

The Shrewdness of Abraham Violence and Sexual Difference in a Paradigm of Monotheistic Faith

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The question that animates my essay is a presumptuous one: where does violence enter into monotheism? I am presuming that violence does enter into it, not necessarily as its essential ingredient, but not like a total stranger either. Monotheism seems to court violence. Or that at least is the impression I would like to test.

The *prima facie* violence of an abstract monotheism is its reduction of difference to sameness. So far that is a very ethereal and not very violent kind of violence. Any kind of conceptual articulation requires that difference be brought under the purview of some sameness. I note seven apples. My concept of an apple applies equally to the seven I note. Have I done violence to difference by making seven individuals answer to one concept? I have at least this much reason to hope not: I can now speak of seven different apples. When I move from the “mono” to the “theism” in monotheism, I begin to notice a disconcerting difference between gods and apples. I note seven gods. Six are classically Olympian—the sort of god that is apt to show up in Homer and the Greek tragedians—and the remaining god is the Jealous One, the god of gods, who will have no other gods before him. If I am speak of these seven gods in comparative terms, perhaps with some eye towards the difference between Jealous One’s jealousy and the jealousy that standardly fuels rivalry among the Olympians, I need to be able to use the word ‘god’ without too much equivocation. But can I? The aspiration of monotheism in Western religious thought

has been towards the sublime, even inarticulate, uniqueness of the one god. In keeping with this aspiration, I am required to become hyper self-conscious not only about my use of the concept ‘god,’ but also about how I write down or type the word. It has been conventional to capitalize ‘god’ when speaking of the one God, but slashes, dashes, and quotes are perhaps now better suited to mark the uniqueness of this God—a uniqueness taken to defy conceptualization.

Consider now the difference between gods and apples. The concept of an apple applies to apples. The concept of a god applies to gods up until the point when the one God is invoked, and then the concept applies neither to gods nor to the one God. The one God escapes conceptualization by being sublimely unlike the other gods, and the other gods, by virtue of their absolute difference from the one God, lose their claim to legitimate divinity: they get demoted to idol status. The concept of an idol is a degenerate concept of a god. Since the degeneration is here a function of the ineffable sublimity of the one God, we are in the curious position of being able to say only what the one God is not like. This kind of inarticulacy has been a valued commodity to many a great theological mind, from Maimonides and Aquinas to Kierkegaard and Marion. I am nevertheless going to try to make it seem a little less valuable. Monotheism calls for the sacrifice of the many gods to the one, but it seems to forget that no sacrifice is ever total. There is always some good that is not sacrificed, and that withholding is what gives the sacrifice its point.

I am going to collect my thoughts about monotheism around a story of a sacrifice. You are no doubt familiar with the story, as it is detailed in Chapter 22 of *Genesis*. Here are just a few of the highlights. God makes a strange and terrible request of his servant Abraham, the man destined to become the father of a nation (Gen. 22: 2-3): “Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering

on one of the mountains which I shall say to you.”¹ Although Abraham has been known to bargain with God for a life or two, Abraham does not bargain for Isaac. Instead he saddles up his donkey, splits wood for the sacrifice, and takes his son to the place of God’s choosing. Isaac is under the impression that a sheep is to be sacrificed, and his father doesn’t disabuse him of his naïve faith until the time comes for Isaac to be bound and placed on the altar of sacrifice. With cleaver poised for slaughter, Abraham’s hand is stayed by one of God’s messengers, with no time to spare. “Do not reach out your hand against the lad,” the messenger calls out from the heavens (Gen. 22: 12), “for now I know that you fear God and you have not held back your son, your only one, from Me.” Abraham looks around to see a ram caught in a thicket by its horns; he sacrifices the ram in Isaac’s place. The messenger of God speaks again, relaying God’s words to a now much exalted Abraham (Gen. 22: 16-18): “By my own Self I swear, declares the Lord, that because you have done this thing and have not held back your son, your only one, I will greatly bless you and will greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shore of the sea, and your seed shall take hold of its enemies’ gate. And all the nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed because you have listened to my voice.”

I am going to sketch two traditions of interpretation of this story of sacrifice, surrender, and paternity. The first I will call the classical apologetic tradition, and its representatives will be two medieval Catholic theologians, or if you prefer, two very old Continental philosophers—the Frenchman Peter Abelard and the Italian Thomas Aquinas, and one modern Protestant ironist, Søren Kierkegaard. The other tradition is contemporary and unapologetic, and its ad hoc membership includes the literary critic René Girard, the anthropologist Nancy Jay, and the philosopher Luce Irigaray. Obviously I am not trying to canvas historically cohesive and culturally diverse traditions of Genesis

exegesis; I am simply trying to mark a contrast between readings of the binding of Isaac that seek to obscure the apparent connection between violence and monotheistic faith and those that are more apt to find that connection definitive of Abraham’s legacy. The apologetic readers are keenly aware of the scandalous appearance of a fatherly God asking for innocent blood and asking it of the very father of the boy designated for sacrifice. The unapologetic readers just aren’t all that surprised that a supreme father, bent on his paternal privileges, would ask for such a thing.

Kierkegaard’s reading of the binding story, the *Akedah*, is both the culmination and the *reductio ad absurdum* of the apologetic tradition. The key to Kierkegaard’s reading is the categorical distinction he makes, early in *Fear and Trembling*, between a murder and a religious sacrifice. “The ethical expression for what Abraham did,” writes Kierkegaard, “is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac.”² Notice that Kierkegaard is not distinguishing between a killing and a religious sacrifice. Unless we are prepared to read the commandment, “Do not kill,” in an unqualified and absolute way, as a prohibition against the taking of any life, no matter what the circumstances, killing, in and of itself, has no ethical valence; it is neither ethically positive, nor ethically negative. It is only when we deem a killing unjustified that we call it a murder, and it is the charged nature of the distinction that leads us passionately to debate issues like abortion, capital punishment, and war. Kierkegaard, however, is not inviting debate about the ethical status of Abraham’s intended killing of Isaac: it is, ethically speaking, an intent to murder. Readers of Abraham are cautioned, however, not to be too single-minded in their point of view. The murderer intends, without sufficient cause, to end a life; the man of faith hopes for the miraculous reconstitution of a life surrendered. Abraham falls under both readings. If he is not to be a murderer, plain

and simple, his reader has to be able to suspend the ethical meaning of Abraham's intention while affirming the lawfulness of ethics: the spiritual equivalent of defying gravity.

Perhaps I have set myself up to misread Kierkegaard, in that I have ignored the difference between Kierkegaard and his persona, Johannes de Silentio, who may or may not be espousing Kierkegaard's own sense of faith. I concede the possibility, but someone whose sense of irony is better than mine is going to have to negotiate that particular thicket. My own, flat reading of Kierkegaard leaves me with two basic conclusions. One is that it makes no difference to Kierkegaard's reading whether Abraham kills his son or not. The real story lies in Abraham's act of faith. The other is that the essential difference between Abraham and a murderer lies in the quality of Abraham's intent. But Kierkegaard devotes most of his ingenuity for irony trying to convince his readers that they ought to be exceedingly anxious about identifying what the quality of that intent is. It defies categorization. Abraham presumably knows what he is all about, in kind of an unknowing way, but he has no words to clue the rest of us in.

As you may have surmised, both of these conclusions trouble me. The first troubles me, not only because I think that the difference between an intent to kill and a murder matters in all kinds of ways, but also because it is a bad reading of the story to imagine that the staying of Abraham's hand is just a device to frame Abraham's intent. It is crucial to the story, as I will argue later, that Isaac be returned to his mother's side safely. As for the second conclusion, it is worth remembering that few if any murderers intend their killings to be murders. Most kill out of a sense of entitlement, even if they are aware, in varying degrees, that others are unlikely to credit that sense of theirs. The fact that Abraham doesn't intend to murder Isaac does not, in itself, exonerate Abraham of attempted murder, and Kierkegaard doesn't claim otherwise. In fact Kierkegaard never

defends Abraham outright, as such a defense would have to accede to the jurisdiction of ethics over faith. Instead he sets things up so that a jury of Abraham's peers would find it an impossible task to determine *mens rea*. Neither Abraham's guilt nor his innocence would be evident to anyone who could not imagine an imperative of faith, and no one thinking merely ethically could imagine such an imperative. A jury of ethically minded people would likely remand Abraham to the State's psychiatric facility for further evaluation. And Abraham would be unlikely, given the impregnable uniqueness that Kierkegaard credits to his faith, ever to leave such a facility.

The more classical apologists, less given than Kierkegaard to irony, focus on God's innocence rather than Abraham's, whose innocence will follow from God's vindication. Abelard and Aquinas turn out to have very different inclinations, however, when it comes to theodicy. Abelard's God never intends for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; he commands the sacrifice only to test the strength of Abraham's devotion to him. Aquinas' God also lacks the intention to see Isaac slaughtered, but he is unlike Abelard's God in one crucial respect: the God of Aquinas could have, without fault, seen his command carried out to its bloody conclusion. Abelard's God does not have this option, for Abelard concedes that it would be quite unfitting, not to say monstrous, for God to tie faith to slaughter. Aquinas contends, on the contrary, that no act of God's, however perverse it may seem to us, is other than natural.³

The *Akedah* is a burdensome story for any interpreter who begins with the assumption that the one will of the one God fully determines what is good and bad. Although both Abelard and Aquinas valorize Abraham's faith, it is hard not to notice what an ill fit his faith makes with the monotheistic ambitions of their respective ethics. In his *Ethica*, Abelard takes pains to unify two conceptions of sin: consent to a vice, and scorn for God.⁴ I consent to a vice when I give my heart over to desires that my better self knows to be corrupt; I scorn God

when I assume that mere self-consistency—or faithfulness to my own values—is all the goodness that is ever required of me. To surmount sin in the conception that takes in both consent to a vice and scorn for God, I would have to strive for unconflicted obedience to God, since it is God’s will, not my own, that determines what the true good is. But what if I were Abraham and I suspected that God’s command to me to sacrifice my son was not God’s will; that I was being baited by God to defy God’s will? My faithfulness, under those circumstances, would be best expressed by my not taking the bait. This is not, of course, how the story goes. Abraham gets praised for his willingness to make the sacrifice. Abelard is consequently compelled to imagine an Abraham who is blind to the difference between the murder of a child and a fit offering to God—a difference that Abelard expects every reader of his *Ethica* to see. It is unclear what virtue is supposed to accrue to Abraham for his not being able to see this difference. Unreflective acquiescence to arbitrary authority (including one’s own) is normally for Abelard a paradigmatic expression of scorn for God.

Matters aren’t any less dicey in Thomas. Abraham shows up in the question 94 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa*, specifically in the article that considers, and rejects, the mutability of natural law. The two basic imperatives of natural law are “seek the good” and “avoid evil,” and as long as evil and good remain abstract notions, the basis of natural law can hardly be imagined to change. God is not going to command evil to be sought or good to be avoided. To do so would be to destroy the natural basis of law and with it a rational creature’s capacity to discern divine purpose in the natural order of things. So what then is God’s purpose in commanding Abraham to kill his son and seek to do, what looks to be, a manifest evil? Aquinas is concerned not so much to answer this question as to undercut the motive for posing it. It is analytically impossible, he suggests, for God to command a wrongful act, as it is God’s will that defines the

rectitude of any course of action. What’s striking about this move is that it doesn’t rule out the possibility of a dual will in God; it simply contents itself with reducing nature to will. When set against an apotheosized will, nature becomes a non-entity. Suppose that this will were to reverse itself; there would be no natural perspective for framing the change. Inconstancy of divine will has no bearing on natural law—which is as much as to admit that natural law is an empty notion.

The natural is effaced in Thomas, occluded in Abelard, and suspended in Kierkegaard. By ‘natural’ I mean to refer to a source of wisdom, distinct from God, that renders the sacrifice of Isaac undesirable. The best that the apologetic readings can do is to render the sacrifice unnecessary. Abraham’s single-minded faith is made to stand security for a monotheism otherwise at odds with itself. Kierkegaard, the last of my classical apologists and the end of their tradition, insists on the paradoxical nature of Abrahamic faith. It is absurd, but still somehow sublimely good, for Abraham to have *almost* sacrificed his son. The ‘almost’ here is an adverb at the point of desperation. It is barely holding on.

In the unapologetic readings of the *Akedah*, an inconstant monotheism has had to resort to violence to resolve its own inconstancy. There is no ‘almost’ about its resort to violence. I begin with René Girard, who has remarkably few words to devote to the *Akedah* in his influential set of essays, *Violence and the Sacred*. The little he does say, however, is enough to make the *Akedah* emblematic of his bold theory of sacrificial violence. “According to Moslem tradition,” Girard writes, “God delivered to Abraham the ram previously sacrificed by Abel. This ram was to take the place of Abraham’s son Isaac; having already saved one human life, the same animal would now save another.” “What we have here,” he continues, “is no mystical hocus-pocus, but an intuitive insight into the essential function of sacrifice, gleaned exclusively from scant references in the Bible.”⁵

Readers of the myth of Cain and Abel may not immediately recall whose life gets spared by Abel's sacrifice of a ram. The story reports Cain's murderous jealousy of his brother's favor with Yahweh, his impulsive slaying of Abel, and Yahweh's forbearance. Cain's sentence is not death but exile; he is to leave the soil he has tilled and wander the earth a restless nomad. Cain complains to Yahweh that exile leaves him prey to the first stranger he meets. Random violence is apparently what Cain takes to be the norm outside of Yahweh's jurisdiction. Yahweh responds by marking Cain and associating his mark with a warning: the slayer of Cain is bound to suffer a vengeance seven times as severe. It is never made clear by Yahweh how a would-be slayer of Cain would be able to interpret Cain's mark. The fundamental premise of Girard's theory of sacrificial violence is that human violence in its natural or unritualized expression is reciprocal, contagious, and self-fueling. I kill one of yours, you kill one of mine, another of mine kills another of yours, and so forth and so on, in endless permutations. Cain's mark, read against Girard's premise about violence, is not a mark of protection, but a sign of violence to come. The one who kills Cain will indeed unleash a violence that multiples, but all the victims of that violence will be Cains in their own right, marked by a naked, demythologized human propensity for vengeance. The alternative to this fate, the one Cain wanted for himself, is to stay in the presence of Yahweh, whose potential for violence is sacrificially restrained. But Cain somehow misses what kind of sacrifice would work: it has to be an offering of blood. Fruits of the soil are just too innocuous to rate. Girard's reading of the Cain and Abel myth sets up Yahweh as the reservoir of all brother-against-brother violence. Because Abel vents some of his potential aggression against Cain against an animal surrogate, he has less motive to kill his brother than his brother has to kill him, and Yahweh is relatively pleased. The sacrificed ram, in effect, saves Cain's life,

and if we follow Girard's gloss of an Islamic trope, it saves Isaac's life as well.

But why read Cain into Abraham's motives and imagine that Abraham had some kind of bloodlust against Isaac? The anthropologist Nancy Jay takes Girard to task for being so willing to turn unanalyzed and presumptively natural male violence into a call for ritualized violence. "Girard's theory," she writes, "is itself a sacrificial ideology, legitimating hierarchical distinction as essential for a social order maintained only by sacrifice (and therefore only by males), a social order threatened everywhere by what he understands as its only alternative: chaos."⁶ It is not quite fair to Girard, I think, to accuse him of valorizing sacrificial violence. He doesn't believe that any mythology of sacrifice, particularly when it takes the form of scapegoating, can long survive reflective scrutiny, and even when it escapes scrutiny, the violence that the mythology legitimates does a very poor job of quelling revenge fantasies. Monotheism, as an ideology of sacrifice, is doomed in Girard's estimation either to give way to the war of all against all or to cede its authority to a system of law, where violence is State-mediated and closer to revenge than scapegoating is. Be that as it may, Girard does seem blind to the one aspect of sacrificial ideology that Jay is so brilliant at delimiting. Abraham's near sacrifice of his son can be read as a symbolic effacement of Sarah's maternity. It is the boy's father, authorized by the one father, who leads his son through death and gives him new life—the only life that, from then on, will count. Isaac returns to Sarah, on this reading, wholly his father's son, and so, in effect, he doesn't return to Sarah at all. Jay identifies the *Akedah* as one peculiarly illustrative example of the essential connection between sacrificial religion and the superimposition of patriarchal over natural social order.

The philosopher Luce Irigaray agrees with Girard that societies have been, by and large, sacrificially constituted, but like Jay, she is disturbed by Girard's lack of attention to gender differences. Being virtually

obsessed with the question of male violence and its limits, Girard fails to notice the violence that a sacrificial ideology does particularly to women. "It would seem to me to be more appropriate to inquire," Irigaray ventures, "whether, under the sacrificed victim, another victim is often hidden."⁷ Although she never addresses the *Akedah* in that thought, it is fairly clear that she would identify Sarah as the hidden victim of the story. Sarah loses more than her life; she loses her life's generative possibilities. They are taken from her without so much as a memorial to mark their loss. Irigaray believes that God is, as she puts it, "the other that we absolutely cannot be without,"⁸ but she worries that monotheism has become little more than an apotheosis of maleness, requiring both men and women to separate absolutely from their maternal origins. God's image as both male and female, as a generative God friendly to the ways of the flesh, is still, thinks Irigaray, a God to be envisioned.

If I had to pick my own path between two traditions I have been sketching, I would try to put together the Janus-faced God of Abelard, who loves both law and transgression, with Irigaray's God of sexual difference. That would involve me taking my cue from Genesis 1:27, according to Yahweh his share of a serpent's wisdom, and releasing God's representation from confinement to an elevated, if ultimately empty, maleness. Would there be monotheism at the end of the journey? Let me put it this way. I don't think that the oneness of God should any be any easier to commit to than the oneness that comes of our halting human struggles to see the innocence of one another's differences. It hasn't been my experience that commitment to such oneness comes easy, but I can't imagine the shape of my life without it.

The oneness that Aquinas and Kierkegaard give to Abraham's God strikes me as a ruthless simplification. Abraham, when faced with a choice between his son and his God, finds that he has no choice to make. In choosing God he will have chosen his son. Am I to imagine, then, that it is

possible to cleave love in two and find oneness? Irigaray and Jay commend my attention to the difference between a miracle of possibility and a fiction of dissociation. I cannot find oneness simply by pushing aside and forgetting my otherness. Does Abraham remember Sarah when raising his cleaver? I can't help but think that he does, that he is more knowing than a knight of faith, that he is shrewder than an unquestioning servant to a divine patriarch. He is an awakened Adam.

It seems to me that the choice at the heart of the *Akedah* is finally not Abraham's but Yahweh's. This God can claim his share in the life of his son by making the woman's share his own, or he can let the woman be his otherness and have his son with her. When Abraham raises a cleaver and forces the issue, it is not Abraham's faith that keeps him from becoming a murderer but his prescience.

Notes

¹ The translation of Genesis, here and elsewhere, is taken from Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

² *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 30.

³ *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae, 94.5.

⁴ *Peter Abelard's Ethics*, ed. and trans. D.E. Luscombe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 5-7.

⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 5.

⁶ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 131.

⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 76.

⁸ *Sexes and Genealogies*, 67.