



Child Sacrifice with Religious Origins

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Abstract

Child sacrifice has been documented in a limited number of ancient societies and is generally understood by scholars as a practice rooted in early religious belief systems that sought to appease deities or influence natural and social events. Anthropological and historical research suggests that such practices were often connected to beliefs about divine control over fertility, agriculture, warfare, or communal survival. In these contexts, the act was interpreted as a religious obligation rather than an act of cruelty, although this reflects historical belief systems rather than modern ethical standards. Importantly, most religious traditions that existed in societies where child sacrifice occurred later developed explicit prohibitions against it. Ancient religious texts and theological reforms increasingly emphasized the sanctity of human life and condemned human sacrifice, particularly the killing of children. This shift represents a critical moment in the moral and religious evolution of societies. In the modern world, child sacrifice is universally condemned and recognized as a severe violation of human rights. Contemporary religious institutions reject such practices entirely, and acts claimed to be religiously motivated are understood by scholars and legal systems as criminal abuse rather than legitimate religious expression.

Keywords: Child Sacrifice, Violence, Ritual, Myth, Symbol

1. Introduction

Whether or not child sacrifice rituals are practiced in primitive and traditional societies is a significant issue. Although this question remains historically significant, it captures only one dimension of the phenomenon. Equally important is the observation that accusations of child sacrifice frequently circulated in contexts where evidence was weak, polemically framed, exaggerated, symbolic, or entirely fabricated (Quinn, 2018; Stavrakopoulou, 2004). In these contexts, the discourse surrounding child sacrifice functioned less as empirical description than as a strategy of religious and political propaganda, often mobilized to depict opponents as barbaric, impure, or morally corrupt (Said, 1979).

This article argues that accusations of child sacrifice constitute a recurring rhetorical strategy through which communities construct enemies as morally monstrous and therefore subject to exclusion, domination, conversion, or even eradication. By examining selected historical cases this study shifts analytical attention from the question of sacrificial practice to the politics of sacrificial discourse (Cohen, 2011; Smith, 1982). The child sacrifice carries exceptional

rhetorical and emotional force because children symbolize multiple sacred and socially protected values simultaneously. Children are innocent and blameless, making violence against them particularly shocking. Also, children symbolize communal continuity, lineage, inheritance, and the biological future of a society, such that harm directed toward them signifies a threat not only to individuals but to collective survival.

Ancient Mediterranean polemics, medieval anti-Semitism, colonial representations of indigenous peoples, and modern moral panics all demonstrate that child sacrifice is a subject of significant political debate (Cohen, 2011; Smith, 1982). The argument advanced here is that child sacrifice cannot be adequately explained through a single interpretive model. Instead, it must be understood as a multidimensional religious phenomenon shaped by specific theological, ritual, political, and cosmological conditions. While literal sacrifice appears in some historical and ritual contexts, many traditions progressively replaced it with symbolic or substituted forms, indicating a broader moral transformation in religious consciousness. By tracing continuities and discontinuities across traditions, this article seeks to contribute to comparative religion scholarship by situating child sacrifice within larger debates concerning violence, sacred order, symbolic substitution, and the changing relationship between human beings and the divine.

Child sacrifice occupies one of the most disturbing yet analytically significant positions in the comparative study of religion. Child sacrifice is frequently understood exclusively as an expression of brutality, irrational superstition, or social deviance. Such interpretations, while ethically understandable from contemporary perspectives, often obscure the historical, theological, and ritual frameworks within which sacrificial practices emerged and acquired meaning. From the standpoint of the history of religions, child sacrifice must be approached not merely as an act of violence but as a culturally embedded religious phenomenon associated with cosmology, divine obligation, communal crisis, covenant, kingship, purification, fertility, or ritual substitution (Burkert, 1983).

René Girard theoretically explains the act of sacrifice primarily as a mechanism for controlling social violence and resolving social tensions (Girard, 1977). Walter Burkert approaches sacrifice from an anthropological perspective, viewing it as a ritualized form of violence that contributes to social cohesion and order (Burkert, 1983). By contrast, Mircea Eliade explains sacrifice in symbolic and religious terms, arguing that ritual sacrifice reconnects human communities with sacred reality and restores cosmic order (Eliade, 1996).

Sacrifice has historically functioned as one of the primary means of mediating the relationship between human communities and transcendent powers. Religious communities frequently interpreted sacrificial acts as mechanisms for restoring disrupted order, fulfilling sacred obligations, obtaining divine favor, averting catastrophe, or reaffirming collective solidarity. Within these sacrificial systems, children occasionally emerged as the highest and most symbolically charged offering due to their social value, ritual purity, genealogical significance, or association with future continuity. The sacrifice of a child, particularly the firstborn, often represented the surrender of what was considered most precious to the family or community, transforming sacrificial violence into a language of ultimate devotion and religious seriousness (Levenson, 1995). Such acts, whether historically practiced, mythologically represented, or symbolically imagined, reveal a religious logic grounded in exchange, obedience, substitution, or divine testing.

But, evidence for child sacrifice presents significant methodological difficulties. Historical claims frequently rely upon sacred texts, hostile polemics, archaeological evidence, mythic narratives, colonial ethnographies, or retrospective theological interpretations, each of which requires critical evaluation. Biblical condemnations of child sacrifice, for example, raise

unresolved debates regarding the extent to which such practices actually occurred in ancient Israel or whether references primarily functioned polemically against neighboring groups. Similarly, accounts of child sacrifice in African and Indian contexts are complicated by colonial biases, orientalist assumptions, missionary narratives, and difficulties in distinguishing between symbolic ritual discourse and documented historical practice (Bremmer, 2007; Heesterman, 1993). From a comparative perspective, it is inevitable to acknowledge that child sacrifice exists simultaneously as ritual reality, theological imagination, moral condemnation, and symbolic transformation.

The conceptual distinction between literal and symbolic sacrifice is another issue. Religious traditions rarely preserved sacrificial systems unchanged across time; rather, many traditions underwent processes of reinterpretation in which literal violence became replaced, sublimated, or ritualized into symbolic forms. In several traditions, narratives involving threatened child sacrifice became central theological moments precisely because sacrifice was interrupted, redirected, or transformed. The story of Abraham and his son in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam offers perhaps the clearest example of this transformation, functioning simultaneously as a narrative of divine obedience, sacrificial substitution, and moral reconfiguration. Likewise, Christian theology relocated sacrificial logic to the death of Christ, framing divine sacrifice not as human offering to God but as divine self-offering for humanity, thereby radically reorienting sacrificial meaning (Girard, 1977; Levenson, 1993).

Contemporary comparative studies on the practice of child sacrifice also reveal a tension between continuity and ethical change. Like as Jewish tradition many religious traditions preserved memories or narratives of sacrificial violence while simultaneously condemning or transcending literal sacrificial practice. Such transformations suggest that religious systems are not static but undergo moral and theological negotiation over time. Ritual substitution, symbolic sacrifice, martyrdom, offerings of animals, ascetic renunciation, or acts of spiritual devotion often emerged as alternatives to human sacrifice, preserving sacrificial symbolism while eliminating literal destruction of life. In this respect, the history of child sacrifice may be understood not only as a history of violence but also as a history of religious transformation and moral reinterpretation (Eliade, 1996).

This study investigates child sacrifice with religious motivations through a comparative analysis of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, African religious contexts, and Indian traditions. The focus is intentionally restricted to sacrifice grounded in religious reasoning, including divine command, covenantal obligation, expiation, communal crisis management, fertility, kingship, ritual purity, and sacred mediation. Practices motivated primarily by economic, demographic, or nonreligious forms of infanticide fall outside the present scope except where they intersect with religious symbolism. Methodologically, this study combines historical, textual, anthropological, and comparative analysis while engaging major theories of sacrifice. Rather than assuming child sacrifice to be a universal or uniform phenomenon, the study examines how religious traditions variously justified, contested, transformed, rejected, or symbolically absorbed sacrificial violence directed toward children.

2. Carthage and Imperial Propaganda

The most widely debated example of alleged child sacrifice in antiquity concerns Carthage. Greek and Roman authors frequently accused the Carthaginians of sacrificing infants to deities such as Baal Hammon and Tanit, particularly during periods of military crisis and political instability (Bremmer, 2007; Heider, 2012). Classical sources describe children being offered through fire as acts of devotion intended to secure divine favor, presenting the practice as

evidence of Carthaginian religious barbarism. These accounts have profoundly shaped both ancient and modern perceptions of Phoenician-Punic religion.

However, the political and ideological contexts in which these narratives are produced are increasingly being emphasized. Roman descriptions of Carthaginian sacrifice emerged within a broader framework of military conflict and imperial rivalry. Following Rome's victory in the Punic Wars and the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE, representations of Carthaginians as practitioners of child sacrifice served to reinforce a moral contrast between Roman civilization and its defeated enemy (Quinn, 2018). Such depictions functioned not only as ethnographic observations but also as rhetorical instruments that legitimized Roman conquest and imperial authority.

Excavations of Punic Tophet cemeteries in Carthage and other Phoenician settlements have uncovered thousands of urns containing cremated remains of infants and young children. Some scholars view the Tophets as evidence of systematic sacrificial practices, while others argue that they functioned primarily as cemeteries for children who died of natural causes. A third position suggests that the sites combined mortuary and votive functions, reflecting a complex ritual landscape that cannot be reduced to either sacrifice or ordinary burial alone (Schwartz et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2013).

In works about the practice of child sacrifice in Carthaginian religion, authors have deviated from objectivity due to their ideological interests. As Quinn (2018) argues, Roman and Greek narratives often participated in broader processes of cultural othering, portraying Carthage as the antithesis of civilization. Whether or not sacrificial practices existed in some form, their representation in classical literature served an important propagandistic function by constructing Carthaginians as morally deviant outsiders and thereby reinforcing Roman claims to cultural and political superiority.

The Carthaginian case illustrates a central methodological problem in the study of child sacrifice. The historical question of whether sacrificial practices occurred cannot be separated from the discursive question of how accusations of sacrifice were mobilized to construct religious and political alterity. In this sense, Carthage represents not only an archaeological controversy but also a paradigmatic example of sacrificial rhetoric as a technology of imperial othering (Quinn, 2018; Said, 1978).

3. Sacrifice and Religion

By examining selected historical cases—including ancient Mediterranean polemics, medieval anti-Jewish accusations, colonial representations of indigenous peoples, and modern moral panics—this study shifts analytical attention from the question of sacrificial practice to the politics of sacrificial discourse (Cohen, 2011; Smith, 1982). The accusation of child sacrifice carries exceptional rhetorical and emotional force because children symbolize multiple sacred and socially protected values simultaneously. Firstly, children are widely perceived as morally innocent and blameless, making violence against them particularly shocking and morally transgressive. Second, children symbolize communal continuity, lineage, inheritance, and the biological future of a society, such that harm directed toward them signifies a threat not only to individuals but to collective survival. Third, children occupy a position of social dependency and vulnerability, rendering their protection a fundamental ethical obligation in most cultures. Finally, representations of suffering children evoke particularly strong affective responses, generating fear, empathy, outrage, and collective anxiety.

The phenomenon of child sacrifice demands an interdisciplinary theoretical framework because no single explanatory model sufficiently captures its religious, social, symbolic, and

political dimensions. Within the academic study of religion, sacrifice has been interpreted as a mechanism of violence management, social cohesion, symbolic communication with the sacred, covenantal exchange, cosmological renewal, and theological transformation. Since child sacrifice represents an intensified form of sacrificial logic in which the most socially valued life becomes the object of ritual offering, its interpretation requires engagement with broader theories of sacrifice while remaining attentive to historical specificity. This section employs insights from sacrificial theory developed by René Girard, Walter Burkert, Mircea Eliade, and Jon D. Levenson, supplemented by anthropological and historical approaches to ritual violence.

One influential explanation of sacrifice emerges from the mimetic theory of René Girard, who argues that sacrificial systems originated as mechanisms for controlling communal violence. According to Girard, human societies are shaped by mimetic desire, whereby individuals imitate one another's desires and consequently enter into escalating rivalry (Girard, 1977). Such rivalry threatens social stability and may culminate in collective crisis. Sacrifice functions as a means of redirecting violence toward a substitute victim, thereby restoring social order and preventing uncontrolled communal destruction. Within this interpretive framework, sacrificial victims become scapegoats whose destruction resolves tensions through symbolic unanimity. Although Girard primarily discusses sacrificial violence more generally, his theory offers important insight into child sacrifice in contexts where periods of famine, warfare, disease, dynastic instability, or communal anxiety encouraged offerings perceived as necessary to restore divine favor or social cohesion (Girard, 1977).

From a Girardian perspective, child sacrifice represents an extreme form of sacrificial seriousness because the offering concerns what communities value most deeply: lineage, innocence, purity, and social continuity. In moments of existential crisis, the symbolic value of children could intensify sacrificial efficacy, transforming the victim into a socially meaningful substitute whose destruction was believed to secure collective preservation. At the same time, Girard's theory encounters limitations when applied to traditions in which sacrifice is not primarily collective violence management but rather divine obedience, covenantal loyalty, or ritual exchange. Narratives such as the near sacrifice of Isaac in the Hebrew Bible, for example, emphasize faith and divine testing rather than communal scapegoating, suggesting that mimetic explanations alone cannot account for all forms of religious sacrifice (Levenson, 1995).

A second major interpretive model is offered by Walter Burkert, who conceptualizes sacrifice as ritualized violence rooted in humanity's biological and historical relationship to killing. In *Homo Necans*, Burkert argues that sacrificial ritual emerged from ancient hunting practices and collective experiences of violence, eventually becoming institutionalized through religious symbolism and ceremonial repetition (Burkert, 1983). Sacrifice transforms killing into socially regulated action by embedding violence within ritual structure, thereby producing moral legitimacy and communal order. Ritualization reduces anxiety surrounding death and aggression while simultaneously reinforcing collective identity.

Burkert's approach proves especially valuable for understanding child sacrifice because it emphasizes the paradoxical coexistence of violence and sacred order. Rather than treating sacrifice as irrational cruelty, Burkert interprets ritual killing as socially meaningful violence constrained through symbolic regulation. Child sacrifice, therefore, may be understood as a culturally sanctioned form of ritualized destruction in which religious institutions frame the act as morally necessary for political stability, divine appeasement, or social continuity. Historical examples from African kingship traditions or certain narratives concerning ancient Near Eastern religion illustrate how sacrificial violence could become integrated into political theology and communal order (Burkert, 1983). Nevertheless, Burkert's biologically oriented

emphasis on killing risks underestimating the theological and symbolic complexity of traditions that explicitly reinterpret sacrifice through ethical transformation or substitution.

A third influential perspective derives from the history of religions approach associated with Mircea Eliade. Eliade interprets sacrifice as an act through which human beings reconnect with sacred origins, restore cosmic order, and participate in transcendent reality. In this model, ritual repetition recreates primordial events and enables communities to transcend historical chaos (Eliade, 1996). Sacrifice functions not simply as violence but as symbolic participation in sacred time. The destruction of life acquires meaning because it reproduces a divine or cosmological pattern believed necessary for sustaining order.

Applied to child sacrifice, Eliade's framework highlights ritual symbolism and cosmological logic. In many traditions, the sacrifice of the firstborn or ritually pure child symbolized ultimate offering precisely because children represented beginnings, continuity, and sacred potential. Sacrifice in this sense becomes a restoration of balance between human and divine realms rather than merely an instrument of social control. Moreover, Eliade's emphasis on myth and ritual helps explain why narratives of interrupted sacrifice—such as Abraham's son being spared—retain enduring theological significance: they preserve sacrificial symbolism while simultaneously redefining sacred obligation (Eliade, 1996). However, critics of Eliade caution that excessive emphasis on symbolism may obscure historical violence and power relations embedded in sacrificial practice.

While Girard, Burkert, and Eliade provide broad theories of sacrifice, the work of Jon D. Levenson offers a particularly important framework for understanding child sacrifice within Abrahamic traditions. In *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, Levenson argues that the symbolic offering of the beloved son constitutes a recurring theological pattern in the Hebrew Bible and subsequent religious traditions (Levenson, 1995). Rather than dismissing sacrificial narratives as remnants of primitive violence, Levenson emphasizes their covenantal and theological dimensions. The firstborn child symbolizes continuity, divine promise, and sacred inheritance; consequently, willingness to sacrifice the child represents radical obedience and acknowledgment of divine sovereignty.

Levenson's interpretation is especially relevant to the Aqedah (binding of Isaac), Jephthah's daughter, firstborn consecration traditions, and later Christian understandings of divine sonship. Importantly, Levenson argues that substitution plays a central role in sacrificial transformation. The replacement of the child with an animal victim does not eliminate sacrificial logic but redirects it, preserving theological meaning while modifying ritual practice. This interpretive insight becomes particularly valuable for comparative analysis because substitution recurs across Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Indian traditions, and certain African ritual systems (Levenson, 1995).

An anthropological perspective further complicates sacrificial theory by emphasizing ritual exchange, symbolism, and social function. Classical anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert conceptualized sacrifice as a mediating act that establishes relationships between sacred and profane spheres. In this framework, sacrificial offerings function through exchange, purification, consecration, or mediation between human and divine domains (Mauss, 1964). The sacrificial victim becomes a transitional object whose destruction communicates devotion, fulfills obligation, or restores disrupted relationships. Child sacrifice, therefore, can be interpreted not solely as violence but also as an intensified form of sacred transaction in which the highest-valued offering symbolizes maximum devotion.

Historical evidence suggests that child sacrifice occurred or was imagined for multiple reasons including fertility, dynastic legitimacy, vow fulfillment, military crisis, divine punishment,

communal purification, or sacred kingship (Bremmer, 2007). Moreover, many traditions preserve accusations of child sacrifice as polemical devices against outsiders, making interpretive caution essential. Religious narratives may condemn sacrifice, symbolically preserve it, or transform it into metaphorical devotion rather than literal violence. Consequently, theoretical models should be treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Analyzing the act of child sacrifice within a multifaceted theoretical framework encompassing ritualized violence, symbolic communication, theological obedience, crisis management, and moral transformation is a result of an effort to understand this issue objectively. Girard illuminates sacrificial violence and communal crisis; Burkert explains ritualized killing and social order; Eliade clarifies symbolic and cosmological meaning; and Levenson highlights covenant, beloved son symbolism, and substitution. Combined, these approaches provide a conceptual framework capable of explaining both historical instances of child sacrifice and later religious transformations in which sacrificial violence became moralized, redirected, or symbolically reinterpreted. Such an approach is especially important for comparative religion because it avoids reductionism while recognizing the diverse religious meanings attached to sacrifice across cultures and historical periods.

4. African Religious Contexts: Sacred Mediation

African religious contexts present highly diverse sacrificial traditions that resist generalization. As Africa contains numerous cultures, languages, and ritual systems, any discussion of child sacrifice must remain selective and historically cautious. Moreover, evidence is often mediated through colonial accounts, missionary writings, oral traditions, and contested ethnographies, requiring careful critical interpretation (Bremmer, 2007). Nevertheless, selected historical and anthropological examples suggest that child sacrifice occasionally emerged within contexts of sacred kingship, communal crisis, fertility rituals, and mediation between human and spiritual realms (Akıncı Ambaroğlu, 2025).

In several traditional societies, rulers were believed to embody cosmic order, fertility, or communal well-being. During periods of drought, warfare, disease, or dynastic instability, ritual specialists sometimes (Mbiti, 1990) prescribed sacrificial acts intended to restore balance. Children could occupy symbolic importance because of perceived ritual purity, liminality, or genealogical value. Sacrifice was frequently understood not as arbitrary cruelty but as sacred mediation aimed at collective survival (Mbiti, 1990).

The sacrificial victims often symbolized communal continuity. Within some traditions, sacrificial narratives involving royal foundations, sacred rivers, bridges, or territorial consecration associated children with ritual beginnings and social permanence. Such practices reflected beliefs that sacred violence could stabilize political or cosmic disorder. From Burkert's perspective, ritual violence became institutionalized through sacred meaning and communal regulation (Burkert, 1983).

African ritual practices have been exaggerated or sensationalized to legitimize political dominance or missionary intervention (Evans-Pritchard, 1968). Distinguishing mythic memory, symbolic representation, judicial execution, initiation ritual, and literal sacrifice remains difficult. Consequently, contemporary scholarship approaches claims of child sacrifice through methodological caution while acknowledging evidence for ritual violence in specific historical settings. Comparatively, African examples reveal the intersection of sacrifice, kingship, fertility, and crisis management. Girard's theory helps explain sacrificial violence during communal (Evans-Pritchard, 1968) instability, whereas Eliade's emphasis on sacred renewal clarifies cosmological dimensions of ritual offerings (Girard, 1977; Eliade, 1996).

Across traditions, symbolic substitution increasingly replaced literal violence, reflecting changing ethical and religious norms.

5. Indian Traditions: Vedic Ritual and Debates on Narabali

Indian traditions present a particularly complex case because discussions of sacrifice involve ancient Vedic ritual, mythological narratives, folk practices, regional cults, and philosophical reinterpretation. Child sacrifice is neither central to mainstream Hindu theology nor entirely absent from historical debate. Instead, it appears ambiguously through textual references, legends, temple narratives, and discussions of *narabali* (human sacrifice), often accompanied by symbolic substitution and ethical reinterpretation.

Early Vedic religion emphasized sacrifice (*yajña*) as a mechanism for maintaining cosmic order (*rta*). Although animal sacrifice formed part of ritual systems, later philosophical developments increasingly spiritualized sacrificial meaning (Heesterman, 1993). Textual references occasionally mention human sacrifice symbolically or hypothetically, especially in relation to royal rituals and cosmological symbolism. The *Puruṣamedha*, often translated as “human sacrifice,” appears in Vedic literature but is widely interpreted as symbolic rather than literal in many historical contexts.

Mythological narratives preserve sacrificial themes involving children or threatened sacrifice. Stories concerning vows, divine testing, or offerings to local deities reveal sacrificial logic associated with fertility, healing, kingship, or crisis management. In some regional traditions, reports of child sacrifice emerged in connection with goddess worship or temple foundation myths, though historical reliability varies considerably (Doniger, 2009).

The concept of *narabali* generated sustained debate in South Asian scholarship. Some historians argue that ritual killing occurred sporadically in particular historical or local settings, while others emphasize symbolic substitution and exaggeration by colonial observers (Heesterman, 1993). Frequently, animal sacrifice, effigies, pumpkins, coconuts, or ritual substitutes replaced human victims, preserving sacrificial symbolism while eliminating literal violence (Doniger, 2009). This process resembles Abrahamic substitution narratives in which symbolic continuity survives ethical transmutation.

Eliade’s theory helps explain the cosmological logic of sacrifice in Indian traditions, where ritual repetition restores sacred order (Eliade, 1996). Levenson’s emphasis on substitution similarly clarifies how symbolic replacement maintains theological meaning without literal destruction (Levenson, 1995). Indian traditions therefore demonstrate the coexistence of sacrificial memory, symbolic reinterpretation, and ethical reform.

In Hindu sacrificial traditions, the logic of substitution may be observed in narratives and ritual developments in which human sacrifice is displaced by symbolic, animal, or ritual alternatives. Rather than signifying the complete disappearance of sacrificial logic, substitution preserves the religious and cosmological function of sacrifice while transforming its material form (Eliade, 1996). In this context, sacrificial practice should be understood not merely as an act of violence but as a ritual mechanism for restoring sacred order and maintaining continuity between the human and divine realms.

Within Vedic literature, the concept of human sacrifice appears in theoretical and ritualized forms, particularly in relation to *puruṣamedha* (human sacrifice), although many scholars argue that such rites were symbolic rather than literal (Burkert, 1983; Heesterman, 1993). The gradual ritualization and symbolic reinterpretation of sacrifice suggest that the sacrificial act was increasingly transformed into a controlled and representational form of sacred performance.

A particularly significant example is the story of Śunaḥśepa in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, where a child selected for sacrifice is ultimately spared through divine intervention. Rather than culminating in ritual killing, the narrative resolves through rescue and substitution, thereby preserving the sacrificial structure while avoiding literal death (Jamison, 1991). From a comparative perspective, this episode may be interpreted as reflecting a broader religious tendency toward substitution, in which threatened human sacrifice is symbolically redirected into alternative ritual forms.

From a theoretical standpoint, this transformation may be interpreted through several complementary frameworks. According to Girard (1977), sacrificial substitution redirects collective tensions away from uncontrolled violence toward a contained symbolic victim, thereby reducing social conflict. Burkert (1983) similarly understands sacrifice as ritualized violence through which destructive impulses are socially regulated and integrated into communal order. Eliade (1996), however, emphasizes the sacred and cosmological dimension of sacrifice, arguing that ritual substitution serves to restore disrupted cosmic order through the reenactment of primordial sacred patterns. In this sense, substitution in Hindu sacrificial traditions may be understood as preserving the symbolic efficacy of sacrifice while minimizing its destructive consequences.

6. Jewish Tradition: Abraham and Yitzhak

The story of Abraham and Yitzhak, recorded in Genesis 22 and commonly known in Jewish tradition as the Akedah (Binding of Isaac), occupies a central place in discussions of sacrifice within Judaism. The narrative recounts God's command that Abraham offer his beloved son Isaac as a sacrifice, followed by divine intervention that prevents the act and provides a ram as a substitute offering. This account has been interpreted as one of the most influential texts in the history of sacrifice, particularly because it simultaneously preserves sacrificial logic while rejecting the actual killing of the child (Levenson, 1995).

From a historical perspective, scholars have debated whether the Akedah reflects a polemic against child sacrifice, a transformation of earlier firstborn-sacrifice traditions, or a theological affirmation of absolute obedience to God. Levenson (1995) argues that the narrative should not be understood merely as a rejection of child sacrifice but as a reinterpretation of sacrificial obligation through substitution. In this reading, Isaac remains dedicated to God, yet the ram becomes the actual sacrificial victim. The story therefore preserves the notion that the firstborn belongs to God while redefining the acceptable means of fulfilling that obligation.

Within Jewish tradition, the Akedah became a foundational symbol of covenantal faith, obedience, and divine mercy. Rabbinic interpretations often emphasize Abraham's willingness to obey God and Isaac's willingness to participate in the divine command, while simultaneously highlighting God's rejection of human sacrifice. As a result, the narrative contributed to a broader theological movement in which human sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice and later by prayer, repentance, and acts of righteousness (Kugel, 1997).

The Akedah also played an important role in shaping Jewish understandings of redemption and substitution. The ram offered in Isaac's place became a powerful symbol of God's provision and mercy, reinforcing the principle that covenantal fidelity does not require the destruction of human life. Consequently, many scholars view the narrative as a decisive moment in the development of biblical attitudes toward sacrifice, marking a transition from literal human offering to symbolic and substituted forms of sacrificial worship (Levenson, 1995; Niditch, 1993).

From the perspective of the history of religions, the Akedah represents one of the most significant examples of how a religious tradition preserves the structure of sacrifice while transforming its practice. Rather than abolishing sacrifice altogether, Judaism reoriented sacrificial devotion away from human victims and toward substitutionary offerings, thereby contributing to the broader ethical development of monotheistic religion.

7. In Christianity: Reinterpretation

Unlike many ancient religious systems, Christianity does not preserve evidence of institutionalized child sacrifice as ritual practice. Instead, Christian understandings of sacrifice emerged through theological reinterpretation of Jewish sacrificial traditions, particularly the Aqedah narrative and covenantal symbolism surrounding the beloved son. Child sacrifice in Christianity therefore appears primarily in symbolic, typological, and theological forms, where sacrificial logic is redirected toward redemption, martyrdom, and divine self-offering rather than literal ritual violence. Christianity simultaneously inherits sacrificial categories from Judaism and transforms them through Christology, producing a religious system in which sacrificial meaning remains central while human sacrifice becomes morally rejected.

The principal theological framework through which sacrifice is understood in Christianity concerns the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Early Christian writers interpreted Christ as the ultimate sacrificial victim whose death fulfilled and superseded earlier sacrificial systems. The language of sacrifice permeates the New Testament, particularly in descriptions of Christ as the “Lamb of God” whose death secures redemption (Hebrews 9–10). Scholars have frequently noted that Christian theology reconfigures sacrificial violence by reversing its direction: instead of humans sacrificing children to God, God offers the Son for humanity (Levenson, 1995). This reversal preserves sacrificial symbolism while radically transforming its theological logic.

The typological relationship between Isaac and Jesus occupies a central role in Christian sacrificial interpretation. Early Christian theologians interpreted the Aqedah as a foreshadowing of Christ’s passion. Isaac, the beloved son carrying wood toward sacrifice, became a prefiguration of Christ carrying the cross, while Abraham’s willingness to surrender his son symbolized divine willingness to sacrifice Jesus for human salvation (Levenson, 1995). Yet important differences remain. Whereas Isaac survives through substitution, Jesus becomes both sacrificial son and substitute victim. Christianity thus transforms threatened child sacrifice into redemptive theology, where divine suffering replaces human sacrificial obligation.

From the perspective of sacrificial theory, Christianity represents both continuity and critique. René Girard argues that Christianity exposes and subverts sacrificial violence by revealing the innocence of the victim (Girard, 1977). According to Girard, mythological sacrificial systems conceal violence by legitimizing victimization, whereas the Gospel narratives expose unjust persecution and dismantle scapegoating mechanisms. Christ’s death therefore becomes anti-sacrificial in its ethical implications even while retaining sacrificial language. Christianity does not eliminate sacrifice conceptually; rather, it moralizes sacrifice and redirects it toward compassion, redemption, and divine self-giving.

Another important dimension concerns martyrdom traditions. Early Christian literature frequently framed martyrdom as sacrificial imitation of Christ. Child martyrs occasionally occupied symbolic importance within Christian memory, particularly during periods of Roman persecution. Accounts of youthful saints emphasized innocence, purity, and willingness to suffer for divine truth. However, martyrdom differs fundamentally from ritual child sacrifice because violence originates externally rather than through sacrificial offering by the religious community. Martyrs are remembered as witnesses rather than ritual victims, and suffering becomes testimony rather than communal appeasement (Castelli, 2004).

Christian theology also developed strong anti-sacrificial discourse. Patristic writers increasingly condemned pagan sacrificial systems, associating human sacrifice with idolatry and moral corruption. Spiritual sacrifice—prayer, charity, asceticism, repentance, and Eucharistic participation—replaced literal sacrificial violence. The Eucharist preserved sacrificial symbolism through ritual remembrance rather than renewed killing, representing Christ's sacrifice sacramentally rather than materially. Consequently, Christianity transformed sacrificial logic into symbolic, moral, and theological categories while rejecting literal child sacrifice as incompatible with divine love and redemption.

8. In Islam: Abrahamic Sacrifice, and Symbolic Substitution

Islam presents one of the clearest examples of theological rejection and symbolic transformation of child sacrifice. Emerging in the religious environment of late antiquity and the Arabian Peninsula, Islam confronted existing practices of child killing while integrating Abrahamic sacrificial symbolism into a monotheistic ethical framework. Islamic discourse on child sacrifice therefore centers around three themes: condemnation of pre-Islamic child killing, reinterpretation of Abrahamic obedience, and institutionalization of symbolic substitution through ritual sacrifice.

The Qur'an explicitly condemns the killing of children associated with fear, poverty, or misguided religious devotion. Several verses reject pre-Islamic customs of infanticide and sacrificial killing, emphasizing divine sovereignty over life. Qur'anic passages such as 6:137 and 17:31 condemn killing children under religious or economic rationalizations, portraying such acts as moral deviation and satanic deception. Islamic theology thus positions itself against ritualized violence directed toward children and frames divine command as protective rather than destructive. Central to Islamic sacrificial thought is the narrative of Abraham and his son, commonly identified in Islamic tradition as Ishmael, though the Qur'an itself does not explicitly name the child (Qur'an 37:99–113). Abraham receives a vision commanding sacrifice, and both father and son display submission to divine will. Yet, at the decisive moment, God intervenes and replaces the child with an animal sacrifice. Similar to the Jewish Aqedah, the narrative preserves sacrificial seriousness while prioritizing substitution.

The Islamic version of the narrative is often interpreted as one that emphasizes obedience (Islam, submission) rather than violence. The son willingly participates, reinforcing ideals of trust and faithfulness rather than victimhood. The substitution of an animal confirms that God ultimately rejects human sacrifice while preserving sacrificial symbolism through ritual commemoration (Peters, 1994). This transformation becomes institutionalized in the annual celebration of Eid al-Adha, during which animal sacrifice commemorates Abraham's devotion and divine mercy.

Theoretical perspectives further illuminate Islamic sacrificial logic. From Eliade's perspective, ritual sacrifice reenacts sacred history and renews religious meaning (Eliade, 1996). Burkert's concept of ritualized violence explains how sacrifice becomes socially regulated and ethically constrained (Burkert, 1983). Levenson's emphasis on substitution is particularly relevant because Islamic theology preserves willingness to sacrifice while rejecting literal destruction of the child (Levenson, 1995). Consequently, Islam demonstrates how sacrificial systems may retain theological intensity without legitimizing human sacrifice.

9. Moral Panic and the Construction of Child Sacrifice Narratives

The contemporary study of child sacrifice extends beyond historical and religious analysis to include the examination of media systems, public discourse, and moral anxiety. In modern

societies, allegations of ritual violence are communicated through newspapers, television broadcasts, social media platforms, religious organizations, and governmental institutions. These communicative networks shape public perceptions of sacrificial violence and influence how specific incidents are interpreted. Consequently, child sacrifice must be understood not only as a religious phenomenon but also as a social narrative whose significance is mediated through processes of representation and circulation.

A useful framework for analyzing these processes is provided by Cohen's (2011) theory of moral panic. According to Cohen, moral panics emerge when a condition, event, or social group is portrayed as a threat to societal values and interests. Media coverage often amplifies public concern, producing reactions that exceed the scale of the actual phenomenon. Central to this process is the construction of "folk devils," symbolic figures who embody perceived dangers and become objects of public condemnation. Allegations of child sacrifice frequently operate within this framework because they involve highly charged themes such as innocence, vulnerability, secrecy, and violence. As a result, reports of ritual killings often become symbols of broader social fears concerning moral decline, social disorder, and cultural change.

The Ugandan case illustrates this dynamic particularly well. Although documented instances of ritual killing have occurred, public discourse surrounding child sacrifice frequently extends beyond verified incidents and becomes intertwined with concerns about economic inequality, corruption, occult wealth, and rapid social transformation. In such contexts, narratives of child sacrifice function not merely as descriptions of criminal acts but as symbolic expressions of collective anxiety. The social significance of these narratives therefore derives not only from their factual basis but also from the meanings attributed to them within public discourse (Cohen, 2011).

Frankfurter (2006) analysis of evil construction provides an additional perspective. Examining accusations of ritual abuse and demonic conspiracy across historical periods, Frankfurter argues that societies often construct images of evil through narratives involving hidden violence, secret rituals, and vulnerable victims. Such stories emerge particularly during periods of uncertainty, instability, or rapid social change, when communities seek explanations for perceived threats and misfortunes. Child sacrifice occupies a unique position within these narratives because children symbolize innocence and social continuity. Consequently, allegations involving sacrificial violence against children become especially powerful vehicles for expressing fears about moral corruption and social breakdown.

This pattern is evident not only in contemporary Africa but also throughout religious history. Biblical condemnations of neighboring peoples, Roman accusations against Christians, medieval blood libel traditions, colonial depictions of indigenous religions, and modern rumors of ritual murder all demonstrate how sacrificial narratives can function as mechanisms for identifying and externalizing evil. In many instances, accusations of child sacrifice serve to define moral boundaries between communities, distinguishing the righteous "self" from the dangerous or corrupt "other" (Frankfurter, 2006).

The role of modern media further intensifies these dynamics. Digital communication technologies facilitate the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged stories, often allowing rumors, speculation, and verified information to circulate simultaneously. Media reports may therefore amplify public fears even when empirical evidence remains limited. From a media ecology perspective, narratives of child sacrifice are shaped not only by the events they describe but also by the communication environments through which they travel. The circulation of sacrificial narratives thus becomes a significant social process in its own right.

The incorporation of moral panic theory into the study of child sacrifice highlights the importance of distinguishing between documented ritual practices and the broader cultural narratives that surround them. While historical and anthropological evidence remains essential, scholars must also consider how media systems contribute to the construction, amplification, and persistence of sacrificial discourse. Such an approach reveals that child sacrifice functions simultaneously as a historical phenomenon, a cultural symbol, and a communicative construct whose meaning is continually renegotiated within changing social contexts.

10. Conclusion

A comparative analysis reveals both convergence and divergence across traditions. First, child sacrifice consistently emerges in situations involving sacred seriousness: divine command, communal crisis, fertility, covenant, kingship, or ritual obligation. Children become symbolically powerful because they embody innocence, continuity, inheritance, and social future. Their sacrificial value derives precisely from what they represent rather than from arbitrary victimhood. Second, the traditions examined reveal an important movement from literal sacrifice toward symbolic substitution. Judaism transforms sacrifice through the Aqedah and firstborn redemption; Christianity relocates sacrifice to divine self-offering and Eucharistic symbolism; Islam institutionalizes substitution through animal sacrifice; African traditions frequently evolve toward symbolic mediation; and Indian traditions employ ritual substitutes in place of human victims. Substitution emerges as one of the most significant comparative patterns. Third, the role of violence differs substantially across traditions.

Girard's theory explains sacrificial logic in moments of communal crisis and scapegoating, while Burkert clarifies ritualization of violence and social order. Yet Eliade's emphasis on sacred renewal and Levenson's covenantal symbolism show that sacrifice often concerns cosmological or theological meaning rather than merely violence itself. No single theory fully explains all cases. Finally, ethical transformation represents a major historical pattern. Religious traditions increasingly reinterpret sacrifice through symbolism, prayer, substitution, martyrdom, or moral devotion. Child sacrifice survives less as ritual practice than as theological memory, symbolic language, and moral reflection on obedience, suffering, and sacred obligation.

Few accusations in human history possess the emotional and political force of alleging that one's enemies kill children for religious purposes. The image of child sacrifice combines two of the strongest moral responses available in social life: horror at violence directed toward the innocent and revulsion toward forms of religious practice perceived as morally illegitimate. Because children symbolize innocence, continuity, and communal vulnerability, accusations involving their ritual killing have repeatedly emerged in conflicts between ethnic communities, religious groups, imperial systems, and political rivals (Cohen, 2002; Girard, 1977). In many historical contexts, such accusations functioned not merely as descriptions of alleged ritual behavior but as powerful rhetorical mechanisms for constructing moral boundaries and legitimizing exclusion.

Consequently, accusing a group of sacrificing children functions as a powerful mechanism of moral delegitimization. Such accusations portray the accused not merely as criminal but as fundamentally corrupt, violating the deepest ethical boundaries of communal life. Unlike ordinary accusations of violence, theft, or even homicide, child sacrifice implies organized, sacredized cruelty rooted in a distorted religious or moral worldview. In this respect, the charge serves to construct enemies as morally irredeemable and therefore deserving of exclusion, punishment, or eradication (Girard, 1977; Said, 1979).

Child sacrifice constitutes one of the most difficult yet revealing subjects within comparative religion because it exposes tensions between devotion and violence, sacred obligation and moral transformation, communal survival and individual suffering. Across Judaism, Christianity, Islam, African religious contexts, and Indian traditions, child sacrifice appears neither universal nor uniform. Rather, it emerges through historically specific theological, ritual, and political circumstances shaped by ideas of divine command, kingship, covenant, fertility, crisis management, and sacred mediation. The comparative evidence suggests that sacrificial logic often persisted even where literal sacrifice diminished. Threatened sacrifice, substitution, redemption rituals, martyrdom, and symbolic offerings preserved religious meanings associated with surrender, devotion, and sacred exchange while increasingly rejecting literal destruction of children. Substitution thus becomes a key mechanism through which traditions negotiated continuity and ethical reform.

Theoretical approaches developed by René Girard, Walter Burkert, Mircea Eliade, and Jon D. Levenson collectively demonstrate that child sacrifice cannot be reduced to irrational cruelty or primitive violence alone. Sacrifice functioned as crisis management, ritualized order, cosmological renewal, covenantal obedience, and symbolic mediation. At the same time, many traditions progressively moralized sacrificial logic, redirecting violence toward symbolic forms and theological reinterpretation. Ultimately, the history of child sacrifice reflects a broader history of religious change. The transition from literal sacrifice toward symbolic devotion illustrates evolving understandings of divine-human relations and ethical responsibility. Studying child sacrifice therefore illuminates not only religious violence but also the processes through which religious traditions reinterpret, limit, and transform violence in pursuit of moral and theological meaning.

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