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GOD ON TRIAL: THE VALUE OF HUMAN SACRIFICE

The purpose of this talk is to provide an answer to one of the million-dollar questions in the study of religion: Why human sacrifice? The presence of human sacrifice throughout history and across cultures indicates that it is something fundamental to human beings, yet we know little about what makes these particular types of sacrifices valuable. I seek to uncover the relationship between human sacrifice and value by comparing two sacrificial traditions that differ quite sharply in what they posit as the value of human sacrifice. The first is the Hebrew tradition, reflected in the well-known biblical story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, which is often interpreted as an act of religious faith. The second is the Siberian Chukchi, a group of reindeer herders, who ritually kill their elders to trick the ancestors into giving them new human life through cycles of rebirth.

These two sacrificial traditions are not connected historically or culturally and on the face of it, they signify highly incommensurable value logics. But what would the story of Abraham's faith look like when seen through human sacrifice among the Siberian Chukchi, where trickery is the predominant value? Drawing on the notion that a dominant value contains its "shadow" within, I show that what counts as a the dominant value in each of the two sacrificial traditions is so deeply co-implicated that trickery (Chukchi) becomes the shadow of faith (Abraham), and vice versa. At certain moments, one dominant value or the other is captured by its own shadow and flips into its contrary. Human sacrifice thus has an inherent capacity to displace its own values, which become the inverse of what they supposedly signify. It is this duplicity or shadow-force _within human sacrifice – its inherent capacity to unsettle its own value logic – that has proved so viable throughout history and across cultures. This comparative take on human sacrifice and value provides us with entirely new insights into the paradigmatic narrative about Abraham's trial, which will be exposed as an act in which not only faith is at stake, but also trickery — an analysis that will culminate in a reinterpretation of Genesis 22, in which it is God's divinity rather than Abraham's faith that is set on trial.