On “Sacrifice, Gift and the Social Logic of Muslim ‘Human Bombers’”
What Got Me Started; What Kept Me Going

Discontents about theorizing in religious studies – theorizing in ‘thin air’?

• In religious studies, we have many people eager to theorize – or at least to promote ‘theoretical ideas.’ Truth to tell, we have neither ‘methods’ nor ‘theories’ in the plenary sense of these terms. At most, we have styles of inquiry and theoretical ideas, rather than methods and theories. Quantitative sociologists or political scientists have statistical methods of inquiry; behavioral psychologists have a ‘theory’ of human behavior. Most of us operating in religious studies have neither of these sorts of things guiding our work.

• Nevertheless, a certain kind of caché, glamour or prestige attaches to doing so-called ‘method and theory.’ One shows that one is a Mensch by showing that one can do method and theory.

• But are these theoretical ideas being put to use, or only declared for their own sakes? Are they being put to good use? Or, are they merely ‘academic’ – a kind of 2nd rate philosophizing?

• By ‘good use,’ I mean are we using them with an eye on whether they illuminate the world in which we live? Can our theoretical ideas stand up to what the world throws back at them and us? Can our theoretical ideas work in concrete circumstances? NB taking my lead from Durkheim’s legacy of making the philosophy of his time “more concrete.”

What, in particular, got me going about so-called ‘suicide bombers’?

A series of inescapable facts and impressions....

• Seriousness of the phenomenon itself: 9/11, Middle East, Islamism....

• Seemingly senseless, irrational, meaningless, fanatical, crazy, profoundly sad, sick....

• Obvious connections with religion

• Widespread and commonplace tendency to avoid understanding and engage in value
judgments – either denunciation or celebration.

• a lesson for ‘theory and method’? The need for understanding – phenomenological or hermeneutic method – is as great as ever.

• Here, Charles Taylor has been my guide – beware sentimentality of appeals to ‘empathy.’ ‘Empathy’ is not mind reading. Nor does hermeneutic method entail acceding to the ‘natives’ point of view.’ What matters is that our accounts of ‘them’ have, at least, to pass at least one test: ‘they’ have to be able to recognize themselves in our accounts of ‘them,’ even if they may dispute these accounts.

Some Main Points of the Argument

• Jihad: take this seriously. Whatever else the phenomena of human bombers are, they remain attacks or attempts at attack within the larger strategic context of religious warfare – jihad. For this reason alone, the human bombers cannot be reduced to being adequately counted as ‘suicides.’

• Thus, the phenomenon of human bombers presents a more complex reality – something multivalent and not even necessarily internally consistent with itself. The phenomena include ‘martyrdom’, ‘gift’, ‘sacrifice’ and so on, in addition to jihad. All or several of these options of conceiving human bombing may be in play at the same time – even if these options are not logically consistent with each other.

• Contesting sacrifice, contesting the gift and the giving: older Abrahamic sacrificial ideology of sacrifice as a prudent ‘giving of’ seems to have given way among Islamists to an ideology drawn from the model of Muhammad’s assertion of his willingness to ‘give up’ himself totally.

• Seeing human bombers as sacrifices and gifts directs one to the social embeddeness of these acts. Seen as sacrifices and gifts, human bombing is seen as relational. Human bombers give up themselves under a sense of social obligation; the gift of their lives is received under a sense of social obligation; finally, the human bombers give up themselves in the expectation of eliciting or compelling a response – reciprocity for their initial act of giving up themselves.

• In the human bombers’ act of giving, receiving and reciprocating, the sacred is deployed.

• This deployment of the sacred does not mean either that such a deployment is good, or
that what is deployed is good. In this sense, the phenomenon of the human bombers as a religious phenomenon may be considered a model case of religion as 'bad.'

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