



TROELS NØRAGER

TAKING LEAVE  
OF ABRAHAM

*An Essay on Religion and Democracy*

Aarhus University Press

# TAKING LEAVE OF ABRAHAM

*To Don*  
*– master of humor and melancholy*

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## AN ESSAY ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

Troels Nørager

Aarhus University Press | 

*Taking leave of Abraham*

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the terrorist attack of 9/11 a great many books on religion and democracy have been published. The present book, however, claims a degree of originality in that it deliberately *combines* two perspectives which are normally kept separate: that of political philosophy and that of philosophy of religion. But what do the complex relations of religion and democracy have to do with the biblical story of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, his son? In fact it is possible to establish a direct link, since the written ‘testament’ of one of the terrorists, Mohammad Atta, included a reference to Abraham/Ibrahim with the purpose of casting Atta’s parents in the idealized role of Abraham who willingly sacrificed his son (cf. Brun et al. 2007, 103).

The present essay, however, is not a book on *sacrifice*, although this vast and complex topic has sparked increased interdisciplinary interest in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Actually, I could imagine someone with at taste for dispute objecting that what we are dealing with here is only a ‘near-sacrifice’, since in the end Isaac was spared and a ram killed in his place. To any objection along these lines the Biblical text itself is the answer: It makes no secret of the fact that Abraham intended to go through with the killing. Regarding sacrifice (or religion in general), I have no interest in subscribing to a particular definition among the plethora of those available. What is of more concern to me is the gradual *secularization*

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1 As but one example, the European Society for Philosophy of Religion decided to make ‘sacrifice’ the general topic of their conference in Oslo, August 28-31, 2008.

of sacrifice which has taken place, plus the fact that the phenomenon of 'sacrifice' may be said to epitomize the religious *per se*.<sup>2</sup>

The *aqedah*, the 'binding of Isaac', is the Jewish term for the story in Genesis 22 of the Hebrew Bible where we read how Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, for whom he had been longing for so many years. Obviously, what we are dealing with here is one of the most influential, and most frequently interpreted, narratives of our Western cultural heritage. No doubt, the many layers of this narrative still form an important part of our cultural and individual unconscious. More importantly, in our current world marred by acts of terror which is at least partly motivated by religious concerns, the story of Abraham and Isaac has gained an acute relevance. For even a superficial reading of Genesis 22 should prompt the reader to think of contemporary acts of terror where individuals see themselves as acting on God's command. In other words, a Biblical story that was always disturbing has become even more disturbing, to the point where we must ask ourselves whether it is time to be 'taking leave of Abraham'.

In the process of writing this book, I have had the opportunity to study what I believe is a representative sample of artistic paintings going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. What struck me (and I believe it would be striking to any contemporary spectator) is how docile, devout and uninteresting most of them are. Isaac is represented as a young (almost adult) man, and he is calmly, confidently, and with an almost angelic expression looking into the sky. Why is this? Well, maybe because the paintings had been commissioned by a church with no interest in arousing our sympathies for the innocent victim. In this long line of artistic glossing over the story, Caravaggio stands out as my personal favorite and hero, because he displays the courage to take the victim's point of view and represent the dread and anguish of Isaac. And indeed, what could be more terrifying than the thought or prospect of being sacrificed and slaughtered by your own father? Thus, having seen the

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2 In support of this *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Mircea Eliade, editor in Chief) offers the following general definition of 'sacrifice': "The term *sacrifice*, from the Latin *sacrificium* (*sacer*, 'holy'; *facere*, 'to make') carries the connotation of the religious act in the highest, or fullest sense" (Vol. 12, p. 544).

picture, I decided that it would be fitting to use it for the cover of this book.

What motivated me to write this book is quite easy to tell. During the last years I have had the privilege to teach Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* to university students in their first year of Theology. Two things struck me in that connection: One was the students' general willingness to accept God's command and that Abraham 'just had to do it'; and the other was the fact that they did not more directly relate the thematic of the story to the world in which we live. For, obviously a *tale of terror* like Genesis 22 should have something to do with the *world of terror* in which we live. And thus it dawned upon me that it would be fascinating to use the story of Abraham and Isaac as the overall frame, the test-case as it were, for an analysis of the contemporary debate on the compatibility between religion and democracy and on the role of religion in the public square.

But what, one might ask, is achieved by seeing Genesis 22, Kierkegaard, and the contemporary debate on religion and democracy as interconnected? To this question, of course, the book itself is the answer. Still, what I can say by way of introduction is that part of what kept me going in the process of writing it, is my conviction about two overall points: First, that our current debate on religion and democracy may profit a lot from acknowledging that part of our cultural heritage is a deeply troubling story of a man who has been praised for his willingness to obey God's command to sacrifice his son. The problem here is a radical monotheism demanding blind obedience. And second, that our hermeneutical perspective on Genesis 22 (and the Bible in general) ought to include an awareness of our contemporary problems of defending democracy in the face of the phenomenon of (partly) religiously motivated acts of terror.

I am writing this book as a Christian theologian coming from the field of philosophy of religion. And thus, another way to characterize my book would be to regard it as attempting a conversation between philosophy of religion and political philosophy. For more than a century now, theologians have spent a lot of energy on defending God against a Darwinian account of evolution. I believe it is high time to realize that contemporary political philosophy constitutes an equally (if not even more) important challenge to Christian theology. And, I would argue, not just a challenge

to be overcome, but rather an opportunity for critical self-reflection and a chance to clarify the proper role of religion in a democratic society.

This book is not, I should stress, a book on terrorism and its socio-political and religious sources. There are already a great many books on that particular theme. Neither is it a book about those forms and interpretations of Islam that are being used to legitimate much of the terror that we see, for Islam is a subject on which I am not competent to write. At the same time, we would do well to recall here, that the so called *aqedah*, the story of the ‘binding of Isaac’, is part of the canonical writings of all the three ‘Abrahamic’ religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If anything, this book is an implicit call to all people of good will within the three, monotheistic religions to ponder, whether the time has not come for ‘taking leave of Abraham’ – at least the Abraham who, as it seems, was blindly obedient to a God who demanded human sacrifice.

The book consists of two parts: The first is called *Religion and Morality* in order to denote a cultural context where it is taken for granted that religious authority overrides the norms of morality. Inverting this order, the heading of the second part is *Morality, Democracy, and Religion* which indicates that a constitutive part of what makes us (i.e. we who are living in a Western liberal democracy) ‘modern’ is that our primary commitment is to morality and the normative foundation of democracy. And then, in turn, our religious commitments should be adapted to find their proper place within that socio-politic context. Fundamentalists, I am of course aware, tend to see things the other way round. My claim to the contrary, however, is more than a matter of taste, for I claim that as a result of *cultural evolution*, and thus in an *irreversible* sense, we have moved from one way of thinking to another.

The internal connection between the two parts of the book may also be stated in the following way: As we shall see, Kierkegaard utilizes Abraham’s faith to stage his fierce attack on Hegel’s claim that philosophy represents a ‘higher’ and more advanced viewpoint than that of religion. Today, few people bother too much about philosophy or see a particular form of philosophy as the enemy. Instead, the relevant discussion is whether or not democracy and public reason are ‘higher’ than religion. The answer, in my opinion, should be yes, if by ‘higher’ we mean more