

How to Think about Suicide Bombers

I am trying to see how well I can move along understanding of the phenomenon commonly, but problematically, called suicide bombing. As a student of religion, I am particularly interested in seeing how far some of the perspectives developed in the modern study of religion might assist this process of making sense of a troubling phenomenon of our own time. Here, I propose that we need to pay greater attention to the ‘sacrificial’ designations of these “human bombings” as made by Muslims, and as are rooted in Islamic discourse. I do this not in the interests of celebrating the acts of “human bombers,” or for laying the total responsibility of free agency both upon the bombers, or upon Islam. Above all, and well above the urge to moralize about this phenomenon, I seek to understand it better.

In light of recent attempts by the likes of Talal Asad, for example, to vacate agency and religion from the world of suicide bombers, I seek to reclaim a proper sense of agency, which, as I shall argue consists in the suicide bombers thinking of themselves as religious sacrifices. While there is merit in Asad’s claims that in many places in the Middle East, we should see suicide bombers as lacking agency – as simply reacting to facts on the ground – as having been “driven by an insupportable environment.” (Asad 2007, 45) to initiate “a spontaneous action when legal political means are blocked,” I think the suicide bombers think of themselves in more assertive positive terms as full agents. (Asad 2007, 47) Thus, despite Asad’s attempts to paint the suicide bomber in passive terms – as souls “struck by catastrophe” (Asad 2007, 49) – I do not think the evidence of the words of suicide bombers will sustain such a picture of pathetic victimhood. Curiously, Asad himself has to admit that even in seeing themselves passively – as “struck by catastrophe” – the suicide bombers see that a death so incurred “constitutes a triumph” (Asad 2007, 49) as well as the achievement of a “secular immortality.” (Asad 2007, 47, 49) My rejoinder to Asad is that if this is as he says, then does this not mean that we must inquire as to what the image of such a “triumph” is? What positive content funds such a victory? Where exactly, for example, is the “secular” territory in which ‘triumph’ is enjoyed? Where, as well, do those having achieved their alleged “immortality” dwell? Against these inconsistencies in Asad’s view, I am pressed to pick up the lead provided by the suicide bombers themselves in talking of ‘triumph’ and ‘immortality.’ What is the nature of vision informing the agency of the suicide bomber – now unexpectedly reappearing in religious guise in talk of immortality and triumph in the face of death?

- *Jihad , Sacrifice and the Many Voices of the “Human Bombers”*

If identifying a vision is a concern, a prime candidate for understanding the acts of suicide bombers must – unremarkably – be ‘jihad.’ Jihad certainly overshadows and indeed invalidates the view that “human bombers” should be called “suicides.” Self-inflicted death, on its own, even with conscious religious intent, can never guarantee one’s place in Paradise. Whatever else the “human bombings” in Israel/Palestine may be, they are about killing Jews, Israelis, Palestinian collaborators, and eliminating Israel itself. The declarations of Hamas and other organizations involved in them have made this abundantly clear. Hamas, for example, focuses on the suffering caused to the enemy by the “human bombers” rather than “extolling their own suffering and sacrifice.”

Nonetheless, jihad, taken alone, runs up against the facts of the frequent reference to sacrifice in with it. This modern-day religio-political logic, mixing jihad and sacrifice, takes in martyrdom as well, even as these three notions can – and ought to – be teased apart for the sake of clarity. Reporting on the views of potential women human bombers after 9-11, Sandra Jordan reports in London’s *New Statesman* how they run notions like jihad together with sacrificial discourse.

"We know what Palestine needs from us," said Reham. "Jihad. If Usama had chosen differently, he would have been living for himself, but failing Palestine. Everyone should choose sacrifice until we restore our rights. Israelis occupying our land and we have to get rid of it. Jihad is the only way." {Jordan, 2002 #3517}

Similarly, if we take Osama bin Laden at his word, the 9/11 hijackers were similarly ‘sacrifices’, as well as ‘martyrs.’ Said bin Laden,

The 19 brothers who sacrificed their lives in the sake of God were rewarded by this victory that we rejoice today.” In another place, bin Laden celebrated “Hani Hanjour from Al-Ta’if, the destroyer of the centre of the US defence, the Pentagon. Clear purity and a splendid sacrifice. We beseech God to accept him as a martyr.

So pervasive is the language of sacrifice that Al Qa’eda defector, “Max” even spoke of devotion to Osama bin Laden in sacrificial terms. Referring to the companions of bin Laden, “Max” could say the following:

"MAX" Yeah, you know, each of them wanted to sacrifice for Usama bin Laden. They want to spend their money and their – everything – to sacrifice themselves for bin Laden. There was, you know, anyone that bin Laden asked them to do – to kill themselves, to sacrifice themselves for bin Laden. He won't say no. There are a thousand people; they want to sacrifice themselves for bin Laden. {Max, #3519}

I conclude from these statements, that despite such uses of jihad and sacrifice in the same contexts, these are really two ways of thinking about human bombings, and will thus need to be untangled. What is clear from these and many other assertions of the centrality of sacrifice in the radical Muslim or Islamist point of view about suicide bombings is that in the minds of the Hamas, Al Qaeda and others such operations are better named ‘sacrifice bombings’, ‘martyrdom operations’ or something similar. In this light, the term, ‘suicide bombing,’ turns out to be an unhelpful pejorative. I am also arguing that ‘sacrifice’ is set on a course of its own, although it is woven into the discourse of jihad as well. At the very least, I shall try to how multivalent the discourse about “human bombers” is, with ‘sacrifice’ being one of the most prominent ‘voices’ making up the chorus. My argument is thus that even if we grant jihad a prominent place at the conceptual high-table of “human bombings,” in order more fully to understand even some jihadist aspects of “human bombings,” we may have to adopt something even more of the viewpoint of an Islam that repeats again and again that they are sacrifices. I am urging us to pay more attention to the nuances, qualifications and inner contradictions of the standard interpretation of “human bombings” as jihad pure and simple might suggest that we do. Jihad, I think, is only part of the story of the “human bombers.”

I, thus, believe we need to adopt an even more Islamic frame of reference for understanding the motives of so-called suicide bombers. That Islamic frame of reference for the “human bombings” is, I believe, sacrifice. In Israel/Palestine, while one element of the agency of these self-inflicted death is to attack others outright in jihad, then another, and simultaneous one, is to create a Palestinian political entity by making a sacrificial offering to Allah and the umma. “Human bombers” aim to kill Jews, but as agents they also are embedded in their families and communities, and in a world encompassed by a supreme being that has a political teleology of its own well in excess of killing Jews or any other perceived enemies. The meaning of the actions of the “human bombers” derives at least in part from both the web of human and divine relationships in which they seem themselves living, now and as they imagine their extended families and people living in the future. There is more to “human bombers” than jihad, and certainly more than suicide. There is, as I shall now argue, sacrifice.

- *Sacrifice or Suicide?*

Once attention is drawn to talk of violence we see rather quickly that words like sacrifice, suicide or homicide are not neutral designations, but ‘loaded’ evaluations of certain actions. Language too then becomes an integral part of the physical struggles involved, and not

something set aside and independent of them. For this reason, we will need to clear up some conceptual or terminological issues from the outset. Calling a death suicidal is rhetorically aimed tactically at diminishing its legitimacy, while calling it a sacrifice or an act of martyrdom is to raise it to lofty transcendent or religious heights. In calling a death sacrifice, it is typically ennobled, raised to a level above the profane calculation of individual cost-benefit analysis – to the level of a so-called ‘higher’ good, whether that be of a nation or some transnational or transcendent reference, like a religion. This is one reason that in classic treatments of suicide and sacrifice, the two were distinguished in terms of their relation to the attitudes of their societies of reference. The French sociologist, Émile Durkheim was puzzled about how to conceive the occurrence of what he called “altruistic suicide” – cases of individuals giving up their lives for others, as say in a war where soldiers die to save their comrades. Durkheim puzzled over the question of how it was possible that these acts by members of a given society destroying themselves could be seen as praiseworthy and/or as functioning for social flourishing? Should we not call them something else – something signaling their social prestige and thus, moral stature? Could they not be seen as ‘sacrifices’ instead, since Durkheim believed that sacrificial rites occupied a place of high societal status? Durkheim made little or no progress on this line of thought.

The conceptual thread that Durkheim left dangling was to be picked up a generation later by one of his most talented co-workers, Maurice Halbwachs. In his *The Causes of Suicide* (1930), Halbwachs revisited the question of the relation of suicide to sacrifice, and produced a formula that seemed to ease the conceptual tangle over sacrifice and suicide. Whether something was a ‘sacrifice’ rather than a ‘suicide’ depended upon the viewpoint of their respective societies of reference. “Society claims sacrifice as its own proper work,” accomplished “within the bosom of the community, where all the spiritual forces converge,” says Halbwachs. Society thus “presides” over sacrifice; it “organizes” it and “takes responsibility for it.” By contrast, society “repudiates” suicide.

Confirming the value of this piece of linguistic legislation in our own context of human bombers in the Middle East, the Israeli writer, Avishai Margalit, argues that while they are motivated by a vengeance marked by a strong desire for “spectacular revenge,” something else is afoot. They are profoundly social acts, whose success seems to rely upon their communal recognition and subsequent ritual celebration by the community from which the bomber comes. Margalit observes as well how much social prestige accrues to the bombers. Everyone knows their names, Margalit tells us, even, and perhaps especially “small children.” Other observers of human bombing in the Middle East record that these bombings are done with a specific social function in mind – so that the “entire Islamic umma is rescued.” This, I take it, is precisely what Halbwachs had in mind in speaking of society “claiming sacrifice as its own proper work,” of

sacrifice accomplished “within the bosom of the community,” or of a society that “presides” over sacrifice, “organizes” it and “takes responsibility for it.” Human bombings, understood by their agents as sacrifices, are then suffused with social intentions, essentially involving networks of relationships.

As to the religious aspect that clings to sacrifice, Durkheim as well argued that sacrifice is more than just a socially sanctioned kind of self-inflicted death. It is also a ‘making holy,’ as the Latin origins of the term indicate –*sacri-ficium*.’ Sacrifice for the Durkheimians is indeed a giving up or giving of that makes something holy. Thus, “human bombings” are not conceived by their perpetrators as simply utilitarian acts – even of resistance. The “human bombers” are elevated to lofty moral, and indeed, religious, levels, whether as sacrificial victims themselves or as kinds of saints. Celebrating one of his 9-11 hijackers, Bin Laden notes his, in effect, been made holy in the process of human bombing: “Clear purity and a splendid sacrifice. We beseech Allah to accept him as a martyr.” The notion that these immolations are offered to or for Palestine permits us to dwell for a moment on the peculiar property of sacrificial gifts of making things holy. As the name, ‘sacri-fice’ indicates, while the immolation consists in a gift, it is also at the same time, a ‘making holy.’ So, also, in performing sacrifice for the sake of Palestine, one ipso facto ‘makes’ the bomber holy for Palestinian patriots. At the same time, the sacrifice performed there, makes the territory of Palestine ‘holy,’ since Palestine is a site of an event of making something holy, as well as an intended recipient of sacrifice. One affirms the precincts of its ‘holy of holies’ – its national borders – as holy by making its territory an arena of sacrifice – much say as the WTC site is now generally considered a sacred site, if we are to judge by the persistent invocation of the heroism of the firefighters and police lost in the collapse of the buildings. Notice that nothing of the same sacredness seems to have adhered to the Pentagon, where, as well, many lives were lost, but no conspicuous acts of sacrifice on the part of rescuers were much noted or perhaps even performed. Perhaps coincidentally, this Intifada bears the name al-Aqsa Intifada, referring to the mosque located within the 66 acre site known to Muslims as the Haram al Sharif (“the Noble Sanctuary”) and to Jews as the Har ha-bayit or Temple Mount, both places regarded as holy, although contested, territories. Whether pretense or not, this intifada, at least in the eyes of some – or at least enough – Palestinians was provoked by Sharon’s visit/intrusion into the sacred place of the Haram al Sharif. Informants in Israel tell me that the Israelis immediately erase any evidence that the sites of Palestinian sacrifice/suicide bombings have ever been the sites of such acts. These sites become, as it were, negative memorials – places of deliberate forgetting – by their rapid return to normal profane uses. Contrast these unmarked – and perhaps unmarkable – sites of the loss of Jewish life to others, such as embodied in the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Rising. There the event is embraced with considerable pride, as well, of course, with deep sorrow.

In employing the language of the perpetrators of “human bombings,” I am, of course, neither justifying nor elevating their self-described ‘sacrifices.’ I am not urging anyone to lavish the praise or to attribute the prestige these operations seem to have from their radical societies of reference. Moreover, in calling attention to the religious quality in these ‘sacrifices,’ I am likewise not affirming the pious cliché of religion being necessarily good – a point hardly needing argument before this audience. It should go without saying, then, that I am not urging understanding here to cover for sympathy. But I am urging us at least to take up Halbwachs’ point and see what those promoting these deaths and self-immolations think that they were doing, and consequently why they think they are right in so doing. In this way, I think we can begin to explain their actions – and with that knowledge do what we will with it. We are still free to deplore, deter and punish what those promoting these deaths and self-immolations are doing even when we understand them better. But I can see no benefit in ignoring what they think that they are doing, especially for those who wish to prevent them from promoting these deaths and self-immolations.

Taking together both that social recognition and high religious or moral qualities of innocence color these bombing operations, I conclude that they are neither easily described as straightforward utilitarian attacks nor mere acts of self-destruction. They are not mere attacks because they are systematically careless of preserving the life of the attacker and in doing so seem to take their meaning and rationale from the prestige accorded them by their social group of reference as sacrifices. They are, nonetheless, not just suicides, in part because they remain offensive attacks, but also because they have high moral or religious purpose imputed to them. This is why I am arguing that we should at least see if we can gain further insight into these phenomena by taking seriously other sorts of descriptions that accommodate the social and religious-moral qualities of these acts. In this case, I suggest that we can acquire just these sorts of insights by referring to the insider point of view of these deaths and immolations. From within this view of the world, these bombings and immolations are routinely and regularly described as ‘martyrdoms’ and ‘sacrifices.’

As to this religious ideal of the ‘martyr’ (or shahīd), while a great deal can be said, I must limit myself to a few observations concerning remarkable innovations in the concept of the shahīd among the militant community from which human bombers come. Traditionally, Sunnis have seen martyrdom as a death suffered or endured. But, while ‘endured,’ martyrdom is not actively sought. Instead, martyrdom has always been seen as happening in the course of a just struggle in behalf of Islam. This places the Muslim martyr in a somewhat more active posture than the passive Christian ideal of martyr as a literal ‘witness.’ Despite this shade of difference, the overwhelming consensus of Muslim tradition holds that martyrdom is not a “status to be achieved by the individual warrior, and performed as though it were his own private act of worship.” It is always “something bestowed by Allah as a favor on the warrior for his selflessness and devotion to the community’s defense.” It is never an individual act voluntarily undertaken on one’s own authority.

Two recent developments have, however, radically reoriented the notion of martyrdom away from the traditional consensus and toward an assertive or confrontational concept of the shahīd. First, thanks to the great influence of Iran's Shi'a revolution, its cult of aggressive martyrdom has spread into Sunni lands. Here, one should recall the Iranian human wave attacks in the Iran-Iraq war. According to Iranian Shi'a theology, jihadis should welcome death incurred in battle as martyrdom, even if they seek out such an end! Second, Sunni extremists have undertaken their own "modern innovation" of the notion of shahīd by justifying "calling someone who kills civilians and noncombatants a 'martyr'." Hardly distinguishable from jihad, martyrdom is, in this way, seen as "a human response to the call of Allah to sacrifice oneself for the sake of Islam, and to inflict loss on the enemies of Allah." Muslim critics of this new notion of the shahīd are many and vocal. To them, it is simply "a terrifying new kind of nihilism." Now, with some grasp of these first two aspects of the agency of human bombers – as jihadis and as shahīds – what can be said of the third, 'sacrifice'?

- *Abraham or the Prophet, Routine or Extreme?*

In turning to sacrifice, I consider the longstanding, widespread and still prevailing views of sacrifice proper to the majority Sunni population, where Al Qaida, the Palestinian human bombers and Taliban still account for the majority of human bombings. One of the common words for sacrifice here is "adha" – the same "adha" in the name of the great feast celebrating the end of Ramadan, the "Eid al adha," and the liberation of Ishmael from his intended sacrifice by Abraham. The roots of sacrifice in such ritual and scriptural contexts feed Muslim readiness of give of themselves for Allah, and routinely for the Muslims to practice charitable giving, known as zakat, that counts as one of the five pillars of Islam. One thinks about civic sacrifice by thinking with ritual sacrifice; one thinks about sacrifice in a military operation, in jihad, by thinking with 'adha' or the sacrifice of Ishmael, and so on. In thinking about civic sacrifice based on scripture, nothing, perhaps, exemplifies the difficulty of getting clear directions from an admittedly paradigmatic source than the case of Abraham's problematic attempted sacrifice of Ishmael. How frustrating for believers, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, both knowing that personal sacrifice is required of them, yet when referred to the model of sacrifice, finding a virtual Zen koan instead of explicit helpful advice.

Nonetheless, this story is great because no matter how confusing its lesson for sacrificial behavior, it has no peers as an impetus for thinking about sacrifice. Dramatically speaking, the story does its work by putting to us the quandary of how in the face of demands from an omnipotent deity, we creatures, like Abraham, can say "no!" Making precise sense of the problems entailed in Abraham's willingness to give all that Allah demands, pondering Allah's relaxation of his demand for Ishmael's life, meditating on the point of view of Ishmael for a moment – all these inform thinking about sacrifice for Muslims, even if and as the meaning of the model is contested from various quarters.

In general, as in both Jewish and Christian traditions, the Abraham and Ishmael story has supported a moderate view of sacrifice. After all, while remaining true to God's command to sacrifice his son, Abraham does not do so. And, Allah does not really persist in demanding it. So, peace can reign between fathers and sons, creatures and Creator. The crunch never came. But, some of the puzzles for believers – Jewish, Christian and Muslim alike – have always been whether Abraham really ever intended to follow through with the sacrifice of his son, and whether God was really the kind of deity who would really intend Abraham, so to do. We have all probably played these terrible dilemmas over in our minds. Certainly the vast literature – in the West alone – a literature of retellings and readings – attest to this. If Abraham did not intend to follow the command to sacrifice, then he should be judged disobedient to God. How then is he worthy of admiration? If God really intended to force Abraham to sacrifice his son, then why should not he should be judged a monster? Interestingly, despite the reputation for religious rigor and severity, Muslim have concocted fantastic ways out of the terrible choices the story generates. It is that very inventiveness that lies behind the classic Muslim attitude to personal sacrifice, but it is also one that has seen transformations at the hands to today's militants.

Closest to the prevailing spirit of the moderate traditional reading of the Abraham/Ishmael story are those we might be call today's Muslim humanists. Typical of the point of view is an expression of the need to balance sacrifice for the community with a deep reverence for individual human life:

How is a wall built? How do the individual blocks 'join ranks' to turn into a solid and impregnable wall? As a wall is composed of many building blocks, so must our communities be built upon the strengths of individuals like yourself...

When the wall is seen from a distance, the blocks may look indistinguishable due to their uniformity, but like human beings, each retains its inner individuality. No one is required to sacrifice this... (my emphasis)

The humanists reinforce their reverence for the individual by employing a clever, if as we will see, a contorted, interpretive strategem. Here, they take the Quran at its word to feature how the text itself offers an excuse for both Abraham and Allah to avoid responsibility for the possible slaying of Ishmael. The device consists in noting that the Quran literally says that Abraham arrived at the idea of sacrificing Ishmael in a dream: "O my son," says Abraham, "I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you." In the view of the humanists, this gives Abraham an 'out' since Allah might well not have commanded him to sacrifice Ishmael in reality. There was never really was any danger of anyone understanding the dream's command as earnest and straightforward. While Abraham does lead Ishmael up to the sacrificial mount, by the device of invoking the 'dream,' Allah is excused of ordering the sacrifice of Ishmael. 'I did no such thing old chap! You just dreamt it!' This nicely protects the belief that Allah cherishes the sacredness of every human being, even if it leaves us to wonder about why Abraham went through the motions of initiating sacrifice. Nevertheless, the device serves its purpose for Muslim humanists to find a way out of what looks like a direct command to immolate a human being.

In other interpretive contexts, those still uncomfortable with leaving Abraham ‘on the hook,’ so to speak, work on his rehabilitation in other ways. Some have argued that Abraham intended only to assent to Allah’s command in a kind of perfunctory way, knowing full well that Allah was never meant to be taken at his word, and indeed, that at the last moment, he would provide a substitute – as indeed Allah did. Others produce the clever device of noting that the text records that Abraham hesitates momentarily before moving in with his sacrificial knife. The moment’s hesitation is enough for these interpreters to conclude that Abraham wasn’t such a bad sort after all, since he, we must suppose, knew Allah was only testing his faithfulness, and was on the verge of halting the sacrifice operation anyway. Not wishing rashly to get ahead of Allah’s plan, Abraham waits, as it were, for Allah to catch up with his swift blade action.

Whatever delightful hermeneutic devices are employed, one must imagine that the Muslim humanist ones are no more or less ingenious than those produced by their opponents. Such scriptural sleight of hand is par for the course when wrangling with the intricacies of ancient texts. The upshot of this is that Muslim tradition has generally agreed with today’s Muslim humanists – namely that humans are not sacrificed in Islam. Rendered as a formula of the mainstream, Muslim sacrifice is then a “giving of” oneself, of one’s alienable property – animals, portions of one’s wealth, and so on – is very highly valued and enjoined; but sacrifice as a “giving up” – as a total negation of self or an inalienable subject (Ishmael) – is at most highly questionable – at least in the Quran and some of the commentarial literature that I have cited. There is, of course, only so much that one can read out of scripture that actually shapes a religion at a particular time. But based on both Quranic and commentarial authority, Muslims seem very much like Jews and Christians when it come to sacrifice. To wit, while it may well be that Allah could in principle require absolute self-immolation – since Allah is the supreme being and does after all require absolute submission – the extreme of annihilationist sacrifice is not the kind of sacrifice Allah decides, out of the mysteries of the divine will, to require. There, a goat will do, as it were.

In our own time, however, this traditional moderate model asserting the norm of sacrifice as ‘giving of’ rather than the absolute ‘giving up,’ has been challenged by the rise of the modern militant deviations from the traditional Abrahamic model. The tone and extent of sacrifice have been ratcheted up primarily by the replacing of Abraham as the model devotee with Muhammad. There in militant circles, the Prophet is cast as the chief exemplar of both self-sacrificial death and self-sacrifice (“*tad’hia*”) linked essentially with jihad. The choice as to kind of sacrifice demanded of the Muslim –whether to follow Abraham or Muhammad – seems to depend upon whether or not Muslims felt that the umma’s very existence were threatened. In normal times, the prudent Abrahamic “giving of” would suffice. But in extremis, the ultimate “giving up” might become the norm. As one militant Islamic scholar argued:

the famous Hadith, where the Prophet undertook to die for Allah, to come back to life and then die once again. This means that there was no bigger goal in the Prophet’s own existence than to die for Allah, and repeatedly so. Therefore, this tenet constitutes, in the author’s mind, a divine guideline that applies everywhere

at all times.

Self-sacrifice thus becomes integral to situations where jihad is enjoined. This sort of self-immolating jihad should then become “the standard behavior of all Muslims who seek battle at the highest level of risk” – although not, apparently, at levels of routine, everyday risks.

- *Sacrifices Are Also Special Kinds of Gifts*

From the rich tradition of Muslim sacrificial discourse, of which I have only scratched the barest surface, we can begin to bring to bear some of the things we have learned from the comparative study of religions to illuminate Muslim sacrifice. I would single out three aspects for particular note. As I intimated earlier, at least in part, sacrifice can be seen as a very peculiar kind of gift by Muslims. But, sacrifice is also peculiar as a kind of gift in that a gift (as victim) is destroyed in the process of giving it. Finally, in the course of this act of destruction and giving, the gift/victim is made holy or sacred – a sari-ficium.

The author of the single-most influential book on gift, Marcel Mauss, argued that gifts are never free, despite what people tend to think about their disinterestedness and spontaneity. Despite the show of pure generosity gift givers typically display, gifts are always given under obligation – the obligations to give, to receive the gift, and to reciprocate. A kind of systematic deception prevails between the appearance of freedom in giving, and its actual restricted nature. In the initial instance, the giver first feels obliged to give – as anyone burdened by the onslaught of Christmas shopping and its endless obligations can attest. Taking matters a step further beyond the obligation to give, there is, second, the additional obligation to receive or accept the gift. As the burdens of holiday shopping should recall the obligation to accept or receive the gift can be quite oppressive. And, topping both these first two obligations is a third, perhaps even more strongly felt, namely, the obligation to reciprocate, to give in return

Gift also differs from other common sorts of exchange, such as economic exchanges like buying and selling, ‘truck and barter,’ or mere commercial transactions. Gifts are “in theory” voluntary, disinterested and such. They carry something of an aura of ‘freedom’ about themselves, although we usually tend to make too much of this in our sentimentalization of alternatives to economic society. In straightforward economic transactions, everyone knows that the deal is ‘interested’ by definition, no matter how much a pretense may be made in the course of the transaction that no one really seeks a profit!

As I have already averred in discussing the case of Abraham – and here we begin to broach the matter of sacrifice – gift also can range from a moderate “giving of” or a more extreme “giving up. Gifts can range from alienations of part of one’s goods or services to near-total alienations thereof. These may range from an ordinary expenditures of time or resources such as in routine philanthropic grants or common holiday gift giving, through to special gifts, such as the giving of family treasure or heirlooms to members of the next generation.

- *“Human Bombers” as Sacrificial Gifts*

Without minimizing the importance of the utilitarian jihadist conception of these bombings, as well as their multivalence, permit me to pick up some of the many strands of meaning that dangle from the claim that these so-called suicide or martyrdom bombings need also to be considered carefully as sacrificial gifts. The elements of sacrifice are there in such abundance and pervasiveness that it would be irresponsible to ignore them. Whether the sacrificial factors weigh more than practical ones will have to be determined, perhaps on a case by case basis. But, they at least need to be factored into the equation of the motivation of so-called suicide operations committed by radical Muslims. Once they are factored into the equation, the careful researcher will need to measure and weight the results of the mix between the sacrificial and practical aspects of these operations, assuming that this is analytically possible due to the multivalent and perhaps hopelessly confused nature of motivation here. In order that this factoring may begin, let me further expand my discussion of these bombings, deaths and such as sacrificial gifts.

There is, first, no doubt that the Palestinian bombers give themselves in a spirit of obligation characteristic of the gift that I described. Their deaths are seen as a sacred duty to sacrifice, to give up themselves totally. That they seek the deaths of as many Israelis as they can take with them only witnesses to the multivalence of their acts. Significant here is the fact that even when attacks sometimes fail, the bombers will detonate their charges anyway. This implies that foremost in the minds of some bombers is the intention to give up one’s life in the process – to sacrifice – even when no practical benefit in terms of an attack can be accrued.

This therefore returns us to the matter of the mind of the bomber, and most of all to the conception that they may have of their action. Here, what escapes the observer of narrow purview is the network of social relations in which an individual bomber is located. Fixing only on the individual bomber, or the individual bomber as an agent posed against someone, hides the sense in which bombers see themselves as embedded in a network of social relations to which they may be said to belong or want to belong. And, here sacrificial gift makes a triumphant return. Once grasped as a relational reality, it becomes natural to ask to whom and for whom, then, are the lives of these Palestinians given up? Gifts are necessarily relational, not solitary actions. Recalling the logic of obligation inherent in gift, we may then ask who is obliged to accept them?

One answer arises as to the intended recipients of sacrifice. If we link these self-immolations closely with the ritual sacrifices of Ramadan and Hajj, they are intended for Allah. This was how bin Laden, for example, tells us that the WTC-Pentagon hijackers were meant to be seen. The theological problem that I see in this case is that the gifts given exceed what Allah expects of pious Muslims. Muslim sacrifice is normatively a giving of, rather than the extreme giving up typical of the hijackers and self-immolating bombers. Indeed, there are many references in the current literature issuing from Muslims saying that such deeds of self-immolation are illegitimate and at odds with Islam. This however may only underline the radical and original aspects of bin Laden’s version of Islam.

If we then press the question about who – beside Allah – is obliged to accept these gifts, I think we can grasp how and why the political arena is the natural place for these deaths to occur, and why on top of this, they merit the description of being “sacrifices.” In the case of the Israel/Palestine dispute, besides Allah, I suggest that it is Palestine or the imagined community of Palestine that – at least in the minds of the bombers – is obliged to accept the offering of the death of such a self-immolating bomber. It is literally and ritually for Palestine and Palestinians that these sacrifices are offered, and who therefore are obliged to accept them, and then in some appropriate and equivalent way, to reciprocate.

Finally, who is to reciprocate for the sacrificial gifts thus offered? And, how are they to reciprocate? By the logic I have sketched, it would be Palestine and Palestinians who are expected to reciprocate for these deaths. And, how? By continuing the struggle, of course, but by continuing a struggle in which what is at stake is Palestine itself – or at least a certain imagined community of Palestine . As long as we are thinking about Palestine , it would be well to recall that sacrificial death for Israel has as well always been held in high regard. In the famous Israeli nationalistic poem, Natan Altermann’s “The Silver Platter,” we meet a young couple – significantly pure and innocent as sacrificial victims are classically represented – confronting the nation with the sacrificial price which must be paid for the continued existence of Israeli nationhood itself. The poem concludes with their final words:

“We are the silver platter

On which the Jewish state has been given you.”

Similarly, although some commentators on the Warsaw Ghetto Rising see it, like Masada, as a ‘suicidal’ gesture. What also seems clear is that even in sacrificing their lives in a fight they knew could not succeed militarily, the Ghetto fighters knew that they were doing their part in making Israel. “All we had were grenades, some guns and bottles with flammable liquid. We were like ants attacking a regular army which had conquered all of Europe.... We did it to honor all the Jews,” recalled Masza Putermilch, 79, a Jewish ghetto fighter who spoke at the Warsaw commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Rising in April of 2003. The only response to their sacrificial gift was to reciprocate by following through with the foundation of the real historical state of Israel .

- *Nation-Building and Meaning-Making by Sacrifice*

Thus, despite the extremity of radical Islam’s interpretation of sacrifice, I am urging us to understand those goals and the means by which those goals are imagined to be realized through the interpretive lens of sacrifice. We need to think about them as sacrifice bombings as much as we do martyrdoms or suicide/homicide bombings.

However distasteful it may be to extend understanding to those whom many would see only as killers, I urge that it helps to understand what other – sacrificial – goals the deaths and immolations are meant to bring about. And, here, I think appeal to ‘sacrifice’ may help us focus.

The kinds of extreme sacrifices of giving up are, as we have seen, not what Abraham was supposed to perform, and which are arguably the normative sacrifices as giving of for the Islamic world. Human sacrifice is precisely what Abraham finally did not do, and what the Abrahamic religions eventually declined to engage at a certain point in their development. Nevertheless, I am urging us to see that these suicides or homicides are sacrificial gifts of an extreme sort, offered to attain something in exchange – Palestine – to keep it alive, to realize it, in a way, to create it, in return for the sacrifice of young lives.

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