The Akedah as governance myth: The removal of sacrifice from civic society

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Abstract

Some of our oldest and most powerful myths focus on sacrifice as a means of gaining power, strengthening relationships, and binding a community together. The oldest of these myths emphasize blood sacrifices as the most powerful for this purpose. Our current American myths emphasize nearly the opposite: that success can be obtained without sacrifice. This paper examines the implications of this fundamental shift on civil society. I take the Akedah – the Old Testament story of the binding of Isaac - as a central point in the evolution of the sacrifice myth. In particular, I explore the evolution of ‘sacrifice’ from ritual blood offering in a religious context to that of labor undertaken in a social context. This notion that work over time can replace blood has long been at the heart of the American Dream (e.g. “work hard, save for the future, and your life will be better than previous generations”). This too appears to be changing, as may be seen in our reactions to war, ranging from the lauding of WWII’s “greatest generation” with its stories of sacrifices of both life and hard work, to our current War on Terror.

Storytelling is central to public administration. We engage in storytelling explicitly in the classroom through the use of case studies and simulations as teaching devices. In practice, we tell stories to help others make sense of public policy – public administrators are storytellers when they construct narratives to explain policy decisions to the public they serve (Weick, 1995). Story-telling is sense-making. As White points out, “All research is fundamentally a matter of storytelling or narration” (1999, 6). Science is built on the interpretation of data, which is simply the narration of our attempt to make sense of that data – to find and express meaning in patterns. Language is the basis for our knowledge: we don’t properly know a thing until we are able to express it, until we can tell its story (even if only to ourselves). Put differently, we do not properly know anything until we can put it into words. (7). Kant’s view is that we cannot apprehend reality itself (noumenon), but only insofar as it appears to us (phenomenon). Or, as Farmer sums up, “physical reality, as it is in itself, is beyond our seeing” (1995, 18). What we’re left with, then, is our account of what we’ve seen. In this view, we are constituted by language. “Any statement we make, whether from common sense or from systematic inquiry, presupposes the use of a language and is brought forth as a story” (White, 1999, 7). Language defines us, shapes us, and locates us in both our physical and social environments. Our language shapes the world we see and forms our picture of the world as we wish it to be (Farmer, 2010, 14).

It is curious, then, that we do not more often explicitly study the ways that we construct and interpret the stories used to make sense of our world. This paper addresses one such set of
stories, examining stories of sacrifice. Specifically, I contrast the meaning (often the lack of meaning) that modern Americans find in stories of civic sacrifice with traditional narratives of sacrifice as a religious and civic sense-making phenomenon. I utilize the Akedah – the story of the binding of Isaac as a critical point in the evolution of stories of sacrifice to show how we have inverted sacrifice, displacing it from a meaningful social rite to an internal and often post-hoc afterthought.

Accordingly, this is an occasion of interpretive research in the spirit of Rein (1976), White (1992; 1999) and Farmer (1995). The subject of interpretive research is the meanings that we attach to the norms and values that govern our social interaction (White, 1999, 49). Rather than the thing itself, interpretive research focuses on the ways that we look at the thing. Farmer’s analogy, that the object of study is not the star field seen through a telescope, but the telescope itself, is apt (1995, 13). In other words, interpretive research is reflexive. It locates the researcher within the research, by examining how we create our framework of understanding – the “set of assumptions and social constructions” that inform why we understand what we understand (Farmer, 1995 12-13). Its goal is to improve understanding of phenomena – both to the scholar studying a phenomenon as well as to those actors with lived experience of the phenomenon (White, 49). It is also a normative endeavor, as it speculates on how the adoption of a different set of assumptions and constructions would impact how and what we understand (Farmer, 1995, 13). Or, as Rein puts it, interpretive research constructs an interpretive narrative of the past and present so as to build a “moral for future actions [to] suggest, for example, how the future might unfold if certain steps are taken (1976, 265-66). Put simply, stories not only tell us who we are, they tell us who we might aspire to become (White, 1992, 81). By exploring stories of sacrifice, I hope to establish a perspective on sacrifice in the modern civic sphere. Doing so should not only improve our understanding of sacrifice and its impacts on society, it should also speculate on how to change that understanding – how to tell new stories about sacrifice that may affect society in more helpful ways.

Because interpretive research is personal, normative and reflexive, this project is decidedly postmodern. That is to say, it is not concerned with uncovering a universal truth. Rather, it is concerned with truths situated within a context of time, place and audience. Interpretation is transitive – it requires both subject and object. We interpret a phenomenon for some audience and within a particular social context. As either the audience or context change, the story changes as well. There is no universal perspective. Rather, we all wear Kant’s glasses: with blue lenses, the world appears blue; red lenses tint the world red; and so on. Postmodernism denies that we can achieve an objective, ‘un-lensed’ perspective - a grand narrative in Lyotard’s terminology (Lyotard, 1984, xiv). For Lyotard, the Modern age was characterized by the quest for universal, objective truth. The Postmodern, in turn, recognizes the situational context within which we interpret and narrate truth and therefore embraces localized narratives. Regarding the stories that we tell about sacrifice, my position is that we’re caught in tension between grand and localized narratives – we may be largely operating according to localized narratives, but we cling to a belief in the metanarrative. We experience sacrifice locally – as a personal event, but often
want to understand that same event as a universal theme. As an example, consider the ways that we construct narratives around Columbine or any similar school shooting. The local experience – the personal tragedy of the victims and their families - is told as a sacrifice. As the sacrificial story is constructed, we look for a grand narrative, a way of connecting to that local experience. Thus, the event becomes a referendum on the state of American youth, or of the educational system, or of popular music, or of parenting, etc.

This causes all sorts of problems, among them a reluctance to accept and embrace the local narrative insofar as it diverges from an idealized construct - the metanarrative. We live with and operate within the structure of the localized narrative – it describes the conditions on the ground, so to speak. However, we retain the metanarrative as our mental idealized model of how things should be. Think of the ways that both the perpetrators and victims in school shootings lose their identity as individuals as they become idealized types; the perpetrators in particular become icons for ‘troubled youth’, their attitudes, habits and dress significant markers of other potential evildoers. The attraction of making localized reality conform to an ideal vision prevents us from accurately assessing local conditions, and is a factor in the fuzziness of many public administration concepts. Because ‘we all know what bureaucrats do’, we are unable to fully/faithfully/accurately observe and reflect on what they may actually be doing. Because ‘we all know what sacrifice is’, we apply the label ‘sacrifice’ to any number of situations and retroactively fit those situations to the idealized model.

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”
“Here I am,” he replied.
Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”
Genesis 22:1-2

The English word ‘sacrifice’ comes from the Latin words sacer and facere, ‘to make sacred’. ‘Sacred’, in turn, referred to the gods and things in or of their power; it also connoted something set apart. This can be seen in 'sanctum' and 'sanctuary'. It's also present in many cultures' traditions that priests or holy men were, by virtue of their profession, set apart from everyday society, isolated socially - by special codes of conduct, or spatially - living in monasteries or other communities. This notion that something holy is set apart is also present in the Hebrew word for holy, kadosh (root ק-ד-ש). For example, Moses removes himself from the community to receive the 10 Commandments, going alone to the top of mount Sinai while the people remain behind, kept within strict borders on pain of death (Exodus 19). Similarly, when Aaron makes atonement for the people, he removes himself from the community, entering the inner sanctuary alone in order to commune with the divine (Leviticus 16). In both cases, these individual acts, made in isolation, were intended to strengthen social bonds, bringing the Hebrews closer together as a people as well as closer to their God, although in both cases the people remain physically separated from their God.
What is particularly relevant here is that the act of sacrifice – of making something holy – entails ideas of both relationship and location. This paper examines stories of sacrifice and the how the ways in which we talk about sacrifice have changed over time. Specifically, I compare the meaning and practice of sacrifice in the ancient world with its meaning and application in modern American society. I argue that the story of the Akedah - the binding of Isaac - is a critical moment of change in how we understand sacrifice. Further, that our modern conception of sacrifice is undergoing a fundamental change that impacts our society in ways that have not yet been explored.

Understanding Sacrifice

My focus here is not on the act of sacrifice itself, but on the stories that we tell about sacrifice – how we tell these stories and how that storytelling informs our understanding of what we take a sacrifice to be. As an event, sacrifice, particularly in its traditional form, is a rather simple and straightforward act. However, the attempt to attach meaning to the act is much more complicated.

At the heart of sacrifice is the notion that ordinary actions and objects can be transformed when coupled with purposeful human intent (Durkheim, 257). The rituals that accompany sacrifice are designed to focus and maintain that intent during that transformation. They come in an astonishing range: sacrifices may be proscribed by location in time and space or by procedural order; they may require particular clothing or implements; language or movement; or by who may or may not participate or witness the sacrifice. All of these help to set the sacrifice aside - to separate it from the course of normal social life. Tension is inherent in sacrifice, as it is an act that simultaneously separates and draws us together. Durkheim alludes to this tension through his discussion of sacrifice. He notes that the religious and the profane cannot exist in the same space and time (2001, pp. 228-29). He asserts, however, that the sacred is prone to “infiltrate” the everyday world – that which is separate naturally seeks connections (237). Thus, religious prohibitions, including the rituals of sacrifice, are intended to formalize and control the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the separate and the common (223-228). We may more clearly begin to examine the relationship between sacred and profane by examining the narrative of sacrificial rituals: we can get at what is meant by looking at what was done.

Of relevance here is what I see as three basic characteristics of sacrifice. First, there is a physical component, an object to be sacrificed. Whereas prayer may be wholly internal - we can pray quietly and within ourselves - sacrifice needs an outward expression - some thing must be sacrificed. Second, that thing is used up - the sacrificial object is consumed in some manner. This consumption operates on several levels. Fundamentally, in the case of human or animal sacrifice, the “life principle” is consumed by the god as the sacrificial object is killed (Durkheim, 253). This separation of life from body may be sufficient for sacrificial purposes. However, the body is
often further consumed.\(^1\) Both Greek and Jewish traditions distinguish between ‘complete’ sacrifices (Holokautein; olah) where the sacrificial object is entirely burnt, and ‘commensal’ sacrifice (thyesthai; korban), where the sacrificial object is shared between man and god - part of the sacrifice is burnt and part is consumed by some or all participants (Detienne, chap. 1; Dodd, Mead & Co. 294-295). The final characteristic is that of process: the consumption of the sacrificial object is structured by a ritual: there is a method for ensuring a proper sacrifice. (Burkert, chap. 2). There is a vast literature devoted to describing and classifying types of sacrifice. However, my focus here is not on the acts of sacrifice, but on the meaning that we impute to sacrifice – examining both the intent behind sacrifice and the ways that we conceptualize sacrifice.

The difficulty that we have making sense of sacrifice is reflected in the scholarly literature, where a variety of categories for understanding sacrifice emerge. First, some hold that in our modern societies, sacrifice is an empty concept. It has no real meaning, but “lends itself to insubstantial theorizing”; “one can say anything whatsoever about it” (Girard, 1977, p. 1). In this vein, Jean-Luc Nancy has called for “the end of real sacrifice and the closure of its fantasm” (Nancy, 1991, p. 21), and Keenan has urged us that it is time to “sacrifice sacrifice” (Keenan, 2005, p. 1). In this view, the sacrificial act is empty of meaning, and should therefore be abolished, as the action without intent is worthless. As will be seen later, this is of real concern as sacrifice is a label retroactively applied to bloody acts as a way of elevating them. The notion of sacrifice has itself become an altar on which to lay our social violence.

For others, however, sacrifice is real and comprehensible. Sacrifice establishes a contractual relationship with the divine (Frantzen, 2004; Girard; 1977; Sweet, 2003). "Poets recount how the god remembers the sacrifice with pleasure or how he rages dangerously if sacrifices fail to be performed" (Burkert, p. 57). The covenant with Abraham is repeatedly expressed in contractual terms, as God spells out the benefits that will accrue to Abraham and his family for obedience to his God (see, for example Genesis chap 17). More generally, this contract is repeated to the Jewish people. In exchange for observing the commandments, God promises to watch over them in surprisingly concrete terms, ensuring, among others, that the rains come at the proper season and the grass grows (Deuteronomy 11:13-15). In this view, ritual and sacrifice are the mechanisms with which we communicate with our gods (Burkert, 1985). The act of sacrifice renews the covenantal ties; sacrifice bridges the gap between us and the divine (Durkheim, 230).

Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia was the fulfillment of a contractual relationship with Artemis, whom Agamemnon had previously offended. Until he made this sacrifice, Artemis would withhold the winds needed to launch his army at Troy (Euripides, 2004). Thus, sacrifice can also be seen as an attempt to control a greater power’s behavior. All that is necessary to compel god to behave in known and understood ways is to uphold our end of

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\(^1\) The postmodern turn is that we consume, and are consumed by, stories of sacrifice. We simultaneously consume news of war and death, ostensibly as a means of making sense of tragedy, even as that news consumes our attention, so that we seem nearly unable to focus on other events. It's not coincidental that we speak of 'doing a story to death'.

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the contract. Seen in this light, sacrifice is a means of ensuring stability in an unpredictable world.

Developing this theme, sacrifice can be seen as substitution. We offer sacrifice in order to appease a greater power. A measure of protection from a larger power is gained through an offering. By giving it something else, we are spared from the power’s direct attention (Girard, 1985; Sweet, 2003). In this view, the sacrificial object stands in for the larger community. Greek cities maintained a pharmakos, an outcast or vagabond at civic expense. In times of civic crises, the pharmakos would be beaten and driven out of the city, taking with him the problems afflicting the city (Burkert, sec. 4.5; Girard, 9). Similarly, the high priest of the Jews would ritually cast the sins of the community onto a goat, which was then driven into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:5-10). Girard notes that for sacrifice to succeed, the victim must resemble in some way the object that it replaces: what is given to the god must share some characteristics with the thing in whose stead it is offered up. However, these victims differ in one critical way: they are not tied to the community as are the beings they replace on the altar (Girard, 11-13). In other words, sacrificial victims are located outside the community; their relationship with the larger community is at best a weak one. Agamemnon was able to sacrifice Iphigenia, for example, because he was acting in his capacity as war leader and so identified more closely with his soldiers and his need to launch his army. He was more king and warrior than father. Rather than removing ourselves from a relationship with our god, we drive away a stand-in, allowing the contract to continue.

Sacrifice may also be a means of strengthening the social bond. This is the view of sacrifice as social policy (Frantzen, p. 40). For Burkert, it is fundamental to the formation and maintenance of community: “Social order is constituted in the sacrifice through irrevocable acts…every community, every order must be founded through a sacrifice” (p. 55). Our willingness to sacrifice defines our communal identity (Sweet, 2003). As Marvin and Engle note, “What is really true in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for” (769). It is this deep interpersonal connection which grounds their assertion that communal identity is a kind of religion, that sacrifice for the good of the community is sacred.

On a more prosaic level, sacrifice functions as a safety valve, a means of venting social violence in a controlled manner (Girard, chap. 1; Marvin & Engle 771-2; Smith 505). Sacrifice channels violence and directs it outward, dissipating the threat that violence poses to the social structure. The ritual of sacrifice is really the ritual of killing. It allows a community to direct and contain the violent impulse, channeling it outward away from the community and onto an outcast. This stance presumes that people are inherently violent and that the tendency towards violence will build until it is released (Girard; Smith). The sacrifice is a substitution of the sacrificial object for the community; it is a sacrifice by the community for the community – the community is both the protagonist and recipient of the sacrificial act. “Sacrifice …reconsolidates the group. This is why we die for the flag and commit our children to do so” (Marvin & Engle, 774). War traditionally is a promoter of national identity and unity. The gladiatorial games of
ancient Rome were also a powerful means of renewing social bonds through sacrifice. The communal experience of witnessing the suffering and death was an explicit social policy of Roman emperors aimed at placating and unifying the masses (Futrell, chap. 1; Hopkins, 14-20).\(^2\)

Similar claims have been made about modern sports – that at least part of what brings us together to watch violent sports is the possibility of injury (Cornell, 2002). In these examples, society itself is the higher power to which we offer sacrifice. Very much in the vein of Odin, we offer sacrifices of ourselves to ourselves.

**The Binding of Isaac**

The story of the *Akedah* itself is told sparsely (Genesis 22:1-19). God tests Abraham, commanding him to take his only son Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering (*olah*) on a mountain-top. Abraham dutifully chops wood and sets off with Isaac and two servants. On reaching the mountain, he leaves the servants, takes his knife and fire, and loads the wood onto Isaac. Together they climb the mountain. When Isaac asks about the sacrifice, Abraham replies that God will provide. He then proceeds to build an altar and bind his son upon it. With his knife in hand for the killing stroke, Abraham is stopped by an angel and is made aware of a ram caught in a thicket nearby. Sacrificing the ram in Isaac’s stead, Abraham is blessed as the father of a great people. The episode closes with Abraham coming down the mountain to his servants and returning home.

This brief story is a pivotal episode for understanding sacrifice and has profound implications for the role of sacrifice as social policy (Burkert, 59; Frantzen, 40). The elements of traditional sacrifice rituals are present: A contractual relationship is established – after sacrificing the ram, Abraham is blessed as the father of a great people. Note, however, that it isn’t clear whether the reward is given for the sacrifice of the ram or for the non-sacrifice of Isaac. The notion of substitution is present as well, although in a new form, as the ram is ultimately substituted for Isaac. As a means of strengthening the social bond, however, the *Akedah* is more problematic. On one hand, the episode results in the assurance that Abraham’s tribe will be a great people – surely an indication that his society will grow. On the other, it is difficult to imagine that Abraham’s relationship with Isaac is stronger as a result of this episode. Indeed, modern readings that emphasize what is left unsaid in the biblical account: Although the ram is killed in Isaac’s place, Isaac disappears from the story after he is bound. From the reader’s perspective, he remains bound on the mountain: the psychological impact takes the place of his father’s knife. For the rest of his life, Isaac is portrayed as a quiet, stay-at-home figure, largely under the sway of his extended family (Levine, 2001). This perspective, of the *Akedah* as an ongoing, internal mental and spiritual sacrifice, may be seen in Israeli responses to the War of Liberation, Six Day War, and Yom Kippur War (see Sagi, 1998). Netiva Ben-Yehuda’s recollection of the War of Liberation typifies this perspective:

\(^2\) Gladiatorial games had their in the sacrifices following the death of a leader. Death through combat was thought to honor the leader’s memory even as the spilled blood nourished his spirit (Tertullian, *On the Spectacles*, 12).
They told us to go to the army to defend the country so we went. ... I always say that we are the Isaacs. God spared Abraham the trauma, but Isaac, who lay on the altar on his back and, through the ropes, saw his father thrusting a knife, lived with it for the rest of his life. (quoted in Sagi, p. 57).

The Akedah re-structures relationships by focusing on what is left unsaid and by internalizing sacrifice, and de-centers the sacrificial act in both space and time, with profound consequences.

A traditional interpretation of the Akedah understands it as an explicit response to human sacrifice, particularly the Phoenician practices of child sacrifice in times of civic crises (Hertz; Moberly, 1988; Stacker & Wolff, 1984). In this interpretation, Abraham actively refutes the practice of child sacrifice, particularly the Phoenician practice of child sacrifice. In a fundamental shift away from the notion that sacrifice is the foundation and binding force in society (Durkheim; Girard; Marvin & Engle), the story consciously re-founds the social order on a basis of not-sacrifice. Abraham’s sacrifice of the ram in Isaac’s stead demonstrates that the intent is more important than the action – god is interested in our devotion, not our blood.

By shifting the focus away from the object and action of sacrifice and onto Abraham’s devotion to god – his willingness to unquestioningly lead his son to death as well as his willingness to spare his life – the Akedah moves the foundational mythology of ancient Jewish society away from totemism and ritualized violence and towards a moral community.

The focus on intent – internal devotion – decenters sacrifice with far-reaching consequences for both religion and state. On one hand, it allows Judaism to survive the destruction of its central Temple and accompanying loss of its sacrificial practices (McClymond, 157). It is quite remarkable that a tribal society bound together by daily sacrificial requirements and focused on a central Temple in Jerusalem can not only survive, but thrive, following the destruction of that Temple. However, the Jews make this shift with seeming ease. The morning service provides a daily reminder, recalling Yohanan ben Zakkai’s words following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, “There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of lovingkindness” (Avot d’rabi Natan 11a, quoted in Harlow, p. 15). This position is grounded in Hosea 6:6 (“Lovingkindness I desire, not sacrifice”), although this theme may be found throughout Jewish tradition. Micah 6:6-8 similarly argues that good deeds or mercy are more desirable to G-d than sacrifice (“the LORD has told you what is good…to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”). Rabbinic commentary has canonized this orientation through the observation that “On three things the world stands. On Torah, on service [of God], and on acts of human kindness” (Pirke Avot, 1:2). Sacrifice is personalized and internalized. No longer do we have to bring an object to a specific place, at a specific time in order to offer sacrifice. Rather, we

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3 Ancient accounts of this practice can be found in the Library of History (Diodorus Siculus, 20:14) and On Superstition (Plutarch, para. 13). Explicit references to this practice are also made in Leviticus 18:21 and 20:20-25. Modern scholarship is divided on whether the Phoenicians practiced child sacrifice (see, for example, Boehm, 2004; Yehoshua, 2004).

4 A sentiment echoed by Durkheim: “What the worshipper really gives his god is not the food he places on the altar, or the blood he spills from his veins, but his thought” (257).
become the agents of sacrifice, directing our own actions towards a higher purpose. As a consequence, sacrifice is no longer a social, delineated experience. We determine the time, place, and objects of sacrifice. And as Isaac disappeared from the Akedah, it's not always clear when we get off the altar and walk down the mountain.

A second consequence of the Akedah is that the timeline of sacrifice is profoundly altered. Sacrifice had a definite timeline, culminating with the death and consumption of the sacrificial object. However, when the object of sacrifice is removed, there is no longer a definite endpoint for that sacrifice. As internal devotion manifested through prayer and good deeds replaces sacrifice through consumption of some external object, the process of sacrifice extends indefinitely. Put simply, when a sacrifice is no longer physically consumed, it’s not possible to tell when we’ve sacrificed enough, when our end of the contract has been fulfilled. The notion that traditional sacrifice is no longer desirable is echoed in the sentiment that man is justified by his works (James 2:24; Pirkei Avot 1:2). This transformation is problematic, as the terms of sacrificial offerings are detailed with a high level of specificity (e.g. Numbers 28:9 lists the Sabbath offerings: 2 male yearling lambs and 2/10 ephah of fine flour mingled with oil. Numbers chapters 28-29 enumerate appropriate sacrifices for various occasions). However, a similar description of the quantities of good works is nearly absent from widely accessible modern sources. Rather, exhortations toward good works are often phrased as maxims that can be approached but never achieved (e.g. “Seek justice; defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” - Isaiah 1:17. “Love your neighbor as yourself”). We don’t expect to achieve justice or successfully defend the oppressed in the same way that one could bring lambs, flour and oil to the Temple and fulfill one’s obligations. Internalizing sacrifice prevents its expression and acceptance by an outside party – we never fully give up our good works to god or a higher power, but retain them within us, with the result that sacrifice is never successfully achieved. With traditional sacrifice, the focus is back-ward looking, on the sacrifice that has been offered. Internal, de-centered sacrifice is forward-looking, emphasizing the good works that have yet to be done.

This shift in perspective is encapsulated for American soldiers in the US military’s stop-loss policy. This policy allows for service members’ active duty contracts to be involuntarily extended. Title 10, Section 12305 allows the President to “suspend any provision of law relating to promotion, retirement, or separation” of service members who are deemed essential to national security (USC 2010). At his discretion, the President can re-structure the contract that military personnel operate under, requiring them to make additional sacrifices on behalf of their country. For soldiers, stop-loss can feel like the agreed-upon terms of a contract of sacrifice (X years of active duty service in exchange for Y benefits) are being retroactively re-written, with no clear end to the relationship established.

[5] The Mishnah – redaction of early Jewish oral traditions – occasionally addresses the limits and conditions of charitable work. However, here too, one of the most well-known passages opens a discussion of charity by listing categories of good deeds for which there is no set measure. These include the amount of field gleanings to leave for the poor, the size of Temple offerings, deeds of lovingkindness and depth of religious study (Mishnah Peah, 1:1).
Sacrifice has been fundamentally transformed by the shifts embodied in the Akedah. Modern sacrifice in the civic sphere differs in essential ways from ancient sacrificial practices. The foci of sacrifice remain: an emphasis on the relationships established through sacrifice and the role of sacrifice in locating individuals in either a civic or sacred context. The central elements of contract, substitution, and the social bond may also be found in modern notions of sacrifice, albeit to substantially different effects. In the remainder of the paper, I argue that the transformation of sacrifice embodied in the Akedah permeates modern civic sacrifice and has had significant impacts on society.

And we have seen our national character in eloquent acts of sacrifice.  
- George Bush

Bush gives up golf ’in solidarity with troops’  
Guardian.co.uk headline

**Sacrifice in Modern America**

As may be expected when jumping across cultures, hemispheres and several thousand years, the object of examination has changed considerably. However, because we have been telling stories of sacrifice continually across the span of culture, space and time, it's easy to focus on the story as it is currently being told and not consider the endpoints. I shift now from the ancient world to modern American society. I then focus more particularly on the ways that we tell stories of sacrifice about World War II, contrasting those stories against the ways that we are constructing narratives of sacrifice about the War of Terror.

In doing so, the context of sacrifice shifts from a primarily religious to a primarily political environment. Ancient sacrifice was first and foremost a religious activity. Religion was an official, sanctioned function of the state; the state, in turn, depended on religion as a source of its legitimacy. Ancient Jewish society, for example, was a theocracy: religious precepts dictated the shape of the state. Greek and Roman societies endorsed state religions; cities and regions each had their own patron gods and associated festivals. As was seen in the case of the pharmakos and Phoenician child sacrifice, civic crises were addressed through appeal to the divine. In the modern Western world, the obverse is true. Religion is not a state activity, but rather is Constitutionally separated in America. As the state framework dominates the framework of civic life, I focus on civic engagement and sacrifices made for the good of the civic whole. This is not to say that private individual religious practices are not important, nor is the state separated very far from the forms and function of religious practice. Indeed, much of the structure of ancient religious and sacrificial expression has been subsumed in the structure of the state.

In many ways the rise of the nation-state came about as nationalism assumed the narrative of religious life and sacrifice. The example of ancient Israel as theocracy comes immediately to mind, as does the transformation of Rome from multi-faced pagan state through
dictatorship, monolithic in political and religious authority, through its development as both religious center and independent political entity. Hitler's propaganda melded political and religious narratives into a driving force behind Nazi expansion (Hitler, December 18, 1926 speech). Carlton Hayes has examined the religious nature of American nationalism, arguing that it was shaped by a Christian context and shares many of its features (Hayes, 1966). More specifically, the foundational elements of the American state have been accorded religious status - we speak of historic sites from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars as shrines, and denote battlefields as hallowed ground. Zelinsky has pointed out that the American flag has a power and presence comparable to that of the medieval crucifix (Zelinsky, 1988, 243). The flag may be considered a sacred object; refer to recent attempts to Constitutionally prohibit its desecration. Indeed,

The flag is the skin of the totem ancestor held high. It represents the sacrificed bodies of its devotees just as the cross, the sacred object of Christianity, represents the body sacrificed to a Christian god. The soldier carries his flag into battle as a sign of his willingness to die, just as Jesus carried his cross to show his willingness to die (Marvin & Engle, 770).

The idea of the nation has become the religious totem. The ancestral totem that Durkheim saw as the basis of 'primitive' religious societies has been internalized and identified as the self. Christianity promoted the narrative of the violently sacrificed body as totem - the god renewed. Nationalism completes the transformation of the fully-god, fully-man sacrifice into the body of the soldier sacrificed for his country and 'resurrected' under the flag. What is renewed here is not the physical body of the sacrificed soldier, but the nation itself (Marvin & Engle, 770). As Marvin and Engle point out, one consequence of this shift is to fully internalize the notion of sacrifice. Whereas in the ancient world, sacrifice of outsiders - of someone separate from the community - was a means of releasing tension and the violent impulse, and further binding a community together, we not achieve unity through the sacrifice of our own: "If the ritual purpose of war were merely to kill the enemy, the deaths of some 40,000 or more Iraqis would have made a lasting contribution to American national unity " (Marvin & Engle, 772). Instead, narratives of the American victims of 9/11 were at the heart of our initial civic unification behind the War on Terror.

Thus, war has become the prototypical ritual of the nation. While other civic rituals also shape our social identity, the finality and transformation of blood sacrifice in battle is pre-eminent (Marvin & Engle, 776). However, while war may guarantee blood, it does not always realize fruitful sacrifice; war sacrifices may imperil the social bond rather than strengthening it. For wars to be successful as sacrificial instruments, a number of conditions must obtain. The examination of these conditions will be made through a comparing the sacrifices of World War II with the War on Terror.

First, war must extend throughout society. It must have the consent and support of the whole. Recall Girard’s assertion that one function of sacrifice is to quell violence and direct a
society’s violent impulses outside itself. The implicit, shared knowledge that society grows stronger by offering a part of itself to violence at the hands of others is one of our deepest secrets (Marvin & Engle, 771). The myth of the Minotaur centers on this very notion of a community united by a sacrificial delegation. Regardless of how open this secret is, “the group becomes a group by agreeing not to disagree about the group-making principle” (Marvin & Engle, 771). The sacrifice must also extend sufficiently throughout society to seem to touch every member of the group (Marvin & Engle, 775). While the knowledge of the role of sacrifice may remain secret, the effects of the sacrifice must be felt by members throughout the social spectrum. World War II had extensive effects on both the civilian population as well as on our military servicemen. There can be no question of the profound effects of WWII on American society. Civilian support for the war effort included sacrifice and rationing of a wide array of consumer goods.

In the first month following President Roosevelt’s appeal for rubber, 400,000 tons of scrap rubber was collected. Volunteers grew up to 40% of all vegetables, collected waste paper, metal and other materials, and sold war bonds (Putnam, 269-70). Volunteerism did strengthen social unity: “You just felt that the strangers sitting next to you in a restaurant, or someplace, felt the same way you did about the basic issues” (Bill Gold, quoted in Hoopes, xii).

In contrast, while the War on Terror initially enjoyed widespread political support, it touched relatively few Americans. In response to the War on Terror, President Bush enjoined Americans to “enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed,” (Bush, 2001) and was widely criticized as telling us to go shopping, not to “accept the sacrifices that war implies” (Spiers, 2003). In other words, the war exists outside the civilian economy and there is little or no interface for civil society into the war effort.

The sacrifices that both civilians and servicemembers made during WWII have led to them being labeled as “the Greatest Generation” (Brokaw, 1998). Battlefields and graveyards have become popular destinations; WWII veterans are revered figures. Military service touched wide swathes of American society. Celebrities and entertainers served. Professional athletes served in sufficiently large numbers to cancel or curtail seasons in multiple sports. The military has been credited as a driving force behind racial integration, as Americans of all backgrounds were called upon to serve together. Putnam notes that nearly 80 percent of men born in the 1920’s served in the military (Putnam, 2000, 268). While the War on Terror is much smaller in scope, a much smaller swath of society has served in its armed forces. Instead of calling upon more Americans to serve, we have opted to demand longer service periods and repeated deployments. One telling comparison may be seen in how we treat the dead from each war. While WWII graveyards have become shrines, the U.S. has until recently forbidden any media coverage of the return of slain soldiers from the Middle East (BBC, 2009).

A second characteristic of war as successful sacrifice is that there must be a definite outcome (Marvin & Engle, 776). Sacrifice is a transformative occurrence; by moving between the material and spiritual worlds, sacrifice redefines space and time. Abram becomes a new person – Abraham – as a result of sealing his covenant with god, a motif that is repeated throughout the Old Testament. Location in time and space is defined by sacrifice. The Jews
become a people as a result – again, community is founded through sacrifice; the Western calendar has its origin in Jesus’ death. More prosaically, we define ourselves in the context of sacrifice, both the Greatest Generation and the postwar Boomer generation. WWII, from its beginning, had a definite endpoint that could be conceived in both time (the capitulation of the Axis forces) and space (progress could be seen clearly on a map, as territory was gained or lost). The War on Terror, however, has no such defining features. We began the war before we understood who we were fighting. John McCain famously stated that we could continue fighting for 100, 1000, or 1,000,000 years (Corn, 2008). Interestingly, in making that statement, McCain defined military success not in terms of geography, but in casualties. In other words, we will continue to send soldiers to die as long as soldiers are dying. Sacrifice becomes its own end, sustaining itself through self-directed offerings. This circularity seems a clear instance of sacrifice as an empty concept where it has become a fantasm that can mean anything.

Conclusions

Insofar as this is an examination of an ongoing narrative, there is no conclusion as the story isn't over yet. The narrative of sacrifice continues to exist in the social sphere. Individual cases within that narrative thread may end, but the larger narrative theme will continue. However, there is a bifurcation of that larger narrative theme; both branches have significant implications for civic society. On one hand, we no longer sacrifice in a meaningful way. President Bush's claim to have given up golf as a personal sacrifice in honor of our collective war dead (Guardian, 2008) is a striking example of Girard's (1977) and Nancy's (1991) concern that sacrifice has become an empty concept. Framed in terms of the Akedah, Isaac is still bound on the altar and blood still flows, but Abraham is absent - there is no meaningful intent behind the action. The danger inherent in this conclusion is that the social bond is weakened. If one role of sacrifice is to renew the social bond, strengthen community, and resolve social tensions within a group, then that renewal is reduced as sacrifice becomes an empty gesture. One consequence of the Akedah was to shift emphasis from the physical act of sacrifice to the intent behind those actions. When that intention is removed, we are left with emptiness and reflex action. I doubt that civic society can long survive with such a void at its center.

The other branch of the narrative follows from this emptying of sacrifice and the tensions between localized and grand narratives - of living the experience of empty sacrifice while reaching for the grand narratives of sacrifice-as-meaning. When we are left with action - with the mechanics of sacrifice - we apply meaning to that action. Cases of violent action are re-cast as sacrifices in order to make sense of them. We have, in effect, reverse-engineered sacrifice.

Epilogue
The great rabbi Baal Shem-Tov loved his people. Whenever he sensed they were in danger, he would go to a secret place in the woods, light a special fire, and say a special prayer. Then, without fail, his people would be saved from danger. Baal Shem-Tov passed on and his disciple, Magid of Mezritch, came to lead the people. Whenever he sensed his people were in danger, he would go to the secret place in the woods. "Dear God," he would say, "I don't know how to light the special fire, but I know the special prayer. Please let that be good enough." It was, and the people would once again be saved from danger. When Magid passed on, he was succeeded by another rabbi, the Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, and whenever he heard that his people were in danger, he would go to the secret place in the woods. "Dear God," he would say, "I don't know how to make the special fire, I don't know how to say the special prayer, but I know this secret place in the woods. Please let that be good enough." It was, and the people would once again be saved from danger. When Rabbi Moshe passed, he was succeeded by Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, and whenever somebody told him that his people were in danger, he didn't even get out of his armchair. He could only bow his head and shrug his shoulders. "Dear God," he would pray, "I don't know how to make the special fire. I don't know how to say the special prayer. I don't even know the secret place in the woods. All I know is the story, and I'm hoping that's good enough." It was, and his people would be saved. (Wiesel, 1966, i-iii)

I'm not certain that we even know the story anymore; we merely sit in our armchairs and shrug…

References


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