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## Sacrifice, Obedience and Enlightenment

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This week, the world's 1.5 billion Muslims celebrate Eid al-Adha, a four-day feast that usually includes communal prayer, presents for children and visits to family members and cemeteries. But the key ritual will be what gives the holiday its name: "Adha" means "sacrifice" in Arabic. Most families who can afford to do so will slaughter an animal — perhaps a sheep, goat, cow or camel. The animal will be blindfolded, gently put down and then slaughtered while the name of God is praised. The meat is consumed by the family and also distributed to neighbors and to the needy.

For some non-Muslims, it may seem puzzling that Muslims engage in such a bloody ritual. But Jews and Christians should be able to relate to the holiday's origin: the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

This story is in both the Book of Genesis and, with some interesting variations, the Quran. In the story, Abraham receives a shocking injunction from God: He must offer his beloved son as a sacrifice. As a devoted servant of God, he agrees to obey and takes the child to Mount Moriah to slaughter him. At the last moment, God, satisfied with Abraham's devotion, saves the boy by sending a ram as a substitute sacrifice.

There are minor differences between how the story is told in Islam and how it's told in Judaism and Christianity — such as the name of the child, which the Quran doesn't mention and Muslims gradually accepted as Ishmael. But the moral lesson is the same: Abraham's piety should be celebrated. He was willing to obey God's order, even if it meant killing his son.

In the Christian tradition, though, this view encountered a bold challenge during the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant, the 18th-century German philosopher, criticized Abraham's blind submission not as an example to emulate but as a failure to avoid. Abraham should have been certain about his own moral sense, Kant argued, and suspicious about an ostensibly divine voice commanding him to do something as cruel as sacrificing his son. Kant wasn't advocating defying God, necessarily, but he was empowering human reason.

The Muslim world at large has not had its own Enlightenment, but that doesn't mean Muslims never developed similar ideas. Medieval Islam had its own rationalists who also took an unorthodox position on the sacrifice story for the same reason Kant did: They could not accept that God would have ordered something so cruel.

These were the Mu'tazilites, members of a theological school that flourished in Iraq around the 9th century, which argued that "good" and "bad" were defined not just by divine verdicts, as

their rivals claimed, but also human reason. For example, murder wasn't bad simply because God told humans so — it was objectively bad. Moreover, God would never do, or order people to do, something that is bad. So, they reasoned, Abraham could not really have been commanded to carry out child sacrifice.

This view was further articulated by Ibn Arabi, a Sufi master from medieval Spain, who highlighted an important nuance in the Quranic version of the story. Unlike the Bible, in which Abraham receives an explicit commandment from God to sacrifice Isaac, the Abraham of the Quran only has a dream in which he sees himself sacrificing his son. He then consults his son, and they together decide that this is a commandment from God. But this was a wrong interpretation, Ibn Arabi argued, and by sending a sacrificial ram at the last moment, “his Lord rescued his son from Abraham’s misapprehension.”

If this take on the sacrifice story is true, then the lesson for Muslims is that they should be cautious about obeying what seems to be the will of God and compare religious commandments with their moral sense. This is especially true for ordinary mortals like us, who learn religious commandments not from direct revelations, as the prophets do, but rather from the transmissions and interpretations of fallible men. Our guide should be not blind obedience, in other words, but reasoned deliberation.

There’s another lesson to keep in mind this Eid al-Adha: The centrality of the sacrifice story in Islam is a reminder of how Islam is a deeply and literally Abrahamic religion. That is why Muslims are going through the same theological conundrums that Jews and Christians have also discussed throughout their histories. And that is why, in the next few days, hundreds of millions of Muslims will honor Abraham with their sacrifices. “Oh our God,” they will also say during their daily prayers, “bless us as you blessed Abraham, and the family of Abraham.”

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