Dear Colleagues,

As someone who has worked to address the suffering of veterans and their families since 2005, I have a message for those of you in communities of faith: **Suicide is a great concern for veterans and their families.** In this article, I will discuss why I think we need to stop linking the concept of sacrifice with military veterans, in part, because doing so contributes to a climate of suicide.

Don’t misunderstand me. The suffering for too many veterans and their families is real and profound. I think our society is too casual about the suffering of veterans and their families, and it has been my religious call to address that need for awareness and change.

In the secular world, we have many casual uses of sacrifice: a sacrifice fly in baseball, the sacrifice of dessert to the weight program, a sacrifice of the golf game to be with the kids, the sacrifice of the hairdo to walk in the rain, the sacrifice of the good shoes to cross the mud, etc.

For religious leaders to call war suffering *sacrificial*, however, implicitly links it to a larger set of symbols and meaning, which we may not intend, and which can actually do harm. Primarily, it suggests that the suffering was about God, somehow God-pleasing; it cloaks war making with religious symbolism which suggests that the actions were sacred, and that it would be sacrilegious to examine. The Rev. Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug has written extensively about this, especially how using religious imagery for war making interferes with society making good decisions about war.

Veterans themselves react differently to the symbolism. Some feel less worthy, even guilty, when comparing themselves to their comrades who have died. For some, their military experiences have been so disturbing or vile that associating God with that suffering causes them to reject God. These are very serious consequences with potentially life-threatening reactions. Some veterans say, “I was supposed to die.”

A religious sacrifice is made for God. In the European wars of the last century, of course, both sides claimed the Christian God. A colleague of mine has written about his experience of being raised in the Hitler Youth, and how hard it was later to realize the falsehood of his worldview. Nearly every military member wants their efforts to be part of a larger purpose for good. However, we can’t universalize, as some have become quite cynical. Many struggle with the moral examination of the actual nature of their activities, and no longer believe as they had prior to their military experiences.

I am among the Christians who categorically reject the deep primal belief that God demands blood sacrifice, or that the land requires blood sacrifice. Unfortunately, these ancient ideas are still prevalent, sometimes repeated in national anthems. Other pagan concepts, like the Spartan demand to come back *with* your shield, or *on* your shield, require victory or death, heaping shame on the survivors. This concept caused many Japanese soldiers to kill themselves not that long ago.

Statistics show that entering the military substantially increases a person’s risk for death by suicide. My own scholarship leads me to believe that the rate of increase is even higher than the current statistics show. Of course, there is no single cause of the high and growing rate of veteran deaths by suicide, but if changing our language could help even just a bit to alleviate that rate, wouldn’t it be worth it?
I’m asking that we be more thoughtful about how we talk about being in the military. Equating sacrifice, and even “the ultimate sacrifice,” with being in the military is very common. I know this because I’ve done it myself! Can we pause to unpack that a bit to see what those words might be saying to our sons and daughters who enter the U.S. military? Is their life forever forfeited by joining the military? Are they supposed to, as in the Roman-Judeo framework, become that ritualized death that occurs to please a god? The sacrifices of the Old Testament usually involve taking a knife to kill an unwilling animal on an altar. The best known instance of near human sacrifice, however, what Abraham was about to do to Isaac, was stopped by God. Of course, Christians believe that Jesus put an end to all that.

Is it clear—even to someone who may be in an acute moment of mental instability—that we don’t want them to lay down their lives? We need to understand that the decision to act on suicidal thoughts can be quite impulsive and hard to predict.

While we all are on the walk that Jesus walked and can identify with his suffering and compassion as fellow humans, the decision to become a soldier is not what the bumper sticker claims: Only two individuals have laid down their lives for you, Jesus Christ and the American soldier.

The vast majority of soldiers, especially now that there is no conscription, choose to enter the military in order do something of value and to have a better life, not to die. Just imagine the recruiting poster: Join the military to become a sacrifice! That some are willing to go into harm’s way is something else again. The recruiters promise that soldiers will be well trained and well armed to survive.

The military does not want soldiers to lay down their lives. General Patton famously said: No #*! ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making some other poor dumb #*! die for his country.

Nor do I accept that a precious life can be treated as casually as the “blank check.” It is common at veteran events to hear this definition: “A veteran is someone who at some time in their life wrote a blank check to the government payable up to and including one’s own life.” While it is noble to want to serve and protect your country, doesn’t “writing your life off” sound suicidal? Shouldn’t someone ask if this is a good idea? And is your life really just your own to rip off like a check without concern to those who love and depend on you? I argue that we are building a climate, almost an expectation, towards suicide with this imagery. Cloaking soldiers in the language of sacrifice can give the unintended message that their lives are dispensable, like a goat or a pigeon, of little consequence.

Sadly, many of our veterans are suffering from moral injury. “Moral injury” is the relatively new term for harm experienced since ancient times by armed forces. VA psychologists describe moral injury as that lasting harm caused by doing something, failing to do something, or even just witnessing activities that violate deeply held principles and beliefs. At their young age, many of our recruits find they have violated principles that they didn’t even know they had. It may even take them a lifetime to realize this.

Some describe the experience as losing their soul. Many find it hard to describe what they feel they have lost, but here are some of their terms: innocence, a sense of safety, a worldview of justice, self-respect, hope for humanity, being a beloved child of God. They experience this loss as something very precious, and possibly irrecoverable.
These losses are real and profound, but they were not intentional like a religious sacrifice. Some veterans feel betrayed that these losses were inflicted upon them. Nearly everyone familiar with moral injury sees it as a major risk factor for a diminished life, which sometimes leads to death by suicide.

In order to help veterans with their moral injury, we must take off the cloak of sacredness that obscures our efforts to properly address it. In order to prevent moral injury, we must be clear as citizenry that we are not requiring our sons and daughters to violate their consciences out of their duty or love to us.

We have got to do better in our expectations for our troops. I don't want anyone to confuse violating their conscience with being a good soldier. This is not what God—or our country—requires.

There are many issues that contribute to how the risk of suicide is greatly increased upon joining the military. In other writings, I have educated about these many risk factors for over a decade. The sad reality, today, is that more military die from suicide than from enemy action. The least we can do is to stop “sacrificing” them in our speech.

NOTES: Mea Culpa! I’ve used this harmful symbolism myself, even in the title of my 2006 article Soldiers Ongoing Sacrifice. Rev. Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug’s work, along with countless veteran’s stories, has really helped me see better where my language was leading.

Regarding suicide statistics, different official measures show that depending on age and gender, entering the military increases the rate of suicide between 30–1100% (compared to civilians.)

I use the term soldier here inclusive of all the military branches.