Introduction

In the summer of 1986 Egypt was under the political control of Hosni Mubarak, at official peace with Israel, and enjoying the benefits of being a well-rewarded ally of the United States. Tourists happily traveled the length of the country, from the pyramids on the Giza plateau outside Cairo through the tomb of Tutankhamen and the temple of Karnak at Luxor to the monumental statues at Abu Simbel near Aswan. I had arrived in Egypt as a participant in a program that funded American academics to travel and study in the Middle East, sponsored by the National Council on US-Arab Relations. After my colleagues and I spent a few weeks learning faltering phrases of Arabic and traveling around Egypt, one of them, a Benedictine nun from Kansas named Frances, invited me to attend early morning Mass with her in Cairo. I am not a member of the Catholic Church, and I knew that intentionally receiving Eucharist from a Roman Catholic priest was against the rules; but the situation was compelling and the violation irresistible. In that unlikely setting I participated in the ritual reenactment of Christ’s death in the drama of the Mass as sacrifice. The impression was indelible.

Frances and I met Father Shea in the lobby of the Cosmopolitan Hotel. He was accompanied by a young Egyptian, named Safwot, who had just taken vows as a Jesuit priest. Safwot drove us with joyful abandon to a nondescript neighborhood off Ramses Square and stopped next to a high wall with steel doors painted green on which hung a sign in Arabic and English: Missionaries of Charity. We had found the sisters from India extending the work of Mother Teresa among the poor of Cairo. The house was old and needed constant maintenance. Yet within its confines half a dozen nuns, including one Egyptian who had “taken the vocation,” cared for twenty-five enfeebled men and women, aged Arabs who had been abandoned by their families. In this culture, they were as vulnerable as if they were the outcasts of India for whose care Teresa was known as “saint of the gutters.” Here her sisters, daughters
really, practiced her universal love in a very different location. They had
given up family, home, language, food—all the markers of their personal
identities in India—to live for the poor of Egypt. In the words of St. Paul,
they “counted all as loss” in order to imitate Christ in self-sacrifice.

Father Shea was in his mid-eighties and his hands trembled slightly,
but he moved with determination. He had served as an educator in
Baghdad for thirty-one years before Americans were expelled, and had
been at the Jesuit College (equivalent to an American high school) in
Cairo since 1968. On our way to the second-floor chapel he stopped
to inquire about the health of one of the men sitting outside the door.
The old fellow’s neck pain was better. They both said, “L’hamdullilah,”
thanking God in Arabic, Christian and Muslim together. Three sisters
were waiting for us upstairs; one was just seventeen. Frances went into
the room ahead of me, but when I had taken two steps on the rug spread
out in front of the altar, I thought to look at Safwot’s feet. Quickly back-
ing out, I left my shoes outside also. I offered to take Frances’s shoes and
she blushed slightly while slipping out of them.

Father Shea reappeared, his brown outer robe replaced by a green
decorated mantle over his white vestment. The sisters sat on the floor,
leaving the chairs to the three guests. We sang from a hymnal, without
instruments. The brown young women, swathed in white robes trimmed
in blue, sang softly an old psalm in English: “I will never forget you, my
people.” Though forsaken by all, the orphaned in the world are reas-
sured of providential care. How deeply I was aware that these women
were keeping what they believed to be God’s promise to the poor. Their
sacrifice confirmed the authority of the biblical words by enacting its
assurance. In Christian terms, they were the incarnation of the Word in
the daily offering of their own bodies as the “real presence” of the cruci-
fied Jesus.

The moment of supreme mystery arrived. Twenty years after the li-
turgical reforms of Vatican II, Father Shea still knew the Latin formule.
The old man held the chalice aloft. He kissed the wafer. He invoked
the miracle: Turn these ordinary elements of life into the living flesh
and blood of Jesus Christ! One of the sisters rang a bell. Its single, pure
tone filled the silence. I had read about Catholic belief in the “consecra-
tion of the Host,” but never had the idea become palpable, even sensual.
Crumbs flew in the air as the priest broke the wafer; wine splashed in the
goblet. In that instant, Christ was broken again, the sacrifice of his torn body offered to God for the sins of the world. If it has ever happened, I thought, it just happened—in the midst, and for the sake of, these sisters from India. They revisit the crucifixion each day, serving as witnesses to its reality as the women of old, and draw from it the power to reenact Christ’s self-sacrifice.

The Mass that morning was in honor of Mary Magdalene, described by Father Shea as “our Lord’s favorite apostle.” The service included a prayer for Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680), a member of the Mohawk tribe, who was declared “blessed” in 1980 and named the first Native American saint by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012. Her life was marked by heroic acts of penance in sacrificial self-denial. So there I stood, next to those praying for a Mohawk woman to be advanced in life after death: Mother Teresa’s sisters from India, a nun sworn to the Rule of St. Benedict, and an Irish priest with an Egyptian Jesuit assistant. At one point, Frances squeezed my hand; her eyes were shining. She no doubt carried the story back to the sisters in Kansas and they shared her delight and wonder, with renewed commitment to their own vows of obedience, poverty, and celibacy.

None of their blessed hearts would brood over how faintly the flame of their self-sacrifice shone in the raging darkness. Nor would the sisters in Cairo be troubled by the profound spiritual desolation their foundress, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, was recording in letters to her confessor. Only after her death did their publication reveal the breadth of her sacrifice and the depth of her faith in its efficacy. Her private letters recount decades of spiritual destitution in which she felt abandoned by God. Teresa described her life as a “continual immolation for souls” and insisted that her Missionaries of Charity “must be living holocausts.”

Religion is costly. No matter how freely sacred texts speak of love or grace, there is always a price to pay to enter the path of salvation. This book argues that the high cost is one way religions signify the immense value of their benefits and the daunting difference between ordinary existence and life lived in relation to transcendent reality. The more demanding their devotional requirements, meditative practices, and ascetic disciplines, the more confidence their followers have that the sacrifices they exact will provide forgiveness, power, purification, or enlightenment. Some argue that it is precisely such high cost that at-
tracts many believers. Call it the “Chivas Regal effect”: Like that vaunted brand of blended Scotch whisky, the more expensive an item, the more valuable consumers consider it. The social scientists, Richard Sosis and Eric Bressler, describe this marketing strategy in the practice of religious communes as “costly signaling.” They argue that the more stringent the restrictions placed upon members of a group, the greater their loyalty to the community’s teachings and practices. As a result, the members experience to a greater degree the benefits of the community’s solidarity, in turn confirming their own investment. As a result, what began as perceived value because of the cost ends in real value created by individuals’ commitment to the group’s ideals.

We must acknowledge, however, that approaching a religious tradition through its sacrificial practices is an interpretive method that helps us limit the field of evidence we shall consider, but also runs the risk of giving the impression that all members of a tradition, in every one of its many and diverse branches, agree on the meaning of sacrifice. As we shall see, that is certainly not the case. The methodological problem of this text is similar to the one I faced in my book on miracles; and my resolution there is the same position I take here, namely, that the examples in each chapter “should not be taken as representative in some general sense of the traditions from which they are drawn.”

There is another connection between this work and the book on miracles that deserves mention. In that earlier work I was driven to understand the persistence of faith when miracles fail: How does anyone continue to believe in transcendent reality without some sign of its presence? I discovered that each tradition generated a sub-tradition of faithful dissent to belief in miracles that provided religious reasons for denying miracles. Yet, despite my sympathy with those objections, I found myself asking: Is a religious tradition without miraculous signs worth the bother? My strong hunch is that it is not. But I could only confirm that suspicion by looking carefully at just how great the bother is. Thus, I turned to the examination of sacrifice as the cost exacted by religions for access to their benefits. This book is the result of that study.

This comparative study is limited to three traditions associated with the patriarch Abraham. Each has a distinct interest in Abraham: Judaism reveres him as the head of the Jewish family; Christianity admires his heroic faith; Islam honors him as the first prophet of belief in one
God. These differences, elaborated over centuries, are great enough to raise questions about the designation “Abrahamic religions” because the adjective suggests greater commonality of belief and practice than the history of these traditions demonstrates. Nevertheless, some general designation of the three traditions is useful as an expression of the hope that a basis for common respect can be established in the claim of a shared history. In inter-faith conversations, reference to “Abrahamic religions” often indicates more a desire for unanimity than a literal claim of family relation, much less a common religion. In my experience, no religious people are more aware of their differences than Jews, Christians, and Muslims involved in honest discussions about each other’s faiths. Still, scholars worry that the adjectival phrase obscures deep differences in theology, ritual, and scripture among the three traditions.

Carol Bakhos, scholar of Near Eastern languages, reviews objections to the category “Abrahamic,” but accepts its practical value as indicating family resemblances shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that are not found in Asian religions. The influential biblical scholar Jon D. Levenson appreciates the intention behind the phrase “Abrahamic religions” to promote ecumenical good will, but provides detailed evidence for the sharp and significant differences in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim constructions of Abraham in their interpretive traditions. Arguing that there is no “neutral Abraham” who exists independently of those traditions, Levenson debunks popular claims that the three religions share in monotheism originated by Abraham (Christian belief in a God of three persons seems quite different from Jewish and Islamic insistence on divine unity) and that Abraham is the father of all humanity (Genesis designates the specific lineage of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob to the Jewish people). Levenson also details particular theological and institutional claims that are simply irreconcilable, such as Christian belief that faith in Jesus as the divine savior alone makes one a child of Abraham against the Muslim claim that Islam, which rejects the deity of Christ, is “the religion of Abraham” (Qur’an 3.68) against the Jewish insistence that only descendants of Abraham belong to his family and inherit the promise to him through obedience to Torah.

In light of such deep and abiding differences, in this book we will use the designation “religions of Abraham” in order to keep the plurality of the three paramount and to avoid confusing their distinct identities with
the common adjective “Abrahamic.” Our interest is not in broad claims to the legacy of Abraham, but in ways the three traditions preserve and pass on the specific story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son. Versions of the story are recorded in the Bible (Genesis 22) and the Qur’an (surah 37) and have generated volumes of commentary in all three traditions. How that story and the history of its reception have shaped the meanings of sacrifice in religions of Abraham will be a unifying thread throughout this book.

Both miracle stories and practices of sacrifice are nearly universal. One is tempted to say that they constitute the foundation of any religious tradition: signs of the reality of the sacred and means of relating to, or participating in, that reality. Miracle and sacrifice, revelation and self-denial, transcendent power and human discipline: These are familiar conditions of a religious way of life. Together, they constitute a ground of confidence that there is a transcendent reality and a commitment to discovering the peace, wisdom, or salvation that reality offers—no matter what the cost and however uncertain the benefit. While the term miracle indicates an event of transcendent power, a sign of reality from “beyond” that disrupts ordinary experience, sacrifice is a human act, an attempt to participate in transcendent reality by relinquishing one’s hold on, or holdings in, the conventional world. What the two have in common, as event and act, is that neither can be entirely determined by human initiative. Miracles cannot be summoned with confidence in their occurrence and sacrifices cannot be performed with assurance in their desired outcome.

The cost of sacrifice and the uncertainty of its efficacy add drama and suspense to its role in mediating a relationship to the transcendent. In contrast to views of religious sacrifice as payment offered to fulfill an economic contract, this book argues that in religious sacrifice one surrenders the gift as total loss with no guarantee of return. Only in that way can sacrifice retain its tragic and self-denying character as a marker of transcendent reality. In short, sacrifice cannot guarantee its own success without canceling its religious value. If I am right about this view of sacrifice, then my earlier question arises in a different form: Is a religious faith without sacrifice worth bothering with? Because religious traditions claim to bring participants into relation with the transcendent—reality “beyond” natural and human orders of being—the ways they trace to
that reality forsake ordinary calculation of self-interest and natural inclinations. As the goal of religious aspiration lies beyond nature, so the path to the goal often requires sacrificing “what comes naturally,” including sex, food, sleep, family, and possessions. Religious sacrifice is a discipline of ordinary affections and dispositions in pursuit of extraordinary, but abstract, benefits. From ascetic rigors to mystical trances to actual martyrdom, religions issue the “costly signal” that spiritual advancement requires leaving behind self-interest.

One may object at this point that some programs of spiritual formation include pleasures, such as music and dancing. Even in those cases, however, the goal is to shape physical impulses by the restraint of abstract ideals. For example, the gracefully whirling dervishes of the order of the Islamic mystic, Jalal al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 1273), demonstrate religious ideas translated into symbolic action; but their movements are no more natural than the intricate choreography of a ballet. As with all stylized dancing, the steps and leaps are learned and must be practiced to train the body to execute them in order. That is, dancing mystics are artificial creatures. To become religious is an act of self-making, a transformation from the “natural” to the “spiritual.”

Along the way, the jeopardy of what Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek calls “violent derailment of nature” by spirit is always present. What sacrifice reveals is that religion, like other cultural forms including morality, is unnatural; its ideals guide the construction of artificial selves. As one writer comments on religious ritual: “Good is something against which nature rebels. But nature has to be tamed. This is what rites are for.” This observation, however, is not necessarily a criticism. Human evolution proceeds by the impetus of imagined ideals that inspire us to experiment with new forms of individual and social identity. By imagination we created tools, planted crops, began to speak, and formed communities. Sacrifice is also an imaginative way believers free themselves from natural limits by resisting hunger, sex, and sleep, comforts of family and home, and security of possessions. In short, sacrifice is one of the ways religious believers re-make themselves; therein lies its creative power and its ethical danger.

While that danger drives many modern critiques of sacrifice as a barbaric enactment of discredited myths of redemptive violence, the demand for sacrifice increases as the tide of global religious fervor rises.
The current resurgence of religion in the world is a surprise that few saw coming. Believers have revived traditional practices, including ascetic discipline and sacrificial offerings, as the re-assertion of cultural identity. Voices from cultures that had been submerged under the symbols and institutions of Western societies began to be heard, as they peeled away the bindings over their own religious intuitions through the liberating power of postcolonial criticism. Among those intuitions is the power of voluntary sacrifice to affirm individual identity and to support communities of faith. Contrary to critics, not all those who sacrifice their goods and autonomy to charismatic religious leaders are dupes; at least some pay the cost in the hope of finding meaning in their lives.