

March 8, 2009

Reflection from John Surette, SJ

The Acceptable Sacrifice (Genesis 22:2)

“Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a mountain that I will point out to you.”

Abraham lived some 7000 years ago, a time when animal sacrifice and even human sacrifice was not as totally repulsive as it is to us now. Cultural historians tell us that many ancient peoples practiced human sacrifice. It seems that the ancient Celtic people did so in Europe and the Inca people did so in the Americas. The value of human sacrifice appears to have been embedded in the religious consciousness of those ancient times.

We have the story of Abraham being willing to kill his son Isaac for religious reasons. Surely God is not asking this sacrifice of me, he says to himself. Surely God is not asking the unspeakable, the unimaginable, namely, that I turn away from my destiny to have many progeny. Yet it seems that there is a place within Abraham’s religious consciousness that allows for the killing of his son.

However, like everywhere in the Universe, evolution takes place. One of these places is within human consciousness in general and human religious consciousness in particular.



Let us move from Abraham some 7000 years ago to the time of Jesus some 2000 years ago. There has been an evolutionary advance in religious consciousness. Human sacrifice has been

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abandoned. It is no longer acceptable. The sacrifice of animals, however, continues to be practiced. For example, we have the story where Joseph and Mary take their baby to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and to offer an acceptable sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

Another evolutionary advance in religious consciousness occurs with Jesus, his life and his teachings. With him, sacrifice now has nothing to do with offering animals like turtledoves and pigeons and much to do with offering one’s own life of love and service of the dear neighbor.

“I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.” Here we see the outlines of the new acceptable sacrifice.

To serve the members of our families...this is the acceptable sacrifice. To serve our friends, associates, and co-workers...this is the acceptable sacrifice. To serve all those people suffering from war and terror, from poverty and hunger, from natural disasters and from ecological diminishment and destruction...this is the acceptable sacrifice. To serve the air, the water, the soil, and all the other creatures upon which we depend for our very existence and upon which Earth depends for its vitality...this is the acceptable sacrifice.

She who lovingly serves her sisters and brothers is of all the sisters and brothers the greatest! He who lovingly serves his sisters and brothers is of all the sisters and brothers the greatest!

To lovingly serve all who are seated at the table of God’s cosmic banquet...this is the acceptable sacrifice!