Does our emphasis on “sacrifice” this Veterans Day really help or hurt?

By Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug

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As congregations prepare to observe Veterans Day this November 11, we can exercise leadership and faithfulness by making this an opportunity to think more deeply about a word that we often use uncritically, “sacrifice.” Popularly understood, many Christians understand Jesus’ sacred sacrifice as the necessary act that paves the way for the salvation of the world. However, in a U.S. climate that is dominated by a permanent war economy, not to mention two U.S.-led wars that have lasted over ten years, the language of “sacrifice” tied to war in our culture plays at best a highly ambiguous role.

I have argued that the language and practices of “sacrifice” are like a sacred canopy over the actual horror and waste of war. We have been told over and over that “war is a necessary sacrifice”. When our service members die in war, we say that they have “made the ultimate sacrifice” (this is precisely the same language many Christians use to describe what Jesus did on the cross). Our political leaders of both parties readily refer to “the necessity of the sacrifice of war” and tell us that such sacrifices are worthy of our devotion and honor. This language has a way of attaching almost a religious sensibility to the reality of war, in essence making it somehow sacred. Protected by this sacred canopy, war becomes something that is more difficult for us to protest, or ask serious questions about, or resist. To do this is akin to challenging something that is sacred; some people feel it is almost like committing heresy.

In the U.S., as well as other modern nation states, the intertwining of sacrifice, Christianity, war and the nation have a very long history. Thomas Jefferson’s famous saying, “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants” is well known, but we should think about it more deeply. Does this assumption that “freedom isn’t free” (think of the bumpersticker we’ve all seen!) in fact increase our presumption toward war, and away from other ways of dealing with conflict, suffering and threat? In contrast, the Declaration of Independence describes freedom quite differently; “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are not commodities that have to be purchased through blood (this is the sacrificial impulse), but are “inalienable rights” that are bestowed upon all people by a Creator.

People in the United States are deeply impacted by the logic of “the necessity of war-as sacrifice”. At the same time, this language is so common and comes to mind so readily, we tend not to think about it consciously. This makes us vulnerable to its abuse. I argue that this same logic justifies and normalizes U.S. armed force and militarism, and diverts clear ethical thinking and decision making.
If we did not consider the losses of war as “a necessary sacrifice”, what other ways of speaking would come to mind for us? What difference would it make? Moreover, when we rush to thank service members “for the sacrifice of their service,” does such language stop us and them from a more profound conversation about the real hurts, ambiguities of their battlefield experiences, and challenges to life back at home? War is not sacred. According to the ELCA social statement on war and peace, war represents “a failure of politics.” For further reading, see *U.S. War-culture, Sacrifice and Salvation*, by Kelly Denton-Borhaug (London: Equinox, 2011); and this link “Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan: Religion and Politics in U.S. War-culture” in the summer 2012 issue of *Dialog*.


**Consider thinking about and raising conversation about the questions below:**

What do we mean when we call war “a necessary sacrifice”?

Where does “sacrifice” fit in with the plethora of models, theories and narratives about salvation in Christian tradition?

How central is war to our national identity as U.S. citizens? How would we describe our citizenship if we excluded war? What else would we say?

What would we say about the losses of war if we did not describe them as “necessary sacrifices”? Would this make a difference in terms of the way we think about these losses?