

# Fathers, Sons, and Blood Sacrifices

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*“Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return.” – James Baldwin*

For years I’ve been haunted by the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Why, I’ve wondered, would a father be willing to sacrifice his son because he thought he heard the voice of God telling him to do so? Isn’t that something crazed murderers say: that God or the devil told them to kill, to take the knife and cut up their victims?

When I was growing up the catechism told me that sacrifice was “the most perfect way for man to worship God.” We were taught that Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac was a sign of his obedience and a prefiguring of the death of Jesus, the son of another father, who was well-pleased with his son’s obedient sacrifice. But even as a youngster I could read the words and clearly understood that Abraham had tricked and lied to Isaac, and that Jesus was a free rebel dangerous to the Roman authorities, who put him to death for his revolutionary message. But church fathers and theologians later preferred to emphasize his execution as the act of a son obeying his father rather than the result of non-violent resistance to the authorities of church and state. Obedience became the justification for millennia of sacrificial victims and their compliant killers.

“I carried out the orders I was given, and do not feel wrong in doing so,” said Lt. William Calley about the grotesque slaughter of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai.

Why all this need for blood, this need to prove obedience to a father God? It gradually grew on me that there was something perversely macho in all this, the kind of thinking that would encourage fathers to send their sons off to war, what the pundits like to call “the ultimate sacrifice,” and for sons to obediently march off to kill and be killed in a sacrificial bloodbath to appease the fathers.

But being an only son myself (with seven sisters) and coming from a patriotic milieu, it also seemed “natural” to me that sons had to be sacrificed on the battlefields for the sake of God and country. If not, the communists or Canaanites would seize our new Promised Land.

But a little voice and the tale of Abraham and Isaac kept speaking to me. I never went off to war, but I was in the Marines and quickly came to see the immorality of the war against

Vietnam – the madness of war in general – and applied for a discharge as a conscientious objector. My father, a WW II era guy who tried to volunteer when he had five children but was refused for that reason, disagreed with me, but he supported me fully, and I was eventually honorably discharged. It was for me a harsh introduction to a world in which the group mentality holds sway and the individual is made to seem mad if he doesn't obey the bloodthirsty impulses of society. And made to seem less than a man for rejecting the "manly" ethos epitomized in the Marine slogan, "My Rifle is My Life."

It wasn't mine, and I have an ironic memento of that truth. It's a photo of my parents, who gave me life and sustained me, when they came to Parris Island for my graduation from boot camp, standing in front of, and partially blocking, a large red and gold sign ablaze with those egregious words resonating with a double entendre lost only on one totally unfamiliar with the Marines' obsession with rifles and "guns" – as the other unofficial slogan hammered into us recruits put it:

"This is for killing and this is for fun."

Fun with all the Suzie "rotten-crotches" we could find, as we were repeatedly told was a perk that came with the equally enjoyable opportunity to kill all the "gooks" we could find once we got to Vietnam.



*The Sacrifice of Isaac* by [Caravaggio](#), in the [Baroque tenebrist](#) manner (Source: Wikipedia)

Last week I was rereading a book when I again thought of these issues of socially-sanctioned violence passed down the male line. The book was Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and images of Abraham holding that knife to his son appeared to me. Perhaps it was [Caravaggio's painting](#) that I saw. Or an image living in my imagination since I first heard that story that haunted me. Or was it Wilfred Owen's words from *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young* forming on my lips?

*So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
and builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

I can't say. But Roth's story concerned another knife wielded by fathers against their sons, one Abraham was intimately familiar with.

Roth ends his novel with his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman arguing that circumcision is good because it immediately lets the baby boy know the world is a place of violence, not peace and love. Also, "circumcision makes it clear as can be that you are here and not there, that you are out and not in - also that you're mine and not theirs....confirms that there is an us, and an us that isn't solely him and me." In other words, the painful act of cutting the skin off the end of an innocent boy's penis to better make it resemble a weapon is good for the young whippersnapper, for it tactilely teaches him the need for pain and violence and the division of the world into us and them, good guys and bad.

"The heavy hand of human values falls upon you right from the start," Roth writes approvingly, "marking your genitals as its own."

I never knew that. I was under the impression that my genitals were mine; were me, just as my hands and brain are. Roth's argument struck me as strange coming from a writer who made his reputation by being the Jewish malcontent. It seemed that Roth was offering this justification for circumcision - which Jews and Muslims trace back to Abraham, as another sign of his obedience to God - as a token of guilt redemption for all his criticism of fellow

Jews. The wayward son, the creator of Jewish masturbators and fornicators, was finally seeing the wisdom of the father, Abraham. Father knows best, after all.

But our essential problem is obedience, not circumcision, which is just one symptom of a deeply rooted mindset in which we have confused honor and respect for fathers with mindless obedience. Obedience comes from a Latin verb – *obedire*, *to listen to* – and whether one is Christian, Jewish, Muslim, non-religious, etc., we have listened far too long to those calling for blood sacrifices. Howard Zinn advised as much:

Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders...and millions have been killed because of this obedience...Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves... (and) the grand thieves are running the country. That's our problem.

Nothing could be truer.

Suppose a father was circumcised. Should he submit his son to the knife? Whom is he listening to? His father? Let us say the wife asks, "Why should Jeff be circumcised?" Many men might respond: "Because I was." Tradition. Some would say that, although I suspect they're the same people who justify much cruelty with the words, "I went through it and it didn't do me any harm. So should he." (Just substitute military service and war.) If not, they argue, the poor boy, looking different from his father, will grow up with some kind of penis complex.

This obsession with likeness bespeaks a great fear of individuality, as if manhood were dependent on the look of your penis, its similarity to your father's. Do some father's say to their sons, "Take a look at mine, little boy, some day ...."? This is my rifle, this is my gun, this...

It's quite funny, except that it's serious. Back in the 1890s when circumcision became popular in the U.S., it was touted as the cure for many ailments – asthma, epilepsy, alcoholism, etc. – and for the treatment and prevention of masturbation, which, as everyone knew, especially medical authorities, led to insanity. Thomas Szasz, in *The Manufacture of Madness*, offers an explanation that makes sense to me and brings my reflections full circle. Masturbation, he writes,

"symbolizes the individual's separateness from, or rejection of, the group. This is why, psychologically, it is the gravest of all 'crimes.' Hence too, I surmise, its remarkable neglect in belles lettres."

Back to Abraham. Both Jews and Muslims, the two main groups that practice religious circumcision, trace it to this patriarch. Christians have adopted the practice as well, despite no obligation to do so, just as they have joined the other religions in the martial spirit and have supported wars, massacres, and holocausts down through the centuries. Support is too mild a word – waged brutal and bloody wars and reveled in the mayhem as a sign of God's blessing is the truth, always finding justifications.



“Isaac’s Circumcision,” from the Regensburg Pentateuch (c. 1300) (Source: Haaretz.com)

Seemingly just an issue of tradition and, in modern times, one of health, circumcision is actually rooted in an obedience that rewards the spirit of war and killing; obedience to God who tests you by seeing if you will obey and kill your son, and who tells you that if you circumcise yourself and all males it will result in a conqueror’s booty. As a reward for his obedience, we are told, Abraham was promised many descendants who would defeat their enemies, take their women, raze their towns, kill their children, and establish powerful kingdoms.

Cut off the foreskins, sacrifice your sons, and you’ll be powerful, goes the message: you’ll conquer the world. Any uncircumcised male will be cut off from his people. (I guess God checks up on this.) He will stand outside the social circle, looking in. He will be a pariah, an enemy, an other. He will go insane.

I am not suggesting that women are immune from the urge for bloody war and sacrifice. History teaches otherwise. And we have some recent stellar examples, led by Hillary Clinton and her ilk, to whom I offer my humble apologies for leaving them out of these ruminations. Medea, after all, killed her children, and it’s said that she too was a feminist who took charge of her own life in a male-dominated world. Perhaps next Mother’s day I can take up that theme.

But this is Father’s Day, and there is a strange long cultural blood link through fathers to sons to fathers to sons to fathers down through the millennia that occurs to me now.

When I turned from being one of the “few good men,” my father, although he didn’t agree with my refusal since he felt it could lead me to jail, supported me completely. He understood that conscience supersedes blood, and that a father’s love means never sacrificing anybody’s son on the altar of old men’s wars or that of a savage God demanding grotesque sacrifices. For that and many other things, I celebrate my father today. He was a rare man and I was a lucky son.

Someday soon, I hope, sons and daughters around the world will celebrate their fathers for not sacrificing them to the gods of war, those fiends who sit in government offices throughout the world, knives held high above their victims as they await the word from on high to plunge it deep and watch the blood flow.

That will be a very Happy Father’s Day, a different kind of Sunday than the one we [hear](#) now, and have been hearing for eons. It will require revolutionary non-violent resistance, the refusal to shed others’ blood. It will be born of disobedience.

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