

## Three perspectives on Abraham's defense against Kant's charge of immoral conduct

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# **Three Perspectives on Abraham's Defense Against Kant's Charge of Immoral Conduct**

## **The Need for a Trial in a Kantian Court**

Throughout history no mere mortal has been more revered and esteemed by so many diverse people than Abraham, great patriarch of the three enduring monotheistic religions. Yet Judaism, Christianity and Islam all agree that this man attempted to kill his own, innocent son, an act so dastardly that it would normally be judged both immoral and illegal in any civil society. Surprisingly, the scriptures of these three religious faiths *praise* Abraham for this very act, justifying it in very different ways, but all portraying it as the paradigm of religious obedience.

In the reasoned opinion of Immanuel Kant, one of the western philosophers most highly respected by scholars of all three faiths, Abraham's murderous intent should not be so easily excused.<sup>1</sup> Instead of following the traditional religious interpretations, we should condemn Abraham and learn from his near fatal mistake. If Abraham really was responding to God's command – a possibility raised in the scriptures of all three faiths – then he must have misunderstood what God wanted him to do, for no God worthy of worship would command us to break the moral law and expect us to obey. All three religious faiths agree with Kant, that murder is an immoral act. If God was indeed testing Abraham, then Kant insists he failed the test: unlike Job (see e.g., Job 26-31), he did not stand up to God and refuse to accept an unjust situation. Kant was not opposed to the use of religious figures as paradigms of moral behavior, a practice that can be especially instructive in moral education;<sup>2</sup> but he did not count Abraham worthy to be included in a list of such moral exemplars.

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The authors of this article both deeply admire Kant's philosophy in nearly all of its applications and agree with most of his conclusions. However, in this case we believe Kant may not have done justice to the evidence provided in the scriptures of the three faiths when they describe Abraham's reasons for doing what he did. To convey our arguments in a more interesting and persuasive manner, we propose a thought experiment involving a Kantian courtroom, with Kant himself as prosecuting attorney, presenting the reasons for condemning Abraham's act. Presiding over this crucial case is the Chief Justice, (Kantian) Reason Herself.

Abraham himself, so we imagine, has little ability and no desire to justify his action rationally, for he is content simply to refer to the voice he believes came from God. For reasons that will become clear in the following sections, proponents of the three faiths are aware that their hero is in danger of being declared insane (see note 26, below); they have therefore sought our assistance in providing Abraham with a defense that will stand up in a Kantian court. Taking up the role of Abraham's defense attorneys, we will seek to refute Kant's charges and show that they cannot be sustained in light of the testimonies concerning Abraham's character and motivation that are available in the Jewish Bible, the Christian New Testament and the Islamic Koran. As such, our task will not be to represent the ways various interpreters belonging to each historical faith have, in fact, interpreted the theological (or other) implications of Abraham's act. In a courtroom, that would be dismissed as hearsay. Rather, our focus will be on the *material evidence* (the texts) and on the *operative laws* that govern this imagined court (i.e., the basic principles of Kantian philosophy).<sup>3</sup>

The jury deciding the outcome of this trial consists (so we imagine) not of scholars (though scholars may be called upon as expert witnesses to present the facts) but of ordinary, morally-conscientious people who, though they may or may not be committed to a particular

religious faith, are all sufficiently rational to be able to make assessments within broadly Kantian guidelines. In hopes of persuading the diverse members of such a jury, bound as they are by the objective principles of a morally-legislated courtroom, we will not assume the truth of any specific historical faith. However, in the course of presenting our case, we will refer on occasion to the defendant's *own* religious beliefs, in order to give the jury an accurate understanding of his character, as assumed, in turn, by each of the three scriptures we are taking as evidence.

The main goal of this thought experiment will not be to persuade the jury members to affirm the non-moral aspects of any of the three faiths, but rather to determine whether Abraham (when we consider his conduct within the context of each faith in turn) can be acquitted of the charge of immorality, using Kantian principles alone as a standard of judgment. If successful in achieving this first goal, a secondary goal will be to determine whether a Kantian jury would have sufficient evidence to uphold Abraham as an exemplar of the *moral purity* that is the only Kantian indicator of a genuinely religious faith. We do not claim that Abraham himself could have defended his action in the way we are attempting, nor even that he would have wanted to do so. Abraham might prefer simply to rely on the tenets of his historically-contingent faith, including his presumed communication with God, and let the chips fall where they may. By contrast, we imagine ourselves as having been employed by the three faiths to reason in whatever (Kantian) way may be necessary in order to free their shared hero from the dire consequences of Kant's charge.

### **The Textual Evidence for an Indictment**

Jews and Christians share the same scriptural source for their accounts of the incident in question. In Genesis 22:1-10 (NIV) we read:

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Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

The evidence from the text up to this point (where God intervenes and prevents Abraham from completing the act) seems incontrovertible: Abraham intended to obey what he believed God had commanded, even to the point of murdering his own son. The Koran's account of this incident (Sura 37:102-111) is shorter and in the opinion of most interpreters portrays a different son as the near victim,<sup>4</sup> but is no less explicit with regard to Abraham's murderous intent:

When he [presumably Ishmael] grew enough to work with him, he [Abraham] said, "My

son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. What do you think?" He said, "O my father, do what you are commanded to do. You will find me, God willing, patient." They both submitted [to the presumed command of God], and he put his forehead down (to sacrifice him). We called him: "O Abraham. You have believed the dream." We thus reward the righteous. That was an exacting test indeed. We ransomed him [Ishmael] by substituting an animal sacrifice. And we preserved his history for subsequent generations. Peace be upon Abraham. We thus reward the righteous. He is one of our believing servants.

This text, like the one from Genesis, portrays a man who, by all appearances, is willfully carrying out an immoral act – in this case, solely because he has interpreted a dream as a special command God had given uniquely to him, requiring him to do so. As prosecutor for this case, Kant would present these two reports to the Court as sufficient evidence to proceed with a trial; for, although they differ in several important details – details that will influence how we formulate our case for Abraham's defense from the different perspectives of each faith – both accounts contain clear admissions that Abraham acted with the intent to kill his innocent son.

### **Kant's Case for Prosecution**

Kant's basis for seeking to prosecute Abraham's conduct is two-pronged: from the theoretical standpoint, the issue is how a person is able to discern a divine command (as opposed, for example, to an hallucination); from the practical standpoint, what matters is how a person is able to discern a moral imperative. According to Kant no person (not even Abraham) can set oneself up as a unique case; if justice is to be done in the Kantian courtroom, each person must submit to universal laws (both natural and moral) that are accessible to the light of clear

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reasoning. Of this there can be no doubt.<sup>5</sup>

Thinking specifically of Abraham's case (for he mentions it in a footnote), Kant addresses both issues at once in *The Conflict of the Faculties* when he writes:

For if God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for a human being to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and *be acquainted with* it as such. – But in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.<sup>6</sup>

Although a person can never know for certain whether a commanding voice heard inside one's own head has come from God, Kant is not rejecting this possibility altogether. Rather, he is reminding religious believers, or the members of the jury in the present context, that our theoretical ignorance in such situations makes room for a merely negative practical principle: a person is free to treat an inner voice as a divine command, and may *obey* such a command in the faith that it expresses God's will, *only if* the command can be interpreted as being at least *not immoral*. What this means for Abraham's case is that in a Kantian court he cannot plead innocent on the grounds that "God told me to do it!"

On the first (theoretical) issue, discerning the divine as an object of experience, the problem arises because humans as a species depend on their senses for knowledge. By means of input from the senses, as processed by the categories imposed by the human mind, we are able to obtain reliable knowledge about the empirical world. However, Kant argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that this limits our possible knowledge to *finite* objects; we can and do form *ideas*

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about the infinite, but we can never isolate it as a definite object of experience. As a result, we have no way of distinguishing, through theoretical reasoning alone, between an illusion whereby a finite object merely *seems* infinite to us and an experience of something genuinely infinite.

A simple analogy from the geometry of human vision may illustrate effectively how this point relates to the story of Abraham. Imagine two parallel lines, like straight railroad tracks, one being very long (let's say, a thousand miles) and the other being *infinitely* long. A person standing in a space between and within sight of these lines would see them as receding to a single "vanishing point". A human observer who is far away from either endpoint of the very long line would have no idea that the infinite line extends out beyond the end of finite line. As a result, a person in that situation would have no way, through the senses alone, of determining which line was truly infinite and which line was just very long. A similar problem occurs, Kant argues, any time a person claims to have an experience of God. The most such a person can do is to compare the experience with other, obviously finite experiences (e.g., the tracks on a toy train set) and determine that because the former is much greater than the latter, it *might* have an infinite (cf. supernatural) source. But then again, the appearance of infinity also might be an hallucination, as in the case of the very long line, or the supernatural source might be not divine but devilish. Thus, human observers who are faced with a power that is obviously greater than any ordinary human power are not able to know for sure, through theoretical (sense-based) reasoning alone, that they have experienced God. In a word: humans are not able to intuit the infinite (or divine) in a way that can be conceptualized in order to produce reliable empirical knowledge. This is an incontrovertible principle of the Kantian court.

If Kant, as prosecuting attorney, had a mind to persuade religious members of the jury on this first point, he might point out that this limitation of human observation is acknowledged



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even within the text of the Bible. Consider the case of the young Samuel, as told in 1 Samuel 3:1-10. He hears a voice in the dark and assumes it is a human voice, though in some respects it appears to be more than human, because as far as Samuel can tell, nobody else is around when he hears it. Samuel identifies this Voice-in-the-Dark as God's only when the priest tells him. If we assume (with the biblical text) that the priest was correct in his judgment, then this story shows that even biblical writers understood this basic principle, that human observers can easily be fooled when we attempt to identify an experience as being of divine origin.<sup>7</sup>

Kant solves the theoretical problem encountered by Samuel and various other religious heroes (see note 7) by arguing that in such situations the limitation of human reason gives us no recourse but to rely on our inner awareness of the moral law. Practical reason, Kant believes, has primacy over theoretical reason, because the moral law *is* of infinite value and we *are* able to discern it (through the inner power of conscience) and to apply it in practice (through the power of free choice). No matter how deep Abraham's faith might have been, he could not have been theoretically certain that an apparently divine "voice" came from God, so he had *no right* to trust it, once it told him to do something wrong; in a Kantian courtroom, alleged ignorance of this law of genuine (rational) religion is no excuse, for the moral law is common to all. Kant would not need to recount all the details of his moral philosophy if faced with the task of prosecuting Abraham before a jury of common, morally-conscientious citizens. A more persuasive approach would be to paint with broad strokes a picture of human morality according to Kantian principles. We shall therefore offer an illustration that presents quite plainly the logic behind one of Kant's most controversial theories, his claim that each moral (free) individual makes a timeless (or "noumenal") choice to adopt or to reject the moral law as the primary incentive for his or her actions.

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As far as our theoretical reason can determine, we human beings live together in this world in such a way that we appear to have been left on our own to decide, through our own reasoning powers, what practical rules we should impose upon ourselves and each other. That is, we cannot know for certain whether any God exists, so we also cannot depend on such a God to tell us directly what is right and what is wrong. As moral beings, we are free to make this choice, yet this does not mean we can choose just any rule we wish. To make this point clearer, Kant the prosecuting attorney might ask the jury to imagine that all humans who are capable of practical reasoning (where actions are undertaken in accordance with principles) be stripped of all memory and understanding of their respective, actual situations and be given an opportunity to devise rules that will guide them in their interactions with each other. Let it be further supposed that we understand only this much, that all people will relate to each other in terms of powers, whereby some may be lords and some servants. In such a situation, each person, thinking alone and from a purely rational (or noumenal) point of view, ought to choose the *identical* practical rule to govern human conduct.

Following this spontaneous and universal line of thinking will require each of us to reason in this way: I can either accept the rule that *I alone will count in this world*, or else I can accept the rule that *every person will count equally*. I cannot rationally will that another hold sway over me, and yet I am aware that I may be destined to be a servant. In that situation, I would not want the one who is in a position of power over me to live by the former rule. In order to maximize the likelihood of my own well-being, the rule I must therefore choose (as it were, “timelessly”) is: *every person counts equally*, for only this option *guarantees* that I will count (this being my reason for initially preferring the other choice), *regardless* of what power-relations may hold in our actual experience in the phenomenal world. This gives us the rule: all

people are beings of *intrinsic* value and not objects of some other person's value system.<sup>8</sup> This practical law that issues forth from the internal reasoning of each person who is aware of having the power of free choice is what Kant calls *the moral law*, and is the Law of all laws governing the Kantian courtroom.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the prosecution continues, we see that human persons not only conceive of this moral law, but also discover we have an innate *respect* for it; this leads us to the remarkable recognition of the *fact* of our freedom,<sup>10</sup> for we have the choice either to conform to this absolute creation of our own rationality or to use this rationality for our own benefit first, and only then (if convenient) to conform to the law. Our capacity for this choice, together with our respect for the moral law, should fill us with an awareness that we are *sublime* beings, for this law originates from ourselves, autonomously, as rational creatures. If Kant noticed among the members of the jury some of Abraham's religious peers, he might argue further that this practical rationality, not shared by all living beings, can also be regarded as a gift of God. For this practical rationality (whatever its source) serves as a beacon that enables us to recognize God's presence, at least negatively. That is, while we cannot recognize God empirically, through the senses, we *are* able to recognize when God is absent, through moral awareness. In a word, we can all be certain that *God will not command a person to break the moral law*.

This prepares us to consider Kant's most explicit condemnation of Abraham's immoral conduct. In the footnote attached to the paragraph quoted above from *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant refers directly to the case we are considering:

We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly

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divine voice: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven."<sup>11</sup>

In Kant's view the case for the prosecution is straightforward and requires little argument, once the laws governing the Kantian court are clearly understood: Abraham acted immorally because he attempted to do something that all rational beings can easily recognize as being contrary to the moral law. Had he succeeded in killing his son, he would have been guilty of murder in any civilized society. The fact that he stopped just short of completing the act does not change the morality of his initial choice one whit; indeed, in many legal systems he would be guilty of the crimes of *attempted murder* and/or *child endangerment* just for going as far as he did. Practical reason, Kant reminds us by way of summing up the case for the prosecution, *requires* us to choose an option that is totally certain, from the standpoint of human morality, whenever it conflicts with what can never be more than a mere *possibility*, as far as our interpretation of a particular experience of God is concerned. Abraham had every reason to distrust the voice he thought was commanding him to kill his son; yet he deliberately chose to commit the immoral act anyway. Regardless of the legal status of the act he eventually aborted, the jury in this courtroom, Kant concludes, is therefore duty-bound to find Abraham guilty as charged of the immoral choice of intending to commit murder.

### **The Case for Abraham's Defense: Three Perspectives**

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is well known as a critic of Kant's interpretation of Abraham's conduct in nearly murdering his son. Attacking Kant's over-reliance on ethics, he defends Abraham by developing a concept of religious faith that requires the believer to venture

out beyond the boundaries of reason into the paradoxical realm of the absurd.<sup>12</sup> The literature on the Kant-Kierkegaard debate as it relates to Abraham is vast.<sup>13</sup> From our point of view, however, this whole debate is irrelevant; for our goal is to assess how the defenses implied by the scriptures of each of the three abrahamic religious faiths might be used as a basis to justify Abraham's actions with reasons that could *stand up* in the Kantian court, whose basic principles were summarized in terms comprehensible to a typical jury in the preceding section. Kierkegaard's solution may be religiously deeper or more spiritually profound than anything we will present in what follows; but it explicitly requires a leap into a whole new way of thinking that goes beyond the kind of reasoning we, following Kant, wish to preserve here.<sup>14</sup>

How, then, can we refute the arguments our imaginary Kant has presented so succinctly in his attempt to persuade the jury of Abraham's guilt? Could capable attorneys for the defense portray the situation "on the ground" as being entirely different from what the prosecuting attorney has assumed, although still consistent with what the texts tell us about Abraham's inner choices and outward actions leading up to the moment of would-be execution? In taking up this challenge, we will aim to show that Abraham's act was justified because he assumed no real (enduring) harm could possibly come to his child, for any harm caused would result in his son's long-term benefit. In either case, our goal (by the very nature of our task) will be to demonstrate that Abraham should be found *not guilty* of immoral conduct in a Kantian court.

The Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures offer distinct, though not entirely incompatible, explanations of why Abraham was not only morally justified to have responded the way he did to the voice he interpreted as conveying a command of God, but is also worthy of being honored as an *exemplar* of moral virtue. In the following three subsections, we will examine these "three Abrahams," using for the sake of simplicity the abbreviations "Abraham-

J,” “Abraham-C” and “Abraham-I” to refer, respectively, to the images of Abraham portrayed in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From each of these three perspectives, we will present a rationale for Abraham's conduct that is consistent with the evidence presented in the relevant scriptural account and is designed to persuade a jury consisting of morally-attuned inquirers that if they abide by the rules of a Kantian court, they must find Abraham not guilty.

### **1. The “Magician's Assistant” Defense:**

#### ***Abraham-J Knew the Appearance of Harm Was Only an Illusion***

Our first attempt to defend Abraham against Kant's indictment is based on additional information found in the Jewish scriptures (e.g., Genesis 18 and 24:1-4) that provides a window into the state of Abraham's mind at the time he attempted to obey the allegedly divine command to sacrifice his son: he seems to have believed his son *could not be killed*, no matter what Abraham might do. Abraham-J knew beyond reasonable doubt that Isaac, the “miracle child” (born to Sarah when she was far beyond normal child-bearing age), was the only child who could possibly fulfill God's promise that Abraham's offspring would become a great nation.<sup>15</sup> The text clearly implies that when Abraham heard God's command, he immediately realized that God's promise could not be fulfilled without Isaac's life continuing – given that, at the time of this new command, Isaac had not yet produced a child.<sup>16</sup>

Another relevant piece of evidence is found in Genesis 18:16-33, where Abraham pleads with God for the salvation of the city where his uncle, Lot, happened to live – a city so evil that God had decided to destroy it. Abraham's response shows us an important fact about his character: he was a noble and well-meaning man who believed in giving people a second chance and was not afraid to stand up and argue against God in the hope of winning a reprieve for

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people God had already condemned to die. Given this character trait, one cannot reasonably assume that Abraham seriously believed God would allow his son to die, otherwise he surely would have argued against the command, just as he did in this situation. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the text tells us, were utterly corrupt and *deserved* to die; yet Abraham came to their defense! How then could he remain silent when commanded to destroy with his own hands his *innocent* son? Far from pleading with God, as he had done on Lot's behalf, Abraham goes straightway to "carry out" the command without uttering a single word on Isaac's behalf.<sup>17</sup>

If the portrayal of Abraham in Genesis tells us anything, it is that he was a man of strong moral resolve, a man whose integrity was part and parcel of his great faith. He was not a man who blindly obeyed his impressions of what God had commanded without thinking for himself about the nature of the command. Given this fact, the only reasonable explanation for such an apparent *contradiction* in character in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is that Abraham knew full well that his son would not die. On this interpretation, Abraham was being entirely sincere when he told his servants (Genesis 22:5) that *both* he and Isaac would see them again, when their sacrifice was complete. Kant's attempt to prosecute Abraham for attempted murder can succeed only if we assume not only that Abraham had suddenly and inexplicably become a person who could accept a divine decree of death for his innocent and beloved son without complaint, but also that he lied to his servants with a straight face, presumably to hide from his son the sick trick he was about to play on him. The hermeneutic principle of charity requires us to see Abraham-J in the former way, thus rejecting Kant's assumption that Abraham intended to murder his son.<sup>18</sup>

We can shed some light on the mystery of how a man of such high moral character could appear to be performing an immoral act by comparing Abraham-J to a magician's assistant. The assistant to a magician who is about to perform a death-defying trick is asked to undertake an

action (e.g., thrusting a sword through a slit in a closed box) that should result in the death of the participating "victim." The assistant undertakes this "murderous" action (or in some cases, submits to the magician performing the action on her or him) and tries to "kill" the victim (or submits to being "killed"). Should the trick go wrong and the victim actually die, the assistant is not to blame, but rather the magician; for the assistant normally does not understand exactly how the trick works, but merely trusts the magician not to do anything that would cause any real harm. Despite the appearance of murder, the whole episode *is* a trick and the victim is never in any real danger.<sup>19</sup>

Something akin to this Magician's Assistant scenario must be operating in Abraham-J's response to God's command. For on this account, Abraham does not even have to know for certain that this is the command of God. From the point of view of Abraham's established experience, the voice telling him to kill his son could be the voice of a demon; the accurate theoretical identification of the commanding voice as being God's does not matter. The only thing that matters is Abraham's certainty that the *previous* promise of God shall not be thwarted by any being in all of creation, not even by Abraham himself.<sup>20</sup> This is the heart of the faith Abraham-J has in God: nobody and nothing can prevent God's promise from coming to pass.

True, Abraham's heart is heavy as he climbs the mountain with his son, but not because he knows he is about to commit a murder – for the death of his son is impossible! Rather, his deep concern is only for the fear that may overcome his son as he watches his father test his own faith in God's promise. Abraham's reason for not telling the lad the details of God's command beforehand is not that he feels guilty that his son is about to die; rather, the extreme emotional intensity of this test of faith prompts Abraham-J to temper the intensity of the experience for his son. Abraham, viewed from the perspective of this defense, knows full well that he will be



stopped, just as the magician's assistant knows that the sword will not really kill the would-be victim. Abraham-J must have given himself *some* explanation for how this might happen – perhaps believing the knife would melt into water upon touching the boy's flesh, or that something equally miraculous would happen to prevent the killing. On this interpretation, God was testing Abraham's dedication to *act out* the killing to the very best of his ability and without flinching.<sup>21</sup> *The safety of his son was never in question in Abraham's mind*; the only question was whether he, Abraham-J, would pass his test without causing his son to worry unnecessarily.

*Summation.* This first defense pictures Abraham as a man of almost unfathomable confidence in the consistency of God's promises, a man who at this mature stage of life is as resolute in his unwillingness to undertake any immoral act as he is to obey God completely. He is a moral man who would not and did not commit an immoral act; for he acted in the full assurance that he *would not be able* to kill his son, no matter how hard he tried. He knew the test would require him not actually to kill his son, but to proceed unflinchingly *as if* he were going to do so, fully anticipating God's intervention to prevent the tragedy from actually taking place. On this account, Abraham-J must have been aware that his obedience would provide his son with a first-hand experience of God's faithfulness, so that he too could have confidence in God's promise as firm as his father's, not merely hearsay based on his parents' teaching. Abraham-J is therefore a model father, willing to endure in his heart great personal suffering in order to demonstrate God's reliability to his child, so that Isaac could also become an effective apprentice. Once we recognize these obviously moral intentions, we must conclude that the Abraham portrayed in Jewish scripture is free and clear of Kant's charges.

## 2. The "Sacrificial Lover" Defense:

### *Abraham-C Knew No Enduring Harm Would Be Done*

The case for the defense now looks at Abraham through the evidence of the Christian scriptures. We begin by noting that the logic of the state of mind of Abraham-J, just presented, also holds to a large extent for the Christian.<sup>22</sup> Abraham-J serves as a background or context for the distinctively Christian scriptures to introduce a new element that will modify the logic of Abraham's defense. The Christian scriptures (Hebrews 11:17-19) indicate that

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

This new assumption about Abraham's internal thought processes requires us to remove from the defense case the confidence assumed by our previous defense of Abraham, that Isaac could not possibly be killed. For now, according to the Christian sacred history, not only *could* Isaac die, but Abraham must have expected that he probably *would* die, though he would then promptly be resurrected. This seems to strengthen the case for the prosecution's charge that Abraham's conduct amounted, at the very least, to attempted murder.

Before responding to this charge from the Christian point of view, we must analyze the common understanding of what constitutes a murder. The normal concept of murder always assumes not only the intentional killing of a person, but also the *continuing absence of life*. If a would-be killer somehow *knew* (with theoretical certainty) that the death caused by killing a person would be followed by a quick resurrection, the killing itself would take on a different

character; we would not regard it as a murder – at least, not in any straightforward sense. By “murder” we always mean acting in a manner that causes a person to die, with the intent that the person's death be *enduring*. To *attempt* murder, therefore, means to act with the intent of causing a person to die *and remain dead*.

Abraham-C sets out to kill his son, fully expecting to do so, but only because he is certain that God will then raise Isaac back to life again, as an undeniable confirmation of God's promise to bless this special family.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, we cannot rightly judge Abraham-C to be a murderer. Abraham not only *wants* his son to live and not die, but is fully confident that if he should happen to die as a result of this act of obedience to God, he will be speedily resurrected. Evidence for Abraham's assurance that Isaac's recovery from death (if any) would be *speedy* was already presented in the prosecution's textual evidence for indictment: when Abraham told his servants to wait, he explicitly stated that both he and Isaac would soon return. This indicates that Abraham had no doubt as to Isaac's long-term safety and well-being.<sup>24</sup> As already established by the logic of the defense case for Abraham-J, God's hands were tied by virtue of his own word (see note 20); Abraham-C would also naturally assume that God would *certainly* bring the miracle child back to life. Although this assumption in itself is *non-moral* and reliance on it admittedly goes beyond the theoretical limits the Kantian court places on our ability to know whether such a miracle had actually happened, this does not make the one possessing such a sincere belief into an *immoral* person. As his attorneys in a Kantian court, we remind the jury that what matters is whether the faith commitment held by Abraham-C, his belief in such a miracle, *encouraged* or *hindered* his ability to obey the moral law. We take no position here on the issue of whether or not our client really was somehow experiencing God.

As the analogy of the magician's assistant does not apply here, we need another analogy

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to render this version of the defense case more forceful. The Christian scripture portrays Abraham as a deeply passionate character, acting toward his son much like a passionate lover might act toward the beloved after realizing that the beloved is destined to have someone else as his or her highest love. Love stories often involve the pain of separation, followed by a long-awaited (often virtually miraculous) overcoming of the obstacle that has been keeping the lovers apart. In one recent Hollywood romance, involving time travel, the heroine is in love with a man from a previous century; her modern-day boyfriend knows that if she jumps off the Golden Gate Bridge at a particular time, she will enter a time warp and be transported back to her original situation, to be with her true love. At first she doesn't believe him, but finally the truth dawns on her and together they run to the bridge. At just the right moment, with a worried policeman looking on, she disappears into the time warp just as she falls off the bridge. The policeman immediately reports a suicide; but the (now former) boyfriend knows the truth, that she has gone back to the previous century, where (as the viewer is privileged to see) her true love promptly proposes marriage.

Abraham, of course, is not in love with Isaac. Nevertheless, his love is *like* that of the would-be boyfriend who recognizes that a separation is necessary for the sake of his beloved. From the perspective of Abraham-C, Isaac must learn to trust God (the true Lover of his soul) more than his father, even to the point of believing in resurrection from the dead, before he will become a vessel worthy to fulfill God's promise of giving birth to a great nation. With this sacrificial goal of transforming the focus of his son's trust firmly in his mind, Abraham escorts his son up the mountain. In a thoroughly Kantian manner, Abraham-C genuinely does not know whether God will allow him to follow through with the commanded killing; yet he does know that *if* Isaac dies, he will be immediately resurrected, for otherwise God's command would be

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immoral and this could not possibly be the case. He also realizes that in this way Isaac will then know that God (who raised him from the dead) should be trusted absolutely, just as his father (who dared to kill him) had so firmly believed. On this defense, Abraham is taking an *extreme* risk as he raises his knife to stab the bound boy: if he turns out to be wrong (i.e., if that voice was not God's), then he will indeed be a murderer, just as the would-be boyfriend in the film would have been an accessory to suicide, had he been wrong about the time warp on the Golden Gate Bridge. But in both stories, this possibility is ruled out by an extraordinary series of events that leads the hero to have no rational option other than to believe in what would normally seem impossible; as a result, an action that would normally be condemned as putting another person's life at risk is now praised as a self-sacrifice that courageously provides the key to another person's self-transformation.

Abraham-C knows that his act might frighten his son for a short time, and might even cause him some pain, but he is certain that no long-term harm will be done. Instead, the heroic act is sure to benefit the apparent victim: one way or another (the details being entirely up to God), his son would be returning with him down the mountain *as a transformed person*, possessing the identical resurrection faith formerly held only by his father, a faith based now on personal experience rather than mere hearsay. Whether Isaac himself dies or some substitute is provided at the last minute will not affect this result; for in the former case, Abraham-C reasoned, Isaac would surely be resurrected in time for them to return together to the waiting servants. In this way we see that Abraham-C, like Abraham-J, is free of the taint of immoral conduct alleged by Kant's indictment. He intends and expects no more harm to Isaac than the sacrificial lover who recognizes that his beloved's highest commitment should not be to himself but to someone else (in Isaac's case, to God). For his willingness to sacrifice the position of primacy he would

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have previously held in his son's eyes, Abraham-C deserves to be honored even in a Kantian court as a paradigm of pure, painful virtue.<sup>25</sup>

This way of interpreting Abraham's conduct enables us to picture Isaac as entering into a new level of religious self-understanding through the whole experience: just as his father was willing to sacrifice his own self-interest (the life of his son, the only empirical evidence justifying his hope of becoming the father of a great nation) and ended up suffering the loss of his fatherly priority in his son's eyes, all for the sake of his son's moral growth, so also Isaac is now able to ground a pure moral faith in his own experience that God's command can indeed be trusted. This would be a new realm of existence for Isaac, characterized by a moral courage that was willing to suffer for the sake of faith. While not germane to the success of our defense, this helps us understand why Abraham-C never pleaded with God to spare Isaac's life. Abraham-C knew the long-term continuation of his son's life was never in serious danger; instead, he foresaw that God was giving Isaac the opportunity to have his own transforming experience of moral faith, just as God had given Abraham such opportunities years before. From the perspective of this defense, Abraham's response to God's command served as a necessary prerequisite for Isaac to carry on the promise by fathering a child of his own and becoming his child's moral exemplar in turn.

*Summation.* As in the defense case for Abraham-J, so also for Abraham-C, we have found him to be a moral man, innocent of Kant's charge. Admittedly, Abraham-C is *apparently* in a more precarious position than Abraham-J, because he in fact is willing to see his son die. However, his willingness is motivated by a pure trust in the ultimate goodness of such an act, just as much as in the case of Abraham-J and with no less morality than that of the most heroic of lovers who is willing to give up a most desired relationship so that the beloved can enter into a

new dimension of life. As with all love stories, the passionate and apparently irrational act demonstrating the depth of the hero's sacrificial love may *seem* foolish, if taken out of context; but when we see it in the context of the love relationship, any normal human being who places a value on love will appreciate that such actions *in context* are universalizable, just as Kantian moral principles require. What would ordinarily look like an indefensible act of insane foolishness<sup>26</sup> becomes the basis for a rational hope (e.g., the hope of a transformed relationship) when placed into the context of a love story. In the case of Abraham-C, his daring deed provided his son with a real experience of God's provision and of his father's love that provided him with an invaluable opportunity for personal transformation. Abraham-C is therefore exonerated.

### **3. The "Good Surgeon" Defense:**

#### ***Abraham-I Knew any Harm Done Would Be for the Son's Benefit***

We turn now to the Muslim account of Abraham in hopes of formulating a defense case from that perspective. Of course, none of the three scriptures gives us more than a few hints about what Abraham's (or his son's) inner motivations or reasoning processes might have been. Nevertheless, in a manner not unlike the way the writer of Hebrews seems to have regarded Abraham as a closet Christian, the Muslim scriptures appear to treat Abraham as if he were actually Islamic in his understanding. Accordingly, the passage from the Koran quoted above treats Abraham-I and Ishmael as if they knew about, or at least had an intuitive awareness of, the special reward that is granted to all those who give their lives in obedient submission to God; for as martyrs, such Muslims are greatly favored by God.

The evidence from the Koran of the importance of martyrdom is almost as pervasive as is the New Testament evidence that Christians affirm the resurrection of Jesus. Of the many texts

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that could be quoted, the following few examples from the Koran will suffice to illustrate why Muslims tend to view the details of Abraham's attempted sacrifice in terms of God's reward for obedient submission and even greater reward for martyrdom:

And say not of those who are slain in God's cause, "They are dead": nay, they are alive, but you perceive it not. (2:154)

And thus does their Sustainer answer their prayer: "I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours [in My way], be it man or woman: each of you is an issue of the other. Hence, as for those who forsake the domain of evil, and are driven from their homelands, and suffer hurt in My cause, and fight [for it], and are slain - I shall most certainly efface their bad deeds, and shall most certainly bring them into gardens through which running waters flow, as a reward from God: for with God is the most beautiful of rewards." (3:195)

These and many other passages indicate why it was so natural for Abraham and Ishmael, considered as proto-Muslims, to assume that martyrs not only end up in paradise, but do so immediately, without needing to await the final Judgment Day.

As we saw from the prosecution's presentation of textual evidence at the outset of these proceedings, Abraham-I has a dream and tells it openly to Ishmael, the son whose mother was Hagar the servant. In the dream Abraham sees himself killing Ishmael and upon waking he appears to be uncertain whether the dream is from God. (In this respect, the attitude Abraham-I has toward his presumed experience of God is even more closely aligned with Kant's principle of theoretical ignorance than that of either Abraham-J or Abraham-C. However, it bears repeating that Kantian Reason does not *require* a person of faith to distrust any alleged experience of God; it requires only that, *if trusted*, the believer must use the experience for



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purposes of moral improvement.) Abraham-I has reason enough to dismiss his experience as a mere dream, believing on the basis of his past experience (Sura 21:52-70) that God can speak directly to him. Even though it is merely a dream, however, he realizes it *could* be God's command. The text portrays Abraham-I as caring most about what the boy, the one who may have to die, thinks about the dream: if Ishmael believes this dream was the command of God, and if he is willing to *submit* to such a command, then he could die as a martyr and attain paradise immediately, thus avoiding all the trials and tribulations that pertain to human life. When Abraham discusses the matter with his son, Ishmael trusts his father's judgment so much that he says he will do whatever Abraham decides.

For Muslims, one of the most important traits a person of strong character must possess is sincerity. Abraham-I exhibits this virtue by taking advantage of the opportunity made available to him through his dream to assist his son in having an opportunity to obtain a paradise of supreme bliss. The Suras quoted above show that, as a good Muslim, Ishmael would have realized that those who are obedient to God will be rewarded, and those who give their lives in obedience to God receive their reward *immediately*, in the next life. If sincerity is being tested, then both father and son pass the test without the sacrificial martyrdom actually needing to be taken to its final completion. Together, they sincerely choose to do what (in the context of Muslim conceptions of virtue) they believe to be in the other person's best interest. In this sense, the Islamic version has a message similar to that of the metaphor of the Sacrificial Lover; however, in this case the focus is not so much on the hero's self-sacrificial love (as in the case of Abraham-C), as on the sincere love and concern *each* had for the *other's* well-being. Inasmuch as this experience of Abraham-I is the basis for the Eid, one of the most important Islamic festivals (e.g., it is the closing celebration for both Ramadan, the month of fasting, and the Hajj,

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the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca that each Muslim should make at least once), we must therefore find a rather different metaphor to express this virtue.

An illuminating analogy that may help us appreciate what (ideally) motivates every Muslim (and so also, what is assumed to have motivated Abraham-I) to behave with such deep sincerity (e.g., celebrating the extreme obedience of Abraham and Ishmael at the sacrifice reenacted in the Eid festival) is that of a dedicated surgeon who plans to put a knife into his patient in order to perform an operation that he knows will *benefit* the patient. The surgeon's intention is not to do harm, but to provide the patient with a better life after the surgery. If the patient inadvertently dies, the surgeon is not called a murderer, for in most cases the patient has freely chosen to submit to the admittedly hazardous consequences of the knife. Similarly, Abraham-I cannot be viewed as a murderer, because this judgment utterly contradicts the spirit of sincerity and love he demonstrates for his child, and his child for him. Unlike the Jewish and Christian versions of the story, where Isaac appears to be like a lamb led silently to the slaughter, having no choice in the matter and (in most interpretations) not even knowing what his father was planning to do until the last minute, *Ishmael controls his own destiny*. Enabling him to decide for himself whether or not to submit is the only reasonable explanation for Abraham-I having brought the matter up to his son. Like a good surgeon, Abraham-I gives Ishmael (his "patient") the freedom to choose whether or not the dream should be interpreted as a call to the honorable path of martyrdom. Far from having the motive of murder, Abraham-I serves as an example to all parents to give their children, in all sincerity, the freedom to choose their own destiny – even if the parent (somewhat like Abraham-C) thereby suffers the risk of losing earthly contact with the child in order to prepare the way for the child's higher good.

*Summation.* According to this third defense, Abraham's actions, while drastic, are the

result of an almost superhuman love that Abraham possesses for his son – a feature all three accounts share in different ways. What sets Abraham-I apart from the other two would-be exemplars is his explicit respect for his son's decision-making capability. Abraham-I is seen as a good surgeon who simply expresses a willingness to “operate” on his good son for the sincerely intended good of that son and with the son's full and free assent to the procedure. As such, the jury in a Kantian courtroom would have to acquit Abraham-I on the grounds that he was serving the best interests of his precious son. Even if the killing had actually taken place, it would not have been murder in any ordinary sense of the term, for Ishmael willingly *chose* to die and the death was for his own good.<sup>27</sup> Especially when a charge as serious as attempted murder is in question, the hermeneutic principle of charity requires us to adopt the Good Surgeon explanation and reject the view of Abraham-I as a mindless, immoral slave, blindly obeying whatever he thinks God is telling him to do.

### **Case Review and Final Judgment**

Before sending the jury out to return its verdict, Judge Reason (so we imagine) reviews the proceedings thus far. In his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant has portrayed Abraham as the Great Immoral Slave, who wholly misunderstands the necessarily moral core of all true religion. Kant's Abraham hears a familiar voice (a voice he has grown accustomed to interpreting as God's) ordering him to commit an obviously immoral act, and without even reflecting on whether this truly is the voice of God, he hopes to demonstrate his great zeal by blindly obeying the voice and committing the dastardly deed. Being misguided in his spirit (adopting an illusory view of what religion requires), Kant's Abraham inadvertently becomes immoral in his heart (and probably also criminal in his conduct);

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as such, he would deserve to be punished, not praised. Praising him, Judge Reason warns, might encourage others who claim to hear God's voice commanding an immoral act to imitate Abraham's blind compliance, not only without blame but even with approbation.

Agreeing to have this case tried in a "Kantian courtroom", the defense has accepted the prosecution's presuppositions about the theoretical difficulty of identifying an experience of God and about the universal moral grounding of all genuine religion. Nevertheless, Abraham's attorneys have sought to defend him from Kant's indictment by examining the scriptural evidence surrounding this famous case as it is presented in the scriptures of three distinct religions and by interpreting these with the help of analogies that can shed light on the perspective (i.e., the internal reasoning procedure) each scripture can be understood as imputing to Abraham. In each of the three alternative readings of this evidence, Abraham turns out not to have contravened the most basic Kantian principles after all, though his willingness to take his faith to such extremes is undoubtedly beyond what Kant as prosecuting attorney would recommend as an example of pure rational religion.

The account offered by each faith's scripture shows Abraham's *mind-set* to be meritorious, when considered from the perspective assumed therein. Far from blindly agreeing to murder his son, simply because God told him to do so, he deals with his son in a conscientious, loving and sincere manner. While Abraham's *conduct* would be difficult, if not impossible, to universalize in a Kantian manner – few if any of us could imagine ourselves doing what Abraham nearly did<sup>28</sup> – the defense has shown that his *mind-set* can serve as an example to all believers within each of the three faiths as well as to non-believing parents who are dedicated to giving their children the best they can. None of the three accounts presents any evidence that the son has any moral ground for complaint regarding the way his father treated him. Instead,

according to the explanations provided by the defense, the son's behavior in each account confirms that no moral offense was committed. The father acts on behalf of his son by demonstrating through a first-hand experience how authentic trust in God can lead to moral transformation through a willingness to endure personal suffering. In each account the result of the ceremony (for so we now must consider it) is profoundly successful. The son does not die, does not even experience significant physical suffering as far as we know, but is given the opportunity to experience precisely what Abraham (like any sincere religious believer) counts as being valuable beyond all measure: the transforming power and gracious provision of God.<sup>29</sup>

This strategy has enabled the defense to avoid the solution Kierkegaard, like many other religious believers, adopted in attempting to justify Abraham's conduct: that Abraham was such a special, uniquely gifted individual that we would be mistaken to attempt to universalize his conduct by regarding it as a moral example. To take this approach would be to appeal to a different court, a court where paradox and mystery are allowed to overrule the weight of reason. Instead, by focusing on what Abraham's mind-set appears to have been, the defense has shown how each scripture does provide a way of understanding Abraham that satisfies the court's requirement that morality be universal in its application. Abraham-J shows his son how to have total confidence in the mysterious and unpredictable (even miraculous) workings of God by exemplifying the hard-earned trust that a magician's assistant must have in the reliability of the master's instructions. Abraham-C encourages his son to believe that God transforms every apparently hopeless situation by providing new life where death seems to be the only certainty, just as a lover sometimes has to make a huge personal sacrifice in order to act in the best interest of the beloved. And Abraham-I goes even further by allowing his son to participate in making the final decision as to how they will proceed, just as the good surgeon does not force a patient

onto the operating table without obtaining consent. In all three cases, the father deals with the son in precisely the way *every* father in that faith would want to have been treated by his own father, when he was young. All three perspectives on Abraham's defense portray him as a shining example to their faith of what it means to be a good parent and a person of strong moral character. If the jury sees fit to understand Abraham's mind-set in the way the defense claims these scriptural texts have portrayed it, the Kantian court must find him innocent of the charge of immoral behavior – even if Kant the prosecutor ends up leaving the courtroom in a daze, frustrated that his own principles have been unable to confirm the severity of his personal bias against this man of faith.

As an aside, Judge Reason now asks: whether or not Abraham's mind-set makes him morally innocent, could his *conduct* nevertheless be regarded as externally wrong – i.e., in Kant's terminology, *illegal*? If events had not transpired that persuaded Abraham to believe that God was stepping in and preventing Abraham from fulfilling the command, we have to assume that Abraham would actually have killed his son. Is he not therefore guilty at least of some lesser charge such as *attempted* murder or child endangerment? Neither the prosecution nor the defense has considered this possibility here because the case is being tried in a *moral* (not a legal) court. Moreover, all three scriptures portray God as intervening and Abraham as not actually doing anything to harm his child. As such, there would be no hard evidence of any illegal conduct, even if this had been this court's concern. The defense has argued that Abraham knew (or at least, confidently trusted) all along that no immoral (to say nothing of criminal) act would need to be committed and that only with this in mind was he willing to take up a role comparable to that of a Magician's Assistant, Sacrificial Lover and/or Good Surgeon. Considering the report of his compassion for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the defense has assumed that Abraham,

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consistent in his character, would not have undertaken to treat his son as he did out of the kind of blind adherence to an immoral command that the prosecution imputes to him. Leaving aside the legal issue (for in the end this would depend on the specific legal system being used to assess Abraham's action), the jury's duty is now to decide the issue of whether or not the Abraham portrayed in the scriptures of all three monotheistic faiths is morally innocent (and perhaps therefore worthy of universal admiration, as a person whose character was strong and whose subjective certainty of what God would or would not allow turned out to be right).

On the basis of the evidence and arguments presented, and in light of Judge Reason's foregoing summary, the jury in this thought experiment (so we imagine) would require little time to return a verdict of not guilty. On the more specific question of whether the defense has succeeded in portraying Abraham as a moral *exemplar*, we must admit that the jury (especially if it consists entirely of morally-attuned persons) is likely to be split. Those with a commitment to one of the three specific historical faiths are likely to have been persuaded that Abraham (or at least *their* Abraham) can serve as just the sort of example a Kantian demands for a person with historically-contingent religious beliefs. Among those without such commitments, however, some will surely have remained unconvinced, believing that one or more of the Abrahams presented had not properly prioritized his faith commitments in relation to his moral duties. One such jury member might accuse Abraham-I of treating his son as a means rather than an end. Another might accuse Abraham-C of letting superstition and the passion of the moment cloud his reasoning processes. And a third, while admitting insufficient evidence that the father had shirked his duties, might accuse Abraham-J of using an ineffective strategy in training up his son to be a morally-upstanding believer like himself, blaming Abraham-J for encouraging the rather dubious moral character Isaac later exhibited (e.g., in Genesis 26:1-11).

These reservations notwithstanding, we believe that if the jury in this case accepts the facts of the various scriptural accounts at face value, a “not guilty” verdict can and should be *unanimous*. Judge Reason should therefore declare that Abraham's conduct, considered purely on its own merits and in the context assumed by each of the three scriptural accounts, cannot be condemned as positively *immoral*. While this does not *require* anyone (e.g., Kant) to take Abraham as an exemplar of moral heroism, it means those followers of the three religious faiths who wish to interpret Abraham in this way are permitted to do so.

### **Postscript**

As a concluding, “post-judgment” note, we can look to the three great faiths to demonstrate that this moral understanding of Abraham's motives is consistent with their core understanding of commands or guidance from God. In John 5 we learn that Jesus refused to wait a period of time until the sun went down before healing a man, but did it as soon as the need became apparent. In so doing, we are told, he was “breaking the Sabbath” (5:18) and laid himself open to serious (and legal) reproach from the religious leaders of the day. David is reported to have acted similarly in 1 Samuel 21:1-8, when he ate bread that was designated as holy and set apart for the priests. Yet in both cases scripture interprets these “illegal” actions as *appropriate*. The principle here is clear and fully agrees with Kant's principle of the primacy of practical (moral) reasoning over any theoretical interpretation of objective experiences or religious rules: no command of God (whether it be an inner experience or a written statute) is to be understood as calling for immoral action, including the immorality of not doing what is good. The moral trumps all human notions of what God could say or might have said to any individual or group. All reputed commands of God are to yield to the moral.<sup>30</sup> What we have demonstrated above is



that, if the scriptures of the three great monotheistic faiths are correct in their portrayals of Abraham's motives for attempting to kill his son, then Abraham was not breaking this important Kantian principle, but was confirming it.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Kant offers his assessment of Abraham in his classic and oft-misunderstood book, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:87,186-187, and in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:62-65. In what follows, we shall examine the arguments that give rise to his negative assessment. Translations of both these texts are from *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); all references to Kant's writings cite the volume and page numbers of the *Akademie Ausgabe*, as provided in the margins of most translations.

That Kant is well-respected among Jewish and Christian philosophers (even those who disagree with his views on religion) is well-known. Less known is the similar appreciation Muslim philosophers have for Kant. The evidence of this interest was overwhelmingly shown by the Kant conference held in Tehran in November of 2004, on the theme "Two Hundred Years After Kant" (organized by the Department of Philosophy, Allameh Tabataba'ii University). In recent years numerous Iranian philosophers have been applying various aspects of Kant's philosophy to Muslim religious and philosophical traditions, most notably, to the ideas of the Iranian philosopher and mystic, Mulla Sadra (c. 1571–1636).

<sup>2</sup> In *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:155-161), immediately preceding the famous "Two things fill the mind" passage, Kant sets up a detailed thought experiment not unlike the one we shall

present here, whereby “a ten-year-old boy” becomes, as it were, a jury of one, and is asked to assess various examples of morally exemplary behavior. The goal of the exercise is to train the boy's judgment so that his recognition of moral purity will be as “habitual” as discerning “the difference ... between the right and the left hand.” The thought that Abraham might be a candidate for exemplifying moral purity never seems to have occurred to Kant, even though all three religious faiths do, in fact, praise Abraham as an exemplar. The question is: are there good (Kantian) grounds for doing so?

<sup>3</sup> Our use of various metaphors, comparisons and other persuasive techniques should not be taken to imply that past *scholars* in the three faiths have (or have not) actually employed such strategies. For an excellent overview of the scholarly interpretations of Abraham's act that have been presented in the Jewish and Christian traditions, see Ronald M. Green, *Religion and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially Chapter 4 (“Revelation and Reason in Biblical Faith: Genesis 22 and Traditional Judaism”), 77-102, and Chapter 5 (“Revelation and Reason in Biblical Faith: Genesis 22 and Christianity”), 103-129. For a specifically Jewish perspective, see Emil Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 68f (“Abraham and the Kantians”). Having asked for advice from and discussed this matter with numerous Muslim scholars, we know of no equivalent summary of the history of Islamic interpretations of Abraham in English.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from the Koran are from Muhammad Asad's translation, *The Message of the Quran* (online at <http://www.geocities.com/masad02>). Of the various Muslim scholars we have consulted on matters of Islamic interpretation, the authors have found most helpful the kind

assistance of Tariq Mahmood Hashmi (Lecturer in Islamic Studies in the Mus'ab School System, Lahore, Pakistan) and Abdulaziz A. Sachedina (Professor of Islamic Studies at University of Virginia).

<sup>5</sup> We must therefore exclude at the outset what is probably the most common argument used to “justify” Abraham’s act: that he was somehow “different”, “unique”, etc., and can therefore be excused from following the principles that apply to the rest of us. That even scholars sometimes appeal to such an excuse (see the reference in note 28, below) only intensifies the need for a more rational approach, *if* religious persons wish to portray Abraham as a *moral* hero. For according to Kant (and common sense), a person can be held up as a moral example only if he or she shares the same nature and is subject to the same laws and limitations that apply to other people. See *Religion*, 6:62-66.

<sup>6</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:63.

<sup>7</sup> The story of Samuel could be compared with two famous cases in Christian and Muslim sacred histories. Saul, the Christian hater, has an unexpected vision of a Jesus-in-the-Sky and is struck not dead but blind; he is then made to see again, as had been foretold (see Acts 9:1-18). He requires the help of a Christian mentor to interpret this experience to be of divine origin and become a convert, renamed Paul. Similarly, Mohammed encounters Gabriel-in-the-Cave and is uncertain about the character of his vision. Several stories, all consistent with each other, explain how he comes to believe his experience is of divine origin (Ibn Ishaq, *Sîrat Rasûl Allah*; tr. Alfred Guillaume as *The Life of Mohammed* [Karachi: OUP, 1955], pp.153-155). In one, he thinks himself possessed and threatens to kill himself, but is stopped by the visionary being. In another, he is alone with his wife, his wife begins to undress, and the visionary being withdraws,

indicating the modesty expected of a divine being. In a third account, Mohammed's wife believes he is too good and fair and just to be tricked by a demon, so she consults with an older Christian acquaintance and both agree Mohammed must have encountered a heavenly being. Like Samuel, Paul and Mohammed both appear to have become aware of the divine origin of their experiences only gradually, through appropriate moral reasoning and/or instruction. That is, they had to go beyond the theoretical standpoint of merely assessing the observation and appeal to a deeper set of practical criteria, just as Kant argues must always be done in such cases.

<sup>8</sup> Kant the prosecuting attorney might note in his speech to the jury that this rule exhibits the same elementary reasoning implicitly engaged in by children when they so very early come to judge morally with their cries of "that's unfair!" While at first this is naturally prompted by one's realization of a personal deprivation – i.e., *I* have been treated unjustly (e.g., have received too small a portion of a shared treat) – this then expands to represent the reasoning just described: *no* person may be treated inequitably; I am a person; and for that reason it is wrong to give me a smaller portion than the others.

<sup>9</sup> This conception of the innate recognition of the moral law conforms quite well to the suggestion in Genesis 3:22a, that we know good and evil just like God does – i.e., that in moral matters we who have become aware of our power of free choice are now God's equal.

<sup>10</sup> Kant's rather fascinating conception of this "factum" of reason can be explained as follows. No sane and reasoning person would accept the assertion of John Locke's famous "glass man" (see *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Chapter XI, paragraph 13, entitled "Difference between idiots and madmen") as a justification for including among the sciences a study of men who are made out of glass. This is simply an idea that possessed a madman,

although he was entirely rational in all of his actions as a result of his possession. The idea of freedom should be just as nonsensical to people of science, for it detracts from the necessity that is requisite for understanding the most elementary experience – e.g., that in spite of how things appear to our senses, things do not actually get smaller as they move away from us and fingers do not split as they approach the nose. (For a more detailed account of Kant's argument on this point, see Philip Rudisill, "Circles in the Air," *Kant-Studien* 87:2 [1996], pp.132-148.) Nevertheless, sane intelligent persons of science have actually wanted to include in the university the study of freedom (i.e., ethics), which they would never have been able to do except for the awesome respect they involuntarily have for the moral law.

<sup>11</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:63n.

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard presents this argument in a book published in 1843 under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, translated by Walter Lowrie as *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). For a concise summary of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story, in terms of a "teleological suspension of the ethical", see Green (1988), 84-86, 89-94, 98-99, 121-127. Green notes that for some Jewish interpreters it is God more than Abraham who suspends the ethical order for the sake of his higher goal, a goal that is itself ultimately moral (101). However, "Within the Jewish sources, there is not a hint of Kierkegaard's interpretation" (102). Even after a thorough sketch of the history of Christian interpretations, Green can conclude (122) that "Kierkegaard's interpretation of Genesis 22 is enormously eccentric." Green says "Kant did not openly condemn Abraham" but implied his attitude was that of "dangerous religious fanatics" (123), so Kierkegaard was trying to defend Abraham against Kant (while also reacting to the perversion of Christianity as a state religion in Denmark). In an interesting twist, Green

interprets Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* as addressing not "normative moral questions" but "the very different 'transnormative' or 'transmoral' religious question of whether we can count on God's grace and forgiveness to help us fulfill our moral destiny." This renders Kierkegaard's approach far more traditional than it is often made out to be. Green further argues (124-128) that the hidden target of Kierkegaard's cryptic dedication of the book might have been his own overbearing (but deceased) father, with the message being an entirely moral one: God's teleological suspension of the ethical can be the path of grace and forgiveness that can pave the way for our own ability to be the individuals we are meant to be – a message Green believes is entirely consistent with morality in its intent. In a nutshell, our defense will attempt a similar demonstration on behalf of *Kant*, but without appealing to Kierkegaard's paradoxical approach.

<sup>13</sup> See, most notably, the book-length studies by Ronald M. Green (*Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992]) and Ulrich Knappe (*Theory and Practice in Kant and Kierkegaard* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004]). For a collection of papers on different aspects of the Kant-Kierkegaard relationship, see D.Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds.), *Kant and Kierkegaard on Religion* (London: Macmillan, 2000). Up to now, most philosophical studies of Kant's criticism of Abraham have focused on this contrast between rational and irrational principles of assessment. Whereas most interpreters who appeal to Kierkegaard simply accept Kant's claim that Abraham's actions cannot be justified on moral grounds (see e.g., Murray Rae, "The Risk of Obedience: A Consideration of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1.3 [November 1999], 308ff), our approach in this essay is to use Kant's own rational principles to defend Abraham's innocence.

<sup>14</sup> Another alternative defense would be to argue that, because Abraham believed he was *certain* that God was commanding this act of murder, the *principle of forced choice* permitted him to kill his son, lest he himself be condemned for his disobedience. The situation would then be like two shipwrecked persons who may, without blame, seek to cause each other's death because neither one knows how to swim and there is only one life jacket available. But all this is mere *casuistry* if we accept Kant's principle that it is *impossible* for any human – including Abraham – to have such certitude. As Kant puts it, we human beings are simply incapable of having an intuition of the divine that can be processed through the categories as genuine empirical knowledge. That Kant does leave room for experiences of the divine, provided we do not claim they amount to empirical knowledge, is argued at length throughout Stephen Palmquist's book, *Kant's Critical Religion: Volume Two of Kant's System of Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), especially Part Four.

<sup>15</sup> Some Kant scholars might expect the prosecuting attorney to object at this point on the grounds that the defense is appealing to an article of historical faith that is disallowed by the principles of the Kantian court. But such an objection would be overruled by an impartial judge personifying Kantian Reason. For the true source or accuracy of the promise in question is irrelevant to the point being made. The Genesis account of Abraham's life clearly and repeatedly states that he *believed* God had made this promise, and this fact could be used in the Kantian court to condemn the person who believes it only if the prosecutor could show that it impeded Abraham's moral development in some way (in some way *other* than in the case being tried, for the moral status of that deed is precisely what is here in question). If the defense can show that some positive moral good comes out of such a belief, then the Kantian court might even praise

such a belief! For in Kantian rational religion, the believer's choice to believe a dogma or practice a ritual is rejected as harmful "pseudo-service" of God *only if* it blocks the person's moral development. Even non-religious members of the jury (if there be any) would therefore have to be advised by Judge Reason to take this belief into consideration as a fact about Abraham *without* passing moral judgment on him simply for holding a non-moral belief. If the prosecutor further challenges this point, the defense could point to any number of recent books on Kant that correct the old view that Kant is seeking to reduce religion to morality. See, for example, Palmquist (2000), ch.6.

Incidentally, Ronald M. Green, *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 109, provides a helpful tabular summary showing the basic requirements of Kant's principles of pure religious reason. Green's subsequent work, *Religion and Moral Reason*, carries his project a step further by arguing that reason itself has a deep structure grounded in moral concerns and by offering explicit guidelines on how comparative religious studies can benefit by a focus on this grounding. Green takes Abraham as the archetypal example (for both the Jewish and Christian faiths) of "divine command morality" (77). That Abraham has, in fact, been taken this way by the vast majority of those who regard him as a moral/religious example is incontestable. Green does an excellent job of considering the various interpretations that have been offered in both of these traditions. He acknowledges a paradox in his central proposal (77-78), "that an insistence on the primacy of the divine command is not only permitted by the moral reasoning process underlying religious belief, but is also a natural outcome of that process." Along lines similar to those suggested by Kant himself (though Green does not call attention at this point to this influence), Green points out



(79-80) that interpreting moral norms as God's commands lends them power and authority that actively encourage many people to follow them more completely. He depicts religious systems as imperfect, potentially involving immoral codes and/or beliefs, and suggests we view them "as evolving rational systems that strain over time to move toward greater and greater sensitivity to reason's agenda." He depicts the Genesis 22 story as "the hardest case of all for any view stressing the underlying rational and moral basis of religion" (83). However, Green explicitly focuses "on the postbiblical traditions of commentary and exegesis rather than on the original 'meaning' of the biblical text itself." This sets Green's analysis apart from ours, where the commentaries and opinions (despite being of interest to and inspiring for the defense attorneys as we prepare our case) are strictly inadmissible as evidence. Green thinks focusing on the scriptural texts alone is "a mistake" (83), since many are inconsistent with moral reason and the subsequent development of interpretations is what makes the faith tradition itself moral or not. While we agree completely with the latter assertion, we do not think this renders useless the ongoing attempts of interpreters to take a fresh look at the original evidence and attempt to defend it anew, as it were, "from scratch", as we are doing here.

<sup>16</sup> Green (1988, 91-92) points out that in the Hebrew mindset, children were the property of their parents, so the "moral distance" we (like Kierkegaard) assume between Abraham and Isaac wasn't necessarily assumed. Jewish interpreters typically think of Isaac as having been 37 years old at the time of the incident, and some therefore assume he fully participated in the act (92-93), much like the Islamic account portrays more explicitly. They infer this from the use of "together" in the text and the assumption that Abraham could not have forced a full-grown adult into such a situation. Green notes (248n41) that "The rabbis derived this number [37] by reckoning Sarah's

age at the time of Isaac's birth and her age at her death, which immediately followed on the Akedah." If Isaac was already an adult, then his participation can be seen as an expression of "self-sacrificial and willing martyrdom" (93). But the focus, typically, is on the *hope* of those who also face possible martyrdom, that they (like Isaac) might be *spared* (98-99). It is worth noting that if Isaac was old enough to propagate a child at the time of this incident, but had not yet done so, then the whole event might have been conceived by Abraham as a ritual or rite of passage, through which God was making a point similar to that made by the long delay in Sarah's pregnancy. Or, less flatteringly, Abraham might have been testing God: "if God won't let my son be a father, then I shall kill him, thus forcing God to give me a son who will do so!" But, of course, such possibilities are of no help to the case for Abraham's defense.

<sup>17</sup> Abraham's faith conforms to most (though perhaps not all) of the seven requirements for moral religion specified in Green (1978), p.109. Perhaps the chief objection Green's table raises against Abraham's reasoning method is requirement 1a, that "moral obedience is always in fact rendered to that [moral] law above all else, and to that law in the same form as given to us by our impartial reason." Our argument here is that Abraham need not be depicted (and is not, in fact, depicted in the scriptures of the three religious faiths) as having *violated* the moral law, even though it may be true that, with his focal point on faith in God's command, he may have appeared at times not to have regarded that law as the *highest* principle of moral motivation. The crucial importance of the Genesis 18 passage is that it illustrates how Abraham *does* stand up to God when he believes God's decree to be unjust or in violation of the moral law! This shows that Abraham did have (at least some of the time) a proper understanding of the priority of the moral law above all else.

<sup>18</sup> Kant as prosecutor might again object at this point by calling to the court's attention Abraham's history of dishonesty. However, this objection should also be overruled. Earlier, in a test, Abraham had faltered in his faith and told not so much an outright lie, as a "half-truth" to save his life (see note 21). Presumably by this late date, Abraham had learned his lesson and was not here undergoing another test for truthfulness. In any case, the text gives no hint that Abraham was again perverting the truth in this later incident; on the contrary, what he said to his servant *did* turn out to be true and the text portrays Abraham as stating and fully believing the truth of his claim that they would both return. Similarly, Kant might refer to the apparently callous act where Abraham sends Ishmael and his mother out to fend for themselves in the wilderness. But by this point Abraham has witnessed Isaac's "miracle birth", so he knows through experience that God's (assumed) voice can be trusted. He therefore believes Ishmael is not in danger, but rather will prosper.

<sup>19</sup> Another illustration would be the friends of the beloved Norse god, Balder, who sought to kill him and finally did, but without intending him the least harm. It seems that Balder was so lovely that all existing things promised his mother never to hurt him, although she didn't bother asking the lowly and harmless mistletoe. Balder's friends would seriously try to spear him, but only to observe how the spears would be deflected. However, one mischievous god made a spear out of mistletoe and to everyone's surprise, this killed Balder. Far from being charged with murder, the thrower was overcome with grief, as were all his friends. See Eva Gold (ed.), *Timeless Truths: Exploring Creation Myths and Dreamtime Stories* (Rozelle, Australia: St. Claire Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> If this interpretation of Abraham's mind-set is correct, then Abraham might have been convinced that even *God* would not be capable of ending Isaac's life before he had a child. The

paradox Abraham would have faced is not unlike the one often raised in idle speculations concerning God's omnipotence – e.g., whether God is capable of making a rock that is too heavy for even God to pick up. According to Abraham's way of thinking, God had pronounced a fact (i.e., that Abraham will become the father of a great nation), confirmed it through a miracle (i.e., the birth of Isaac by a mother who was long past child-bearing age), then proceeded to command Abraham to do something that would render that future situation impossible. Obviously, under such circumstances God had no choice but to interrupt Abraham's attempt to obey the command. God's only other option would be to break a promise, and this is something Abraham knew (and any Kantian jury would be compelled to agree) could not happen.

For a concise summary of the traditional readings of Genesis 22 in Jewish midrashim, see Green (1988), 87-101. God gives Abraham this trial to allow Abraham "to prove to God the purity of [his] devotion" (87). Knowing that the story would be told to the whole world, God also wished in this way to demonstrate the rationality of his choice of Abraham as the father of the chosen people, for God knew Abraham would pass the test before even giving the command, but *we* would not have known about Abraham's faith, had he not gone through the motions (see also 108-109). This explanation is consistent with the Magician's Assistant account, provided here.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham may have been humbled by faltering in his faith earlier when in the hands of the king of Gerar (Genesis 20:1-18). The situation then was similar to that of Abraham when told by God to sacrifice his son. At the time of his encounter with the king, Abraham had been promised that he and Sarah would have a child and if Abraham should die at the hand of the king, the promise would not have been kept. In true faith Abraham should have informed the king that it was impossible for the king to take Abraham's life or to keep him from fathering a child through

Sarah. Instead Abraham was cowed and in order to save his skin told the king a “half-truth”: that Sarah was his sister – she was his half-sister, but also his wife! This could account for Abraham's willingness to go through the motions of slaying his son without trying to find a way out. From his perspective, he had failed the first test, so he was determined not to fail again. By this time, Abraham had seen the promise of God validated through Isaac's miraculous birth, so his confidence was based as much on sight as on faith.

<sup>22</sup> Such overlapping exists between all three of our defenses. This would be even more pronounced if we were to include evidence not only from the scriptures themselves but also from other sources within the faiths. Judaism's Rabbinic literature, for example, prefigures the Christian hope of resurrection as a way of interpreting the Genesis narrative. As Green (1988), 96-97, points out, some rabbis speculate that the knife actually *killed* Isaac when it touched his neck, but God resurrected him. On the other hand (104), “in Christian thinking, the Akedah became the prototype of the Christ event.” Given that Christ effects God's forgiveness, and forgiveness is interpreted as a suspension (or at least diversion) of justice, Christians tend to interpret both it and the Akedah in an extreme way that requires no moral accountability on Abraham's part (see 108). Insofar as the Christian interpretation sees Isaac as prefiguring Christ, the obedient son who willingly allows his father to sacrifice him, this approach (as we shall see) also overlaps with the Muslim interpretation, in much the same way that Jewish and Muslim interpretations overlap by focusing on martyrdom (see note 16, above).

<sup>23</sup> Attributing this position to Abraham-C does not prevent a Jewish believer from adopting a similar interpretation, any more than Christians would be prevented from defending Abraham through the Magician's Assistant metaphor implied by the Genesis text (see note 22, above). The

point in using suffixes to distinguish between the three portrayals of Abraham is merely to acknowledge that the interpretation offered in each of these three subsections is *grounded* in the primary scripture of the relevant faith.

<sup>24</sup> This point was acknowledged by Christian interpreters as early as Origen (see Green, 1988, 107-108), who reasoned that in order to save Abraham from being an outright liar, we must assume Abraham thought *both* that he would fulfill God's command *and* that they would both return; and the only way to resolve this patent contradiction would be for Abraham to have believed his son would be resurrected. In tracing the subsequent history of Christian theological interpretations from Augustine (108-109) and Aquinas (109-114) through the early divine command ethicists (114-118) and Reformation theologians (118-121) to Kierkegaard (121ff), Green portrays Aquinas as the key figure who first clearly recognized and tried to harmonize the possible conflict between God's command and our human understanding of the moral law.

<sup>25</sup> The examples Kant gives of great moral exemplars (see note 2) are all people who are willing to endure great suffering rather than do something out of self-interest. That Abraham-C could not have been acting out of self-interest was a feature of the story that was wholly overlooked by Kant. He apparently neglected the fact that, as Green (1988) concurs, the passage quoted above from Hebrews implies that faithful obedience to God's command "cannot ultimately contradict" morality (105-106). James 2:21-23 could be cited as further evidence of this position from Christian scripture, for Abraham's act is there portrayed as an example of how faith *must* make itself real in action in order to be considered moral (i.e., in order to be "reckoned as righteousness"). The notion that a believer's conduct could be *immoral* while nevertheless being an authentic expression of religious faith is unthinkable to the author of James.

<sup>26</sup> Insanity is the delinking of our rational capacity from our nature as animal beings. To be insane is to render oneself not responsible, because personality is higher than humanity as it functions in human nature. So, the *worst* judgment the Kantian court can pass on Abraham is to send him to the mental hospital. However, as his attorneys, we are here attempting to show that such a judgment misses the deeply emotional (animal), other-centered core of Abraham's reasoning processes, and that once these are recognized and taken into account, his action turns out to be eminently moral and thus praiseworthy.

<sup>27</sup> According to Sura 2.128, Abraham-I prays that Ishmael might be the father of a nation. If God had informed Abraham that Ishmael would be a father, and if Ishmael were without children at the time of the sacrifice, and if the son of sacrifice were indeed Ishmael (which is the general consensus of Islamic scholars), then the situation with Abraham-I at the sacrifice would have to be the same as that of either Abraham-J (where the son would not die) or Abraham-C (where the son might die but would be immediately resurrected). In any case we can be certain that Abraham-I believed either that Ishmael would continue to live an earthly life after the sacrifice (and be strengthened in his faith by that experience) or that Ishmael would enter immediately into a paradise. Thus we can conclude that Abraham-I acts for the benefit of Ishmael.

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting account of one Christian father's imaginary experiment in this regard, see Miroslav Volf, "But I am not Abraham – Reflections on Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac", *The Christian Century*, February 2, 2000 (online version available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_4\\_117/ai\\_59473700](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_4_117/ai_59473700)).

<sup>29</sup> Although Kant is often read as a philosopher who denies the need (if not the very possibility) of divine grace, this is not the generally accepted interpretation of his position by most scholars

working on Kant's *Religion* today. Once the old tendency to see Kant as a moral reductionist is corrected, we are free to see more clearly what should have been obvious all along: that for Kant *some* type of divine assistance (i.e., grace) is *necessary* to preserve the very integrity of moral reason itself. What Kant denies is not the need for or possibility of grace, but the ability of theoretical reason to discern the precise means God might use to transmit this grace to us. Of the numerous recent essays and books making this point, Stephen Palmquist's article, "The Ethics of Grace: Kant's Perspectival Solution to the Moral Problems with Divine Assistance" (forthcoming) delves most deeply into its various facets and applications.

<sup>30</sup> That religious believers in all three faiths ignore this principle is undeniably true. Our references in the text show that at least Christianity, and probably also Judaism, has clear scriptural evidence to support the Kantian principle of the priority of morality over statutory law. We have searched for a parallel passage from the Koran, but without success. Although Kant believed only Christianity cherishes this core principle (*Religion* 6:52 and *Conflict* 7:9), we welcome adherents of the other two faiths to prove he was wrong by showing how Judaism and Islam are not as deeply mired in the priority of statutory obedience as Kant believed them to be. Kant mentioned Islam only in passing (*Religion* 6:184n, 193-194 and *Conflict* 7:50n) and with an even less nuanced understanding than his account of Judaism. He appears to have viewed Islam as an "extortionist" religion because of its tendency to honor abject submission to God's command above all else – even above ordinary conceptions of morality. The topic of this essay, however, is not Kant's own views on the three great monotheistic faiths, but his view of *Abraham*. For this reason, we have made no attempt here to summarize or respond to Kant's general views on Islam, Christianity or Judaism.