

Why Suicide Bombers Bomb

The way we ‘talk the talk’ sometimes fits the way we ‘walk the walk’; the way we think about things sometimes determines how we will act. The heavy artillery of political and religious rhetoric is routinely wheeled into place alongside the machinery of military combat. Thus, whether it is the world of the latest Intifada or that of post 9-11, the struggle to control the discourse about these conflicts is just as fiercely contested on the battlefield of language and concept as are the material struggles related to them. Careful use of terminology is therefore “not a matter of mere semantics, but of great importance in order to discern notions and mind sets and their significance.”¹ In thinking about our enemies, it is vital that we think about them in ways that illuminate what they think they are doing. Are they hijackers, murderers, suicides and fanatics, or as martyrs, saints, and sacrifices?² It depends on where one stands.

In this paper, I shall first attempt to sort through some of the conceptual issues thrown up by naming the particular phenomena that we might, in the interests of objectivity, call “human bombs.” Specifically, we need to pay greater attention to the ‘sacrificial’ designations of these “human bombings” as made by Muslims and as rooted in Islamic discourse. I do this not in the interests of celebrating the acts of “human bombers,” but for the sake of understanding them better. When we succeed in understanding the sacrificial aspect of the Islamic “human bombings,” I believe we will better understand the purposes and facilitating structures of these acts. Until we do so, we will miss something central to what they are – at least in the minds of those perpetrating these acts.

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

Before pressing ahead, two points must be kept in mind. First, the “human bombers” are a modern deviant form of Islam, a fringe “opposition” to mainstream Islam,

although disproportionately influential.

Second, the image of external, militant jihad must be kept firmly in focus as a leading conception of what “human bombers” see themselves to be doing. Thus, whatever else the “human bombings” may be, they are about killing Jews, Israelis and eliminating Israel itself. The declarations of Hamas and other organizations involved in them have made this abundantly clear. Little is mentioned of sacrifice in the Charter of Hamas, for example, but a great deal is said of eliminating Israel and jihad.³ Hamas, for example, focuses on the suffering caused to the enemy by the “human bombers” rather than “extolling their own suffering and sacrifice.” Hizballah likewise demands that the deaths of their “human bombers” be justified by the suffering of the number of casualties inflicted on the enemy.⁴ These examples, informed as they are by the discourse of jihad, should also counsel caution about speaking too simply of sacrifice in connection with the “human bombers,” since sacrifices are not typically directed against the interests of another. Yet, despite the clear jihadist conception behind “human bombings,” they persist in being conceived as sacrifices by their perpetrators – even if this produces a “convoluted” or internally conflicted discourse.⁵

One way that this gap between the utility of military attack and the symbolism of the sacrificial deed is bridged will be by recourse to the alternative description of these “human bombings” as ‘martyrdoms.’ They are deaths suffered in active struggle in behalf of Islam or Palestine . Thus, sacrifice bombers can thus also, and at the same time, be martyrdom bombers in the view that I shall elaborate. But this only adds yet another ‘voice’ to what I have already referred to as a kind of ‘chorus’ of voices all singing in the unison provided by “human bombings.”

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 a segment of Islam that repeats again and again: they are sacrifices. Jihad is only part of

the story of the “human bombers.” If in Israel/Palestine , one goal of these deaths 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. While the “human bombers” aim to kill Jews, 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 beyond killing Jews. 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 sacrifice.

- Sacrifice or Suicide? Durkheim and Halbwachs

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’ words – evaluations of certain actions. Language becomes an integral part of the physical struggles involved, and not a thing set aside and independent of them. Thus, calling a death a suicide or homicidal is rhetorically aimed at delegitimizing it, while calling it a sacrifice or an act of martyrdom may be to raise it to lofty transcendent heights – thereby, of course, to religious levels of discourse and behavior. This is why I prefer the neutral term, ‘human bombers.’

Given that this phenomenon is one deeply embedded in a struggle between communities, we cannot expect that analyses in terms of personal psychological motivations will suffice. Whether to commit suicide or to do sacrifice, people act not only because of personal, self-contained motivational structure, but also because of their relationships with others –whether these be relationships with other human beings or with divine superhuman persons, conditions, or states of affairs. What does such a sociological or religious perspective on “human bombers” reveal?

Well over a hundred years ago, France was plagued by outbursts of terrorist

violence, haunted by impending war, and troubled by an epidemic of suicides. The great French sociologist Émile Durkheim obsessed about these issues, about the way that they could best be minimized and explained, and about the possible hidden connections among these apparently disparate phenomena. Why, for example, were French Protestants more likely to commit suicide than, say, French Catholics or Jews of roughly the same socio-economic and regional membership? Further in this vein, Durkheim was particularly puzzled about how to conceive the occurrence of what he called “altruistic suicide” – cases of individuals giving up their lives – sacrificially – for others, as say in a war where a soldier dies to save his comrades. Since he was viscerally averse to suicide in any form, Durkheim puzzled over the question of how it was possible that these altruistic suicides were seen by people as praiseworthy? If those who praised altruistic suicides were correct in their valuation, should we not call them something else – something signaling their lofty moral stature. Are they not a sort of ‘sacrifice’ instead? And, if we chose so to do, what were we implying in our use of the term, sacrifice? Did it mean that the ‘sacrifices’ incurred in dying for one’s comrades were like sacrifices elsewhere, say, in the ritual sacrifices in the world religions, like that done on the Hajj by Muslims?

Durkheim made little or no progress on this dilemma, but one of his most talented co-workers, Maurice Halbwachs, did. Halbwachs came up with a formula that loosened the conceptual tangle over sacrifice and suicide left by Durkheim. He simply relativized the matter of usage by referring these terms to their social contexts. Whether something was a ‘sacrifice’ rather than a ‘suicide’ depended upon the viewpoint of their respective societies of reference. Says Halbwachs: “society claims sacrifice as its own proper work,” accomplished “within the bosom of the community, where all the spiritual forces converge...”⁶ Society thus “presides” over sacrifice; it “organizes” it and “takes responsibility for it.” By contrast, society “repudiates” suicide.⁷ “We call suicide,” says Halbwachs “all those cases of death resulting from an action taken by the victim themselves, and with the intention or the prospect of killing oneself” – “and which is not at the same time a sacrifice.”⁸

This somewhat abstract formula brought sacrifice and suicide into conceptual relationship as mutually limiting cases. Halbwachs was, in effect, saying that one feature making the suicidal and sacrificial deaths different was society's attitude to them. Confirming the value of the sociological apperception that Halbwachs' conceptual work brings to our subject, Avishai Margalit argues that the success of the 'human bombings' relies upon communal recognition and subsequent ritual celebration of the operations by the community from which the bomber comes. Everyone knows their names, Margalit tells us, even, and perhaps especially "small children."⁹ Other Israeli commentators note that these acts are profoundly social: they are done so that the "entire Islamic umma is rescued."¹⁰

If then we are to take radical Islamist Palestinians seriously in describing the self-immolating deaths in Israel and the territories, we need to think about these acts of religious violence in ways that we have not perhaps yet done with sufficient thoroughness – as "sacrifices."¹¹ 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, where all the spiritual forces converge..." or of a society that "presides" over sacrifice, "organizes" it and "takes responsibility for it."¹² Sacrifice is a profoundly social action. What is more, sacrifice has further religious resonances. Sacrifice is literally a giving up or giving of that makes something holy. Accordingly, the "human bombers" are notoriously regarded as 'sacred' by their communities of reference. They are elevated to lofty moral, and indeed, religious, levels, as sacrificial victims themselves or as kinds of holy saints. This is why, like those one regards as holy, the bombers cast themselves as innocents. As young people, and now notably young women, they are classic candidates for attributed innocence and purity. Thus, especially when young "human bombers" die in the course of an operation, their preparations are recorded on videos, and attempt to turn the moral tables on their opponents. It is as if they are saying in their self-destruction: 'See what you have made us do!' ³¹

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 pitiful suicides. 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. 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 religio-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.’⁴¹

- Mighty Shi’a Martyrs

In broaching the question of the Muslim view of sacrifice and martyrdom, we must be careful not to offend the diversity of Muslim opinion, here made acute, as we will see, by the modern innovations introduced into the discourse of sacrifice, martyrdom and jihad by the Islamists. As it turns out, that diversity of opinion runs along rather different lines than it has in the past. No longer, are Shi’a and Sunni quite as opposed to one another as those we may call moderates and extremists – no matter what their sectarian affiliation. In order to gauge this deviation from Muslim traditions, both of greater longevity and much broader present-day allegiance, let me begin this part of my discussion by seeing how the Muslim, here primarily Sunni, mainstream regard ‘martyrdom’ or ‘sacrifice.’ Much that we will meet here will be familiar to Western readers since, both the notion of martyr and sacrifice derive from elements of a common Abrahamic tradition, mean roughly what they do in Judaism and Christianity.¹⁵

Of the two notions, however, ‘martyrdom,’ shows the most difference in meaning between Muslims and Christians. Instead of the passive Christian sense of martyr as a literal ‘witness’ in Allah’s behalf, for Sunni Islam, the death suffered in martyrdom is one endured in active struggle in behalf of Islam. The overwhelming consensus of Muslim tradition, furthermore, 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.”¹⁶ It is instead a defined social role, as Halbwachs would well understand, heavily regulated by communal standards, debated extensively in that most social of languages – that of jurisprudence. It is, in any event, 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.⁷¹

According to recent observers of the Islamic world, however, the contemporary theology of Muslim martyrdom has taken even greater turns from the common Abrahamic root in recent times. In the hands of Sunni extremists, it has been described as an “entirely modern innovation...” since it would “justify calling someone who kills civilians and noncombatants a ‘martyr’.”¹⁸ Martyrdom in this way is 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.”¹⁹ Thus, it is utterly non-traditional for Sunni extremists to refer to a Palestinian ‘suicide’ bomber as a ‘martyr’ – (sheheen) or Usama bin Laden to the 9-11 suicide hijackers in the same way. “Violence,” in Islamic tradition, instead “must be proportional and that, in repelling an aggressor, only the necessary amount of force should be used.”²⁰ Yet, the Islamist extremists claim that “martyrdom is a pure act of worship, pleasing to Allah, irrespective of Allah’s specific command.” This, their Muslim critics charge, is simply “a terrifying new kind of nihilism,” influenced, as we will see, by radicalized Shi’a militants like Hizballah and the Ayatollah Khomeini.¹²

A similar kind of extremist transformation of traditional concepts of martyrdom also conspicuously marks the Shi’a, long noted for the prominent place reserved in their

spirituality and ritual life for the idea of martyr. The Shi'a notion of martyrdom is rooted in the commemoration of the death of Muhammed's grandson, Imam Husayn in 680 in a straightforward military battle at the hands of the forces of the local Umayyad governor, Ubayadallah ibn Ziyad at Karbala in present-day Iraq. No martyrdom, in the strict literal sense of the word, thus originally took place. Some scholars suggest that Husayn was simply poorly prepared for war, and in all respects, this was just a political struggle with the Umayyads. Shi'a piety nonetheless plays upon the failures of others to aid Husayn, upon his abandonment by those from whom he had expected assistance, whether wisely or not.

The pathos of the death of Husayn thus produced at least two religious consequences. First, the Shi'a religious imagination is driven by a sense of guilt about responsibility for Husayn's death. His devotees affirm that, if history could be reversed, modern day Shi'a would rush to Husayn's aid.²² But since history cannot be undone, Shi'a devotees ritually re-enact efforts to aid Husayn, or indeed to shed blood and even die for him. This ritual participation in the drama of Husayn's death is commemorated annually by pious members of the Shi'a community in Ashura, the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram.²³ These ritual practices seek to demonstrate willingness on the part of the faithful to undergo privation and death in a mystical attempt to show that they would have risked all to save Husayn, had they been present at Karbala in 680. Thus, ritual self-flagellation (*mâtam*) expresses and realizes a resolve to share the fate of Husayn or mystically to come to his aid. By ritual extension, in our own day, this resolve to save Husayn is converted into the willingness to accept death in order to fight other Muslims threatening the Shi'a people, as was proved by the deaths of young Iranian soldiers in defense of the Islam of the Iranian revolution against Iraq.²⁴ Some Iranian prisoners of war, upon being released from Iraqi captivity, confessed "shame" at not having died in order to defend the new Islamic republic of Iran.⁵²

Second, rising to the level of symbol, Husayn then becomes increasingly regarded as having died a martyr's death on the Sunni pattern – as an active fighter against injustice.

Those following Husayn thus resolve to prepare themselves to be martyrs as well. Martyrdom thus takes on a more active aspect, for example, in reinterpretations of Husayn's death as a sacrificial struggle. Here it may be waged against Muslims or anti-Islamic practices by either Muslims or non-Muslims alike. Opposition to a supposedly non-Islamic institution, such as the monarchy of the (Muslim) Umayyads is as said by some Shi'a to have caused Husayn's military campaign in the first place. Raphael Israeli has argued that the Sunni extremists reflect the influence of Shi'a militants such as, Hizballah in Lebanon, and advance this extreme version of martyrdom in contemporary days. Even more radical, since 1986, and spurred on by the theological innovations of the Ayatollah Khomeini, they have also projected back onto the victimization of Imam Husayn at Karbala in 680 CE, a heretofore unknown desire for his own self-immolation in the course of jihad!²⁶ So, what we find, in sum, is a cross-fertilization of extremist ideologies and theologies of both the Sunni and Shi'a, and an emergence of a radical ideology of martyrdom, self-immolating sacrifice and jihad, culminating in one way or another in the phenomenon of the "human bombers."

- Abraham, Ishaq, Ishmael

Despite the increased influence of Shi'a conceptions of sacrifice and martyrdom upon the entire Muslim world, attention must be given to the longstanding, widespread and still prevailing views of sacrifice proper to the majority Sunni population. Inevitably as with any monotheism, a crisis lies in wait in the offing: in the face of an omnipotent deity, it is hard to see how devotees could justify limiting the extent of their devotion and giving by routines and rituals, however piously engaged. In narrative form, this crisis comes to a head in the case of Abraham's problematic attempted sacrifice of Ishmael, and Abraham becomes a model for pious Muslims to emulate in the everyday lives, even if the meaning of the model may be problematic.²⁷

Of all sacrifices performed by Sunnis, the most exemplary, traditional and routine has been that done in imitation of Abraham and Ishmael during the Hajj. At a key point there, pious Muslims will ritually slaughter and sacrifice a certain intermediary victim, traditionally a bovine animal, such as a goat. Thus, the pious Hajjis give of themselves in the act of ritual sacrifice (“qurbani”) – literally a “bringing near” (i.e. to Allah).²⁸ So much part of everyday Muslim spiritual formation is this sacrifice, that efforts are made for any and all Muslims to perform it. Thus, since it is both expensive to make the Hajj to Mecca, and to purchase a suitable sacrificial animal for qurbani, elaborate means have been devised for universal participation in this sacrifice. Thus, although the price of £140 is the quoted for a sheep in Palestine, for a relatively small sum of £45, pious Muslims wishing to perform their qurbani can send either corned or frozen portions of a properly butchered sheep to their less fortunate Palestinian brothers and sisters.²⁹ Far, then, from anything to do with jihad, a critical strand in the Muslim understanding of sacrifice (qurbani) is as a gift, and as a limited, modest or even partial one at that.

Emphasizing this sense of normal Muslim sacrifice as the prudent giving of over against the extreme giving up, typical in many ways of Abraham, one notes that despite the pervasiveness of the Muslim sacrificial tradition, in both ritual and moral senses, self-immolation, self-sacrifice and certainly human sacrifice are never optional. Along with the ritual sacrifices of bovine animals, it is instead the limited practices of self-denial, such as mortification, fasting, charitable giving and such that are regarded as paradigmatically sacrificial. Thus, sacramentally joining with Abraham in substituting an animal victim for the sacrifice of Ishmael, Sunni Muslims do what may be regarded as sacrifices of the spirit, or of bodily mortification or gifts of their material wealth, in further imitation of the submissive spirit to Allah’s command. The extreme of giving up is held at arm’s length distance from normal everyday Islam.

But Abraham’s sacrifice, no matter how comprehended under normal circumstances and across the great length of Muslim history, is still in all embedded in a story of the

relation of humans to an incomprehensible divinity. Because of this essential connection with the divine will, the nuances of the story also become the bases of consequential interpretive disputes among Muslims about how extreme the sacrifice demanded of people really might be. For example, given the Quranic reverence for human life, how was it that Allah could really command Abraham to sacrifice his son, Ishmael? Was this order, perhaps, a devious piece of deception set to test Abraham's loyalty to Quranic values? Therefore, did – either or both – Abraham or Ishmael accept this command, as earnest and true? Or, did they hear it as something laced with divine irony or only meant to be enacted symbolically – say by substituting a ram, as Muslims today do on the Hajj's ritual sacrifices? Other interpreters, less enamored of the Quranic valuation of human life and more impressed with the equally Quranic assertion of the mystery of divinity's ways, claim that both father and son did indeed embrace the command to sacrifice Ishmael literally and earnestly. Giving up gradually begins to push giving off center stage, at least among these interpreters. This is especially so as the model of Muhammed continues to push Abraham off center stage as well.

Other Muslims, (I shall call them Muslim humanists), take the contrary view that Abraham always understood the command to be a kind of test to see if he could distinguish a diabolic deception from a divine order. Would he follow an unrighteous order – an order in conflict with Quranic values and Allah's true nature? Muslim humanists note that the patriarch did, after all, arrive at the idea of sacrificing Ishmael by the mitigating medium of a dream – as indeed it says in the Quran straightforwardly.³⁰ The Muslim humanists deny that Allah would ever sanction the sacrifice of a human individual – even as a test. On a Muslim humanist website, we read, for example such arguments for the integrity of the individual: “How is a wall built? How do the individual blocks ‘join ranks’ to turn into a solid and impregnable wall?” The answer comes swiftly and clearly in terms of an assertion of the value of the human individual: “As a wall is composed of many building blocks, so must our communities be built upon the strengths of individuals like yourself...”¹³ Therefore, in the story of Abraham and Ishmael, there was never really any danger of either

of them understanding the command to sacrifice Ishmael as earnest and straightforward, since this would contravene Allah's well known valuing of the integrity of the human individual.

There are as well other ways the interpretations of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Ishmael reinforce the position of Muslim humanism. One may shift the particular aspect of the episode to be celebrated, for example. Some interpreters focus on the sparing of Ishmael from death that Muslims hold dear and emblematic of the incident.

In any case, what I would like to underline is that both the potential ferocity of the divine will as well as the willingness of people to follow such commands are mitigated equally well in the objective Quranic text (a dream) and in the interpretations of this incident. Further, whatever previous positions one may have been held, Muslims generally share the same conclusion to the Abrahamic sacrifice story – namely humans are not sacrificed in Islam.³² Rendered as a formula of the mainstream, Muslim sacrifice is 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, it must be emphasized, 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.

- Sacrifices Are Also Special Kinds of Gifts

From this rich tradition of Muslim sacrificial discourse, 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 the 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 *sacri-ficium*.³³ In thus classifying sacrifice as a special kind of gift, it will show all the same characteristics of gifts in general, but with the added feature of at least portions of the sacrificial gift being alienated from the human realm in the process of something being made sacred. Let me begin to elaborate this in connection with the “human bombers” in considering first the obligatory quality of the gift.

The single-most influential theory of gift holds 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 obligation³⁴ – 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 invited to a birthday party or wedding will keenly appreciate, or as anyone burdened by the onslaught of holiday 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.

Because I am going to suggest what may first seem absurd, namely, that a “human bombing” can be understood as a ‘gift,’ let alone a sacrifice, a few words of further explanation are in order. ‘Gift’ is a very capacious notion and phenomenon, capable of very wide application. It is not limited to handsomely wrapped ‘presents’ or the items for sale in a “Gift Shop”! Literally anything can become a gift. All that is required in a prestation or exchange is the tell-tale gap between the appearance of disinterestedness and spontaneity on the one side and the reality of the three-fold set of obligations on the other. Thus, gifts

come in many forms – in actions, deeds or objects of all sorts, in greetings, courtesies, kindnesses, or gestures, in legacies, in deference paid to others, or of course in bribes, such as the lavish dinner on a ‘hot’ date. None of this means, of course, that just because anything can be a gift, that everything is a gift. As a subclass of exchange, gift is not, for example, a form of unidirectional access to goods or services, like taking, theft or creation ex nihilo. Gift involves an offering, but one that likewise entails an exchange.

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, or in the most extreme cases, to the kinds of lavish and competitive expenditure that characterize attempts by the powerful to overwhelm and shame the less so into submission.

In these last extreme forms of giving, we seem to shade into, if not arrive at, sacrifices, because no ordinary reciprocation or exchange seems possible. What is given is lavished without limit – wasted – as is the life of the victim in a ritual sacrifice. Indeed, the point of lavish giving is to make it virtually impossible for the initial gift to be reciprocated without courting ruin. Small wonder that some have called such an extreme the “monster

child of the gift system.”³⁵ Perhaps monstrous in its own way, I believe that the same sense of gift exchanges will apply equally well to “human bombings” as sacrifices.

- “Human Bombers” as Sacrificial Gifts

Without minimizing the importance of the jihadist conception of these bombings, 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.

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 returns us to the matter of the socially and religiously formed 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 deviant aspects of Islamist 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.

In light of the relational nature of sacrificial gifts of themselves made by the “human bombers,” certain policy consequences might flow. Thus, to the extent that these bombings are viewed by their actors and the communities to which they belong as ‘sacrifices’ and ‘gifts,’ they might be encouraged or deterred in the way ordinary gifts are encouraged or discouraged. If to deter these operations were the aim, then the societies of reference in question here would have to make it clear that such gifts are not desired, or that they are inappropriate. Offers of such a gift will be rejected. Thus, the social logic of such a deed as a gift, as a sacrifice, would to some extent be encouraged or undermined in the same way,

respectively, that a desired suitor or an unwanted one were urged on or dissuaded. Their gifts could be, respectively, increased or stopped by clear welcome or, alternatively, refusal to accept them. The success or failure of sacrifice bombings then is relational. It would seem then to depend on the willingness of the intended recipient to accept the gift. Perhaps instead of seeking to dissuade sacrifice bombings by concentrating on the bomber as an individual unit of analysis, we therefore need to concentrate on those for whom the bombers bomb. This points to the weakness of our cruder forms of economic explanation of such matters, further enfeebled by liberal guilt, that economic disadvantage breeds such bombings. The facts are quite the contrary, since it is now well attested that most of the sacrifice bombers are formally educated and hail from comfortably middle class families.⁶³

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.”⁷³

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 2003.³⁸ The only response to their sacrificial gift was to reciprocate by following through with the foundation of the real historical state of Israel.³⁹ In Palestine, those notorious videos produced before the bombing are devised to provide just this sort of dedication to the cause, and repository of memory of the sacrifices of the “human bombers.” They are nothing like the typical self-pitying or despairing suicide note.⁴⁰ Further, the forms in which the community supports the “human bombers” draws on a variety of standardized, local religious models. The meager belongings of the “human bombers” are collected and revered as “relics.” Songs are composed about them and their acts, and sung openly in the streets. Their pictures “become the object of worship-like adoration.” The families of the “human bombers,” by a kind of contagion of the sacred, are viewed as “precious in the eyes of the public.” They are viewed with “awe and admiration.”⁴¹

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. In performing sacrifice for the sake of Palestine, one ipso facto ‘makes’ not only the bomber holy, but the territory of Palestine ‘holy.’ 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.⁴² 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. Informants in Israel tell me that the Israeli authorities immediately erase any evidence of Palestinian sacrifice/suicide bombings. These sites become 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.⁴³ If this be so for Jews, in a

future Palestinian state, one might well imagine that the very same sites of sacrifice/suicide bombings will become memorials to the bombers who did their sacrificial deeds on what is now for Palestinians, sacred ground.

- Nation-Building and Meaning-Making by Sacrifice

However distasteful it may be for us 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. I am thus 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.⁴⁴

The main reason nation-building in this way reeks so of religion is, then, because nationalism is exposed as religious. Whatever else they may be, nations are, like religions, meaning-making entities of grand and transcendent sorts, creating an aura of sacredness about all their central doings. Not only do national borders mark boundaries of a sacred precinct as 'tabu' to the intruder as any temple's holy of holies, but the accessories of nationalism – its flags, monuments, anthems and such – partake of the same transcendent religious glow of the nation as sacred being. In terms of national ritual, nationalism has taught us notably that 'sacrifice' will routinely be required of individual citizens in one form or another. As such, in sacrifice the nation (and religions of certain kinds) shows themselves as the highest forms of collectivity demanding human loyalty, transcending palpable human individuality. Thus far at least, for all the efforts of universal cosmopolitan 'humanity' to rally people to common human causes, it has yet to outdo the nation or religion in calling forth the loyalty of people and in getting them to lay down their lives for it. The readiness of individuals to kill others and to sacrifice themselves can only be understood in terms of the religious nature of fellowship achieved by the nation-state – that place where religion

and nation are not usefully distinguishable.⁴⁵ People do not sacrifice themselves for “administrative units”, such as the EEC, but lately for nations – whether actual or imagined – like, Bosnia, Serbia, Ireland, Israel and Palestine or, I would add, potentially for religions like Islam or Christianity, on the other.

Thus, we would be wise to pay attention to differences in language about violence in politics corresponding to differences in fundamental viewpoint. From an Israeli viewpoint, the independence struggle was fought for the imagined community of the ‘nation of Israel,’ and not for the ‘mandate of Palestine’ – even though the two territories are virtually identical. In that struggle, the deaths of Jewish fighters counted as ‘sacrifices’ and martyrdoms, and not – as the British who were arrayed against them, insisted that they were – as ‘terrorist atrocities.’ Similarly, from a contemporary Israeli view which seeks to contain or deny Palestinian ‘nationality,’ those who die in so-called suicide or homicide bombing ‘murderers’ ‘terrorists’ or pathetic mad men. But, seen from the viewpoint of those who want to make the imagined community of Palestine into a nation-state, these suicide or homicide ‘bombers’ are better seen as ‘sacrifice’ bombers, martyring themselves for ‘Palestine,’ Islam and such. For them, these deaths are meaningful, and in this way ‘religious’ deaths, not the random acts of mad men or visceral responses of an overly stimulated organism.

As such, the West Bank, Gaza and the rest are for the Palestinian religious nationalists not the “administrative units” which they are for Israel, any more than was the imagined community of Israel the British Mandate of Palestine for the Jewish independence fighters.

The reason that nationalism is so saturated in religious meaning is that “administrative units” do not create meaning while, in a sense, religions and nations do nothing but create meaning – however gruesome it may be.⁴⁶

CSU San Diego

7May 2006

NOTES

- Israeli, R., "Islamikaze and their Significance," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9, (1997), p. 96.
1. E-mail communication from Horace Jeffery Hodges" regarding a transcript
 2. of a Bin Laden video in which bin Laden asks Allah to "accept these gifts," referring to the 9/11 hijackers. jefferyhodges@yahoo.com Subject: Re: A Query about the Logic of Sacrifice in the Actions of Al Qa'ida (Wed, 24 Jul 2002)
Israeli, R., "Islamikaze and their Significance," Ibid., p. 111.
 3. Israeli, R., "A Manual of Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism," Ibid., p. 30.
 4. This very convolutedness may indeed be a sign of the ideological struggles
 5. in full play within Islam itself . Ibid.
Ibid., p. 477.
 6. Ibid., p. 475
 7. Ibid.
 - 8.

Avishai Margalit, "The Suicide Bombers," *The New York Review of Books*,

9.

16 January 2003, p. 38.

Israeli, R., "A Manual of Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism," *Terrorism and*

10.

Political Violence, 14,(2002), p.37.

See "Eid message to the Ummah from Shaikh Ahmad Yaseen on the

11.

struggle in Palestine ” <http://www.muslimmedia.com/archives/movement02/hamas-eid.htm>

Significance of Eid:

These are the signs of our Ismail's. Let us search for them in ourselves and let us slaughter them to move towards Allah (swt) and to remove the real knife from the throat of oppressed Muslims from Bosnia to Kashmir, from Somalia to Palestine . Let us revolt against the heartless worshippers that we have become. Remember our Eid is not an Eid of victory. It is the Eid of sacrifice (adha)

<http://www.guidedones.com/metapage/frq/eidadha10.htm>

Sacrifice and nationhood

"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." Then Reham turned to me: "I am sorry that I am not the shahid," she said. "Usama took my wish to be a martyr and preceded me. We were in a race and he beat me. It's what I've always wanted to do."

Sandra Jordan, "The women who would die for Allah" *New Statesman* (Jan 14, 2002)
http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m0FQP/4570_131/82135394/p2/article.jhtml?term=%2B%22sacrifice%22+%2Bpalestine

Ibid.

12.

Avishai Margalit, "The Suicide Bombers," *The New York Review of Books*,

13.

16 January 2003, p. 38.

Ibid. But, see two recent articles that do pay attention to this religious

14.

rhetoric. John Kelsay, "Suicide Bombers: The 'Just War' Debate, Islamic Style,"

Christian Century, August 14, 2002 . R. Scott Appleby, "Visions of Sacrifice.

Roots of Terrorism," *Christian Century*, October 17, 2002.

Explicit links are made by Muslims to precedents for Islamic sacrifice in the

15.

Jewish bible: <http://www.al-islam.org/islaminthebible/18.htm>

Kanan Makiya and Hassan Mneimneh, "Manual for a 'Raid'," *New York*

16.

Review of Books 49, no. 1 (17 January 2002), p. 21.

Ibid..

17.

Ibid. p. 20.

18.

Israeli, R., "A Manual of Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism," *Terrorism and*

19.

Political Violence, 14,(2002), p. 35.

Ibid., p. 30. Kanan Makiya and Hassan Mneimneh, "Manual for a 'Raid',"

20.

New York Review of Books 49, no. 1 (17 January 2002), p. 21.

Kanan Makiya and Hassan Mneimneh, Ibid., p. 21.

21.

Heinz Halm, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (Princeton: Markus

22.

Wiener, 1997), p. 41.

Ibid., pp. 41-88

23.

Ibid., pp. 143, 150.

24.

25. Ibid. p. 150.

Israeli, R., "Islamikaze and their Significance," *Terrorism and Political*

26.

Violence, 9,(1997), p. 96.

The terminology of sacrifice in Islam is particularly rich. In the primary instances, it refers to literal ritual sacrifice

27.

“Udhiyah” refers to the animal (camel, cattle or sheep) that is sacrificed as an act of worship to Allah

Note also “Id al'Adha” (or Eid Al-Adha) is the "Feast of the Sacrifice"

My thanks to my colleague, Michael Feener, for these points of Arabic

28.

meaning.

<http://isgkc.org/udhiya.htm> See price list of proper sacrificial animals.

29.

Interpal, a relief effort for Palestinians offers a special opportunity for Muslims to send corned or frozen lamb to Palestine , thus combining both their religious sacrificial duty with relief aid to the poor of Palestine .

<http://www.interpal.org/web/pdf/Qurbani99.pdf>

Abraham’s act of sacrifice in the Quran gives the following account:

30.

(Abraham prayed:) My Lord, grant me a doer of good deeds. So We gave him the good news of a forbearing son. But when he became of age to work with him, he said: O my son, I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you; so consider what is your view. He said: O my father, do as you are commanded; if Allah please you will find me patient. So when they had both submitted and he

had thrown him down upon his forehead, and We called out to him saying, O Abraham, you have indeed fulfilled the vision. Thus do We reward the doers of good. Surely this is a manifest trial. And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice. (Surah Al-Saffat 37: 100-7)

There, however, is considerable dispute among Muslims as to whether Allah ordained it. <http://www.submission.org/Ismail.html>

<http://www.youngmuslims.ca/publications/sacrifice.asp>

31.

That the hijackers of 9-11 planned to kill flight attendants in deliberately

32.

sacrificial ways marks another departure from Muslim tradition. (Lincoln, B.,

Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11 Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 2003), p. 94.

Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, trans.

33.

W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 9.

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic*

34.

Societies, trans. W. D. Halls (New York City: W. W. Norton, 1990), pp. 1-2, 11-

12.

Mauss, M. (1990). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic*

35.

Societies (New York City: W. W. Norton), p. 41.

Atran, S., "Who Wants to Be a Martyr?," *Los Angeles Times* Issue, 5 May

36.

2003, p. A27

Yael Tamir, "Pro Patria Mori!: Death and the State," in *The Morality of*

37.

Nationalism, ed. Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (New York City: Oxford

University Press, 1997), p. 235, 240-1.

Kasprzycka, E., "Jewish Uprising's Heroes Honored in Warsaw," *Los*

38.

Angeles Times, 1 May 2003, p. A15

See also an extended discussion of noble death in the Jewish and Christian

39.

traditions by Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and*

Noble Death (London: Routledge, 2002).

Israeli, R., "Islamikaze and their Significance," *Terrorism and Political*

40.

Violence, 9, (1997), p. 105.

Ibid., pp. 105-6

41.

The transformation of the WTC and its site into a sacred site and holy

42.

ground is truly a remarkable feat, given that it was surely one of the least loved

buildings in America until the moment of its demise. It went from saying

everything that could possibly be said about America in terms of its arrogant,

pushy projection of raw power onto the Manhattan skyline to being a tender

embodiment of human hopes and dreams. See the WTC images from University of

California, Riverside Spontaneous Shrines website www.shrines.ucr.edu
<http://www.biega.com/wwa-3.html>

43.

In the case of bin Laden, it is Islam that one wants to create in the world of

44.

globalized political and economic entities, but outside and above the nation-state –
above the superimposition of that invention of godless *philosophes* and Jacobins
upon the Muslim world.

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991). p. 7.

45.

Ibid. p. 53.

46.