

Abraham's sacrifice in the Qur'an

Beyond the body¹

A recent volume on religion and the body begins by stating that 'Since Abraham's binding of Isaac, minutely described by Søren Kierkegaard as an ethical, religious, spiritual, and physical double bind, the body has overtly or latently been a focal point in the history of the three Abrahamic religions' (Mjaaland, Sigurdson & Thorgeirsdottir 2010: 1). However, Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, does not say that Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic)² binds his son's body, nor is the body the focal point of the story—nor, indeed, is it of more than passing interest in Muslim history.³ This then leads me to question the tendency to homogenize the narrative of Abraham's sacrifice and, by extension, the religions that claim their descent from him. There is no denying their family resemblance of course, but while the family may be Abraham's, Abraham himself is not identical in the Qur'an and the Bible and neither are his trials. The term 'Abrahamic religions' is not very helpful here since, in spite of its linguistic pluralism, it obscures this crucial distinction between a genealogy that is shared and depictions of a common ancestor that are not. Nonetheless, it *is* more accurate than the standard alternative, 'the Judeo-Christian tradition', a phrase that papers over the fissures in this tradition while also excising Islam from what is surely an 'interreligiously shared' world (Wasserstrom 1995: 209). However, I want to suggest that the only way to include Islam in this world does not have to be through an assimilative embrace that stifles its individuality; one could, instead, find ways to honour *both* the plurality of the Abrahamic tradition as well as the specificity of Islam within

- 1 This is a substantially revised version of the paper I presented at the conference on 'Religion and the Body', in Finland in June 2010. I am grateful to Ulises Mejias and Michelle Lelwica for their questions which allowed me to refine some of my arguments, and to Kelly Rafferty for her help with proofreading and the bibliography.
- 2 I retain the word 'Abraham' since that is how most English translations of the Qur'an refer to him.
- 3 This may be because missing from the Qur'an are what Jeffrey Weeks (1985: 65) calls the tortuous 'Judeo-Christian disquisitions on the sins of the flesh'.

it. This is what I aspire to do by re-citing the Qur'anic story of Abraham, as a way to unbind the lessons of his sacrifice from the body and also to illustrate the inappropriateness of using Isaac's bound body as a universal template for all the Abrahamic religions.

Specifically, I discuss two different renditions of the story: the 'mystical exegesis' (Al-'Arabi 1980: 18) of Ibn al-'Arabi, the Sufi philosopher and theologian, who lived in the lands of 'Western Islam' (Spain), in the twelfth century, and my own reading of it as an anti-patriarchal parable. Both of these fall well outside the Muslim exegetical tradition, but I offer them as a way, firstly, to illustrate the range of lessons that Muslims have drawn from the same scriptural narrative over time. Secondly, I feel that a defence of religious pluralism could begin by exploring the diversity of opinions within Islam itself and this requires one to step beyond the confines of what is regarded as canonical in order to explore what may be marginal or repressed in Muslim thinking. In passing, I will also consider the differing conceptions of faith and sacrifice to which conflicting scriptural narratives have given rise in the Abrahamic tradition, by contrasting the Qur'an and its interpretations with the Biblical account and Kierkegaard's 'exegetical gloss' on it (Askari 2004: 316). I should note, however, that the comparisons are not very rigorous and I offer them simply because I want to put my discussion of Abraham in a cross- and inter-religious perspective.

I will start with the Qur'anic narrative, followed by a synopsis of al-'Arabi's exegesis and a brief contrast of it with Kierkegaard's and I will end with my own take on Abraham's story.

The Qur'an and Abraham

The Qur'an tells of the most extraordinary sacrifice that never was in minimalist and enigmatic terms. The relevant verses do not even name Abraham's son and God calls Abraham by his own name only at the very end:

He said, 'I am going to my Lord; He will guide me. My Lord, give me one of the righteous.' Then We gave him the good tidings of a prudent boy; and when he had reached the age of running⁴ with him, he said, 'My son, I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee; consider, what thinkest thou?' He said, 'My father, do as thou art bidden; thou shalt find me, God will-

4 Muhammad Asad (nd: 688) refers to the Arabic word as 'work'.

ing, one of the steadfast.' When they had surrendered, and he flung him upon his brow, We called unto him, 'Abraham, thou has confirmed the vision; even so We recompense the good-doers. This is indeed the manifest trial.' And We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice, and left for him among the later folk 'Peace be upon Abraham!' (37:99–105, in Arberry 1955: 153–4.)

This is the Qur'anic account in its entirety and it is as remarkable for what it does not say as for what it does. For instance, it does not say that God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, or how much time elapses between his dream and the proposed sacrifice, where it is to take place, if Abraham ties his son, or if he ends up sacrificing a ram in his place in the end. Thus, missing from it are all the details recounted in Genesis where there is an ongoing call and response between God and Abraham, starting with God's command to him to sacrifice his 'only son', Isaac. Although the Biblical account is also rather terse, it says that the father and son journey for three days to the land of Moriah, that Abraham binds Isaac and lays him on an altar and that, when an angel stops him from slaying Isaac, he sacrifices a ram instead (Gen. 22:1–24).⁵ Conversely, missing from the Biblical saga is the defining motif of the Qur'anic story, that Abraham shares his dream with his son and they only proceed with the sacrifice *after* he agrees to it. In the Bible, by contrast, Abraham does not tell Isaac of his intent to kill him and it is his silence, more than his binding of Isaac, that Kierkegaard explores in his reading. Thus,

ideas of secrecy . . . are . . . essential here, as is Abraham's silence. He doesn't speak, he doesn't tell his secret to his loved ones. He is, like the knight of faith,⁶ a witness and not a teacher. . . . Abraham is a witness of the absolute faith that cannot and must not witness before men. He must keep his secret. (Derrida 1995: 73.)

In effect, it is this burden of secrecy, no less than the tyranny of an inexplicable command, that evokes the fear and trembling of which Kierkegaard speaks,

5 Neither version allows one to determine Isaac's age with any certainty. Some Jewish commentators believe that Isaac may even have been in his 30s, so this depiction of Abraham as an infanticidal father seems overdrawn.

6 The phrase is Kierkegaard's (1983: 21). Edward Mooney points out that this is just 'a narrative construct, a fictional ideal-type', that allows one to tell faith from fanaticism. Even so, it has the effect of reducing a prophet to a knight (1991: 83–4, his emphasis).

for ‘what could be more abominable, what mystery could be more frightful . . . *vis-à-vis* love, humanity, the family, or morality,’ than an ‘infanticide father who hides what he is going to do from his son and from his family without knowing why?’ (Derrida 1995: 67.)⁷

The Qur’anic Abraham may not know God’s intent in testing him either, but he does not face an ethical dilemma as does (allegedly)⁸ his Biblical counterpart because, while the Qur’an links the sacred and sacrifice, it does not link either one to secrecy. In the Qur’an, not only does Abraham tell his son of his dream but the son also has a role in interpreting it.⁹ Thus both father and son witness their absolute faith in front of one another. From a Qur’anic standpoint, had the father set out to kill an unsuspecting son, it would have robbed the son of all moral agency and made him into a victim of his father’s tyranny while also making the father a murderer. This is precisely the reading from which Kierkegaard and Jacques Derrida seek to rescue the Biblical Abraham by arguing that faith transcends ethics. In fact, not only does it lead ‘one to do what ethics would forbid’ (Kierkegaard 1983: 74), but it even ‘*demand*s that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery or betrayal)’ (Derrida 1995: 66, my emphasis). In Kierkegaard’s telling, for Abraham to put ‘himself in an absolute relationship to the absolute . . . [there must be] a teleological suspension of the ethical’ (Derrida 1995: 62, 66). In Derrida’s hands this becomes ‘ethics as “irresponsibilization,” as an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsibility’ (p. 61). In the Qur’an, however, there is no such ethics as irresponsibilization, because Abraham does not plan on killing an unwary son; one does not therefore need to worry about treachery or responsibility. And if, like al-‘Arabi, one believes that the reason God puts Abraham and his son through a test of such magnitude is because of their own statures as prophets, then one also does not need to impute to them the anguish that Kierkegaard ascribes to the Biblical Abraham. As al-‘Arabi would have said, a prophet cannot be tormented at the prospect of doing God’s will; anguish can only be the fate ‘of one who is ignorant of his Fixed Entity’ (Askari 2004: 327). Since these two Abrahams emerge not only from opposing scriptural texts but also from

7 Lippman Bodoff (2005: 40), however, argues that one ‘cannot prove’ Abraham’s intention to kill his son. Bruce Chilton, on the other hand, counters Kierkegaard’s portrayal of Abraham by pointing out that, in the Bible, his character has ‘the staying power of a weathervane’ (2008: 201–2).

8 See Gellman 1994: 8 for why Isaac’s potential murder does not violate Kierkegaard’s view of the ethical.

9 In my reading (below), I explain why this role is not a purely formal one.

the very different epistemological approaches of al-'Arabi and Kierkegaard, this may be the appropriate place to look more closely at al-'Arabi's exegesis.

Ibn al-'Arabi and Abraham

In the only comparative essay on both, Muhammad Hasan Askari argues that, unlike Kierkegaard, al-'Arabi engages a set of questions that are 'entirely meta-physical in character'. For instance, what is Abraham's 'spiritual station' as a prophet and a friend of God (*Khalil*)? 'How does one attain . . . gnosis of God?' What do divine will and command mean? 'What is the relationship between God and man? What is the distinction between . . . lord and . . . vassal?' and so on (Askari 2004: 321). I cannot, of course, summarize al-'Arabi's position on all these issues and perhaps all that is needed to understand the substance of his exegesis are its three main points.

One is that divine commands are congruent with our own natures, since '[e]very lord gives only that command to his vassal which is consistent with that vassal's nature. Therefore, one never receives a command which is against one's Fixed Entity'. It then follows that knowing one's nature is crucial for 'self-knowledge, and it is in fact the "soul at peace"' (Askari 2004: 324). In keeping with this logic, al-'Arabi argues that the reason Abraham was called *Khalil* is because he knew his own nature, which was to make 'God's command his own choice' (p. 325). As a matter of fact, much before he had his dream of sacrificing his son, he had extinguished his Self in his gnosis with God (and, according to al-'Arabi, Abraham's son was also treading on the same path).

Second and, for this reason, al-'Arabi believes that God was testing Abraham not for his faith (*iman*), which was never in doubt, but for his knowledge (*ilm*). Abraham, he points out, 'saw in the dream that he was sacrificing his son. The question now was whether to interpret the dream or act on it literally', and here al-'Arabi is of two minds. On the one hand, he says that Abraham's 'greatness lay in transforming the dream into reality' (Askari 2004: 322); on the other, however, he maintains that Abraham was wrong in having taken his dream literally. He makes this claim on the basis of a two-fold distinction; between the senses and the imagination on the one hand and between reality and its forms, on the other. Sleep, he argues, is 'the plane of the Imagination' and a revelation of Reality on this plane 'requires an additional knowledge by which to apprehend what God intends by a particular form'. This is especially so when Reality appears 'in a form unacceptable to the reason'. (Al-'Arabi 1980: 99, 101.) For instance, what appeared to Abraham in

his dream as his son was ‘with God. . . nothing other than the Great Sacrifice in the form of his son’, that is, it was the ram Abraham ends up sacrificing in his son’s place (p. 99).¹⁰ According to al-‘Arabi, when God says to Abraham ‘*This is indeed a clear test*’, God is testing to see if he knows that the ‘perspective of the Imagination required interpretation.’ However, even though Abraham knew this, he remained ‘heedless. . . and did not deal with the perspective in the proper way. Thus, he believed the vision as he saw it.’ (Al-‘Arabi 1980: 100.) His error, continues al-‘Arabi, is clear from how ‘God says. . . *O Abraham, you believed what you saw*. . . He does not say, “You were *right* concerning what you saw.”’ This is why God saves Abraham’s son from his father’s ‘misapprehension.’ (al-‘Arabi 1980: 99.)¹¹

This reading suggests that Abraham’s dilemma was epistemological, not ethical, since he was faced with the challenge of interpreting God’s will and, inasmuch as he failed to do so correctly, one could say that he also failed the test. If this is so, what lessons can we draw from Abraham’s story? Before I address this question, I want to round out al-‘Arabi’s exegesis by clarifying his stance on prophets and sacrifice. Like all Muslims, he believes that a prophet is called to this spiritual station by God for reasons we cannot know. However, what prophets have in common is that each embodies ‘a particular aspect of God’s wisdom’ (Al-‘Arabi 1980: 16) and each is tasked with making ‘the Creator and Creation manifest at the same time’ (Askari 2004: 328). To be able to do this, a prophet must be willing to descend (from his own state of gnosis) ‘to the plain of humanity’ in order to ‘convey God’s message to the people’ (p. 328, 332). However, a Gnostic ‘experiences such exhilaration in the final stage of the ascent that he feels disinclined to come down. He does not *want* to return to the stage of humanity.’ That is why, for a prophet, it is a sacrifice to end his gnosis with God and it is precisely in this sense that the sacrifice of Abraham and his son was ‘God’s sacrifice’ since it required them ‘to descend and to manifest’ (p. 328) themselves in order to act on Abraham’s dream. To put this in Kierkegaard’s language, a prophet is both a witness and a teacher whose duty is to both God and humanity, not to himself.

This, in a nutshell, is al-‘Arabi’s reading of Abraham’s story and one can discern some obvious problems with it. For instance, how is it that Abraham does not know the real meaning of his dream but that al-‘Arabi does? And, what of the fact that al-‘Arabi ignores the Qur’an’s chronology (by making it

10 This is, of course, not implicit from the Qur’anic text.

11 Incidentally, these arguments occur not in his chapter on Abraham but on Isaac, even though al-‘Arabi’ believes that it was Ismail whom Abraham set out to sacrifice.

seem that God tells Abraham of his trial beforehand), and ascribes a comment to God (that Abraham 'believed' his vision) that the Qur'an does not? Most egregious of all, to a majority of Muslims, is likely to be his claim that Abraham misinterpreted his dream even if it is clear that God does, indeed, save him and his son from their own literalism. Yet, the idea that a prophet could have been mistaken is not un-Qur'anic since the Qur'an itself tells of how, as a youth, Moses misinterpreted the meanings of certain incidents that he witnessed. In the Qur'an, prophets are not perfect since the attribute of perfection belongs to God alone.

In spite of these problems, however, and even if one is not persuaded by al-'Arabi's parsing of Abraham's story, the morals of his exegesis are still worth considering: that literalism is not the essence of faith, that God's will is not transparent but needs to be interpreted, and that no one can claim interpretive infallibility. These are particularly compelling reminders at a time when so many Muslims are bound to textual literalism, when they see reason as an obstacle to faith, and when male hubris has reached such heights that a handful of (mostly Arab) men can claim to know the truth as it resides with God. It is this claim to authority, which also manifests in patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, that is the point of departure for my own reading of Abraham's story. However, before I describe that, I want to draw out some contrasts between al-'Arabi and Kierkegaard's portraits of Abraham more explicitly than I have done so far.¹²

Differing Abrahams

Unlike al-'Arabi, Kierkegaard does not seem to be interested in Abraham's nature, which he sees as being no different from his own and which he even explains 'by recourse to his own personality' (Askari 2004: 317). And, while he does distinguish between their relationships to God, he does not conceive of the relationships, or of the difference between them, in ontological terms, as does al-'Arabi. In Kierkegaard's view, what makes Abraham Abraham and Kierkegaard Kierkegaard is not that one is a prophet and the other is not, but, rather, that one elects to do God's bidding, in spite of the anguish it causes him, while the other says that he could not have done as much in the same situation. Second, according to Kierkegaard, it is this willingness to put himself

12 See Askari (2004: 311–35) for a more systematic and nuanced comparison of al-'Arabi and Kierkegaard.

in an absolute relationship to the Absolute that marks Abraham as a knight of faith, whereas al-'Arabi would have said that Abraham was already in such a relationship by virtue of being a prophet. Lastly, Kierkegaard believes that a knight of faith owes a duty of obedience to God and 'a duty of freedom in unfettered individuality' to himself (Gellman 1994: 15). Hence, it is only by becoming such a knight that Abraham is also able to individuate himself.

This emphasis on Abraham's 'free will and independence' (Lowin 2006: 223) and 'atomic sense of individuality' (Gellman 1994: 14), may resonate well with secular notions of radical individualism and the promise of infinite choice, but many Muslims would be troubled by Kierkegaard's own rather secular portrait of a prophet. As al-'Arabi would have objected, a knight of faith is not the same as a prophet, since one cannot become a prophet by one's own efforts or even by obeying God. That is why even if Kierkegaard had done exactly what Abraham did, he might have become a knight but he could not have become a prophet. In fact, God would not have put him to the same test to which God put Abraham precisely because Kierkegaard was not Abraham. Thus, al-'Arabi would have agreed that Abraham's relationship with God was ineluctably personal, but he would have taken this to mean that his sacrifice was commensurate with his own nature and relationship to God and therefore not generalizable, since our natures and relationships with God are likely to be different. As for 'the whole issue of compulsion . . . and . . . free will', he would have considered it 'a colossal deception', because 'compulsion only obtains when one is forced to act against his own will, but God commands man to do only what is innate in man's primordial nature.' (Askari 2004: 323.)

In contrast to Kierkegaard, then, al-'Arabi's exegesis seems to convey 'the more Mosaic idea of Allah's supreme and active control of the universe' (Lowin 2006: 225). This contrast, Shari Lowin argues, is also discernable in early Jewish and Muslim commentaries on the story. Even so, I would hesitate to overdraw the contrast between al-'Arabi and Kierkegaard because, in spite of their differences, they also share the view that obedience to God's will is not the only lesson of Abraham's sacrifice, or even the only element of faith. To Kierkegaard, 'mere *obedience* cannot distinguish faith. *How Abraham survives is key.*' (Mooney 1991: 85.) To al-'Arabi, not all of God's prescriptive commands are meant to be obeyed (see Chittick 1989: 291 ff.). If he makes this argument elsewhere and not in his exegesis of Abraham's story, it is because he believes that prophets stand in a distinctive relationship to God, one that transcends the dilemmas posed by free will. Still, his exegesis of Abraham's story also makes clear that a prophet can be faced with both dilemmas and choices. In fact, it is from Abraham's freely made choice that God rescues his

son. Of course, in al-'Arabi's opinion, the rescue testifies to Abraham's failure to interpret God's will accurately; in mine, however, this rescue signals a resistance on the Qur'an's part to father-right, or, traditional patriarchy.¹³

Abraham's son and patriarchy

My interpretation of Abraham's story also emphasizes the importance of free will, but in a very different way, and to very different ends, than does Kierkegaard's. And, while like al-'Arabi, I am also interested in Abraham's dream, unlike him, I approach it mostly from the perspective of Abraham's son, because I think his role in assuming his own sacrifice puts a constraint on the rights his father exercises over him. Since this is the opposite of what Muslim tradition holds, I should note that the lessons most Muslims draw from the story are 'about obedience to God's will and His reward for those who obey Him unquestioningly' (Leemhuis 2002: 125). A few exegetes even maintain that the son (whom most take to be Ismail and some, Isaac) not only agrees to his own sacrifice, but also tries to ensure 'that he himself will not try to resist his father and thus asks to be bound. He also wants to make sure that his father will . . . not show mercy at the last moment. Therefore he asks that his face be put down so that his father will not look him in the eye.' (Leemhuis 2002: 133.) In brief, the son's role is seen as enacting his obedience to patriarchal authority.

This explanation fits nicely into traditional interpretations of the Qur'an as a patriarchal text, but I do not consider it to be very thoughtful or compelling. For one, where it does not take the verses at face value, it injects a welter of interpretive details into them that cannot be justified textually. As we have seen, the Qur'an does not say that Abraham binds his son's body, nor does it offer any particulars that would indicate the drama and pathos which has been conjured up by exegetes. For another, the Qur'an tells us that Abraham had submitted himself to God's will while he was still a young man and even risked death as a consequence (see below); we do not therefore need the story of the sacrifice to prove this. Besides, for Muslims, it is not much of a lesson to know that prophets were willing to obey God when the very term 'muslim'

13 I clarify my definition of patriarchy and also offer my reading of Abraham's story in a more careful and nuanced way, but also with some different emphases, in Barlas 2002: esp. chs 1 and 4.

means ‘one who submits to God’s will’.¹⁴ Most importantly, ‘Allah at no point demands a literal sacrifice. As the text explicitly says . . . “This was an obvious trial.” . . . The Qur’an elsewhere condemns the sacrifice of children and family (70:11–14), as well as infanticide (17:31), because they are sinful.’¹⁵ For all these reasons, I read the story of Abraham’s sacrifice very differently and I put it into the larger context of both his own life, as well as of some fundamental Qur’anic teachings about God, faith, and the nature of moral personality; specifically, that God is not Father, that there should be ‘no compulsion in religion’ (2:256, in Ali 1998: 103), that each soul is answerable only for ‘herself’ and no one can ‘Bear another’s burden . . . [e]ven though he be nearly Related’ (35:18, in Ali 1998: 1158), and that God tries a soul only to the limits of its own capacity. If Abraham’s story is to cohere with such principles then it is clear that he cannot witness his son’s faith by offering his life to God; rather, the son must do so himself. However, what seems significant is not just that he consents to his sacrifice but also *how* and *why*. I want to consider each of these points in some detail.

At a time when the law of the father sanctioned infanticide, it would not have been very extraordinary for God to have commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, as in the Hebrew Bible. But, we know that God does not do this in the Qur’an and, instead, Abraham has a dream that he tells his son about. The dominant Muslim view, as I have just noted, is that this disclosure allows for a display of Abraham’s authority as a father, a reading with which some feminists¹⁶ would agree on the grounds that ‘patriarchal society’s emphasis on obedience to authority (including corrupt or even deranged authority), produces modes of socialization that encourage ‘us to make “choices” that reproduce the dominant/patriarchal status quo.’¹⁷ There is no gainsaying the logic of this argument but I read the son’s part in his sacrifice as doing just the opposite, that is, as illustrating the different ways in which the Qur’an challenges the legitimacy of patriarchal norms.

14 Even if Muslims differ on their understanding of submission, the concept itself is integral to their self-definition.

15 That is why, argues Chilton (2008: 161), ‘nothing takes away from the emphasis in the Muslim *Aqedah* that the test Ibrahim faced was “obvious”.’

16 There is only one feminist reference to this story but it makes the patently counterfactual claim that, ‘unlike Isaac in the Biblical narrative, the son in this [Qur’anic] story does not know that God had commanded his father to sacrifice him.’ Hassan 1994: 131.

17 Michelle Lelwica, personal correspondence, 2010.

It does this, for instance, by not upholding paternal authority just because it is paternal authority; in fact, the Qur'an advocates disobeying parents if they 'strive/ To make thee join/ In worship with Me/ Things of which thou hast/ No knowledge' (3:14-15, in Ali 1998: 1083). It is true that Abraham was not pressing his son to worship anyone other than God, but my point is simply that the Qur'an's concept of moral personality is not premised on the notion of blind obedience to parents, particularly, to fathers (I will return to this point below). There is therefore no *a priori* reason to assume a son's investment in consenting to his father's authority, especially since the Qur'an mentions other prophets whose wives and children refused to heed their messages because they refused to acknowledge them as prophets at all.

Second, it is not even the case that Abraham asks for his son's consent or obedience; rather, he asks his son what he makes of his dream. To this open-ended question the son replies that his father should do as he is bidden (by God). This shows both that the son takes the dream literally and that he believes he is obeying *God's* will; that is, he is submitting to the *God* of his father, not to his *father*. Abraham's question also shows that, up to that point in the story, he has not decided on the meaning of his dream. Otherwise he could just as easily have asked his son a very different sort of question, perhaps about how to proceed with the sacrifice. If one is to go by these details in the story, as well as of the Qur'an's teachings I have mentioned above and others that I will consider shortly, there is no reason to treat the son's voice in the cavalier and instrumentalist manner of Muslim tradition. Indeed, it allows the son to profess his faith by assuming his own death. If it is true, as Derrida (1995: 41) says, that death is 'the one thing in the world that no one else can either give or take: therein reside freedom and responsibility', then it is only by assuming his own death that the son can make his sacrifice a morally purposive and self-determining act rather than one of treachery or betrayal on his father's part. This is partly why I believe the Qur'an gives him a voice in his sacrifice; else, it could have made him like Isaac in the Bible, unaware of his fate.

Third, the son's voice is important because it serves to curtail Abraham's rights as a father. By this I mean that not only does Abraham not have the right to commit infanticide, but whatever rights he does have in this instance are made subject to his son's moral choices. But, if Abraham's authority is not absolute in the matter of his son's sacrifice, can we view him as a patriarch and the sacrifice as an act of patriarchal violence, or as upholding the patriarchal status quo? This point can be better made by contrasting the Biblical and Qur'anic Abrahams. In the Bible, too, Abraham's will is not absolute, since

it is subjected to God's will, but this does not detract from his authority as a father. On the contrary, God's command to sacrifice Isaac clearly reaffirms this authority. Even if Abraham is distraught at doing God's will, his right to kill his son is never called into question. Therefore, the authority the two Abrahams exercise over their sons is very different and I want to suggest that this has to do with Christian and Islamic views, not just of fathers, but of God. In fact, the two are contingent. In Christianity, as some feminists have long argued, patriarchy draws for its legitimacy on sacralizations of God as Father.¹⁸ And while Abraham himself does not refer to God as father in the Biblical story, given the possibility of patriarchalizing God, one can read God's rescue of Isaac not as displacing the patriarchal status quo but as demonstrating that divine patriarchy takes precedence over the earthly one.

In the Qur'an, however, God is not father and Muslims are forbidden from referring to God as such and even from using 'similitude' for God (16:74, in Ali 1998: 676). As the Qur'an repeatedly says, God is uncreated (thus beyond sex/gender) and God is also incomparable and unrepresentable. The Qur'an's refusal to patriarchalize God means that Muslim fathers cannot rely on a model of divine fatherhood to legitimize their own authority. Not only that, but the Qur'an also roundly condemns people who ignored God's messages because they wanted to follow 'the ways of their fathers' (2:170, in Ali 1998: 67), a phrase one can take to mean patriarchy proper or, more broadly, patriarchal tradition. This hostility to father's rule also finds a powerful expression in Abraham's story, including and especially that part of it which deals with his relationship with his own father.

As the Qur'an recounts it, after Abraham's search for the one true God eventually leads him to submit himself to God, he gets into a confrontation with his father's people:

Behold! he said
 To his father and his people,
 'What are these images,
 To which ye are
 (So assiduously) devoted?'
 They said: 'We found
 Our fathers worshipping them.'
 He said, 'Indeed ye
 Have been in manifest

18 One of the earliest advocates of this view was Mary Daly (1973).

Error—ye and your fathers.’
They said, ‘Have you
Brought us the Truth,
Or are you one
Of those who jest?’
He said, ‘Nay, your [Sustainer]¹⁹
Is the [Sustainer] of the heavens
And the earth, . . . Who
Created [Creation] (from nothing):
And I am a witness
To this (truth).’
(21:5–6, in Ali 1998: 834.)

As this exchange demonstrates, the basis of his father's faith is to cleave to patriarchal traditions and it is this practice that Abraham attacks, with God's approval, as the next verse makes clear:

Behold, he said to his father:
‘O my father! why
Worship that which heareth not
And seeth not, and can
Profit thee nothing?’
‘O my father! to me
Hath come knowledge which
Hath not reached thee:
So follow me: I will guide
Thee to a Way that
Is even and straight.’
(19:42–3, in Ali 1998: 776.)

To demonstrate that the idols his father worships are ineffectual, Abraham breaks them, except the largest, and dares his father's people to get it to identify the culprit. His father reacts to this challenge by having Abraham thrown into a fire from which God saves him, just as God saves Abraham's son from him years later. Clearly, then, the condition for Abraham's embrace of God is to break with his own father, and this conflict between God's rule (mono-

19 Translation of the Arabic word ‘Rabb’.

theism) and father's rule (patriarchy) also finds an exposition in the Qur'an's warning to

Fear (The coming of) a Day
When no father can avail
Aught for his son, nor
A son avail aught
For his father.
(31:33, in Ali 1998: 1089.)

On that day, it says,

One soul shall not avail another;
Nor shall compensation be accepted from her
Nor shall intercession profit her,
Nor shall anyone be helped (from the outside).
(2:123, in Ali 1998: 51–2.)

It is within the context of these teachings that I understand God's rescue of Abraham from his father and of Abraham's son from him, and I consider the two to be very different. For one, the sons and fathers could not be more different themselves. Both sons, for instance, are monotheists but one falls victim to his unbelieving father's depredations while the other submits of his own volition to the God of his fathers. Both face death, then, but for different reasons and at the hands of very different fathers. One father (Abraham's) tries to kill his son for his faith and the son has no choice in the matter. In contrast, the other father (Abraham), while also ready to sacrifice his son as a matter of faith, can only proceed with it at his son's expressed wish. If these differences did not exist, Abraham would have been no different from his own father and the story of his near-sacrifice of his son would have proved little more than the omnipotence of fathers in patriarchies. However, the morals of the two stories are not the same and that is the second way in which they are different. One reveals an outright conflict between obeying God and obeying fathers, especially those who are 'devoid of wisdom and guidance' (2:170, in Ali 1998: 67). The message of the other story is that, in order for God's will to be done, believers must submit to it voluntarily. And, since God is not father, one cannot view God's rule (monotheism) as a divine surrogate for father's rule (patriarchy). To the contrary, and borrowing from Derrida, there is an 'insoluble and paradoxical contradiction' between father's rule and God's rule.

That is why, Abraham's story can be read as 'a moral allegory about the consensual and purposive nature of Faith, its primacy over kinship and blood, the existential dilemmas that can result from submitting to God's Will (specially where it comes into conflict with one's own life), and, not least, the insignificance of the father's will in comparison to God's Will' (Barlas 2002: 116).

A postscript

I ended my reading on this note many years ago but, since then, I have reflected both on al-'Arabi's arguments and also on the ontology of self-surrender to God (the meaning of the term 'Muslim'). Much about Abraham's story remains a mystery to me; why did God choose him as a friend, why did the friendship involve putting him through an 'obvious' trial, why did the trial take the form it did, and what was its real purpose: to illustrate the virtue of taking one's faith, or perception of reality, literally or just the reverse? Even al-'Arabi's elaborate metaphysics cannot unravel these questions; in fact, by suggesting that their answers may lie in Abraham's nature, they just deepen the mystery. However, what I have come to realize is that alleging that he experienced an existential dilemma by submitting to God's will amounts to embracing a rather secular and un-Abrahamic view of prophecy. In fact, on this issue, 'the Abrahamic religions are all quite clear in their original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic) that faith—from the Semitic root *'amiyn*, one of the early nicknames of Muhammad—is a matter of placing complete confidence in God, not just agreeing to a proposition' (Chilton 2008: 157).

However, even if this is the principal lesson one can draw from the story of Abraham's sacrifice, it seems that the each of the Abrahamic religions has chosen, instead, to arm itself with 'the conviction that its innocent victim, Isaac or Christ or Ismail, models God's desire for how his people should sacrifice themselves for him'. Thus, 'both self-sacrifice and the extermination of infidels in the name of God . . . have haunted the West . . . and . . . all but obscured Muhammad's vision, and Ibrahim's, that violence is never God's requirement, but only an obvious trial' (Chilton 2008: 170–1). It seems that in their self-righteousness, at least, Abraham's children are very much alike. Still, it is worth cautioning against the tendency to see only sameness among them since doing so ignores fundamental scriptural differences between the three religions, including over Abraham himself. Thus even that ultimate theorist of difference, Derrida, can speak about Isaac's sacrifice as 'the terrifying secret of the *mysterium tremendum* that is a property of all three so-called religions of

the Book, the religions of the races of Abraham.' This view then leads him to cast the ongoing political strife between these 'races of Abraham' as

the fight to the death that continues to rage on Mount Moriah over the possession of the secret of the sacrifice by an Abraham who never said anything. Do they not fight in order to take possession of the secret as the sign of an alliance with God and to impose its order on the other, who becomes for his part nothing more than a murderer? (Derrida 1995: 64, 87.)

I cannot say why the children of Abraham are so quarrelsome; perhaps they have not yet figured out the terms for mutual exclusion or embrace.²⁰ But about this I am clear: Abraham in the Qur'an did not possess a secret as a sign of his 'alliance' with God, nor is he a murderer, and nor does he try to impose his will on his son. I feel that all these differences *should* matter because they *do* matter. And I feel, too, that, like Abraham and his son, we are free to speak about the unspeakable since there is no burden of secrecy here, just the limitations of our own knowledge.

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²⁰ I borrow this phrase from Miroslav Volf (1996).

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