley argues that only sacrifice, or “cooperation” in the language of biologists, “could have brought about the *breakthrough* events in the whole upward thrust of evolutionary development” (24). She identifies “in the new notion of evolutionary sacrifice a principle of divine reason” that has generated “productive sacrificial regularities in evolution which even atheistical science is now bound to take seriously” (25). Whether her work will succeed in “regaining” sacrifice as a rational basis for reconciling religious faith with scientific data remains to be seen. In the meanwhile, I continue to be wary of sacrifice as supporting the myth of redemptive violence in religious traditions and, even more so, in political rhetoric. See my review of Kelly Denton-Borlaug, *U.S. War-culture, Sacrifice and Salvation* (Equinox, 2011) in *Library of Social Science* at <http://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/reviews/Denton-Borhaug.html>.

realize that ideals, including sacrifice, we imagine originating in “another world” have been conceived, and can only thrive, in this one.

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