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Suicide Bombers Martyrdom *vs.* the Death-Drive

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Abstract: We all easily recognize names which sounded exotic only a short while ago: Hezbollah, HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Tamil Tigers, Gama'a al-Islamia, PKK, al-Qaeda. They are the most notorious among other 17 organizations in the world that use suicide bombing as the prime tactical weapon in pursuing their political goals. Since 1983 when the first suicide attack took place until today the number of suicide attacks has been increasing annually. The Tamil Tigers, a Sri Lanka separatist group that takes a lead in lethality, is responsible for more than half of all suicide attacks in the world. A percent of these attacks of all terrorist acts is low, but they account for a very high percent of total deaths due to terrorism.¹ Many analysts believe that death of those who commit the suicide bombing acts and following reprisals do not stop them and "more people are willing to become suicide bombers now than in the past."²

There have been numerous, extensive, and laborious attempts to explain the behavior of suicide bombers using the theoretical apparatus of political science, sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology. In my opinion these approaches are all limited, emphasizing this or that aspect of phenomena which have human consciousness as their key element and which therefore cannot be reduced to observable facts and treated with methods of concrete humanitarian sciences. I deal here not only with manifestations of certain religious ideology, cultural attitudes, and certain political behavior, but with extremely complex states of the human mind which are often called "border-line" and seem to defy common rational and factual logic in attempts to understand them. Even the normal human mind and psyche become fuzzy and legitimate gray

areas for scientific research, especially when faced with artistic or religious personalities. Furthermore, if we deal from the onset with obviously counter-intuitive psychological deviations, dangerous mental abnormalities, and self-destructive behavioral paradigms, the theoretical challenges increase tremendously. Still, these psychological phenomena are consistent in their own right, and therefore we can and must try to elucidate and understand them as meaningful.

What I am about to offer is an attempt to shed some light on suicide bombing using the phenomenological approach and some elements of comparative analysis developed and applied in religious studies. But before I formulate specifications and advantages, allow me to briefly overview some of the approaches in the analysis of suicide bombing so

¹ For the latest and most comprehensive statistics see numerous books, Internet publications, and interviews by Robert A. Pape.

² Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 39.

that we can better appreciate the capacity and uniqueness of a phenomenological undertaking.

Explaining Suicide Bombers' Behavior — Approaches and Limitations

Economic, historical, and sociological explanations, formulated soon after recent suicide attacks, interpreted actions of terrorists in terms of external variables or root causes. Among those were past exploitation, present oppression, poor living conditions, limited economic opportunities, lack of education, political alienation, social marginalization, cultural isolation, tight social restrictions typical of traditional Muslim communities or loose social involvement observed in new homes of Muslim immigrants in European countries, etc. But all these factors could also lead to emigration, attempts to get educations, change a social status, or to participation in reformist activity, domestic conflicts, attempts to topple the ruling figure—but not to suicide terrorist activity. Obviously they could be necessary factors, but not sufficient. Besides, many of suicide bombers came from the well-off middle class, highly educated, and successfully integrated families living in the West.

Psychological and psychoanalytical explanations operate with a set of internal variables—inner predispositions and motivations, deprived psychological types, self-affirmation through mutual denial, frustration over a dull unfulfilled life, grief over the loss of relatives and following revenge, lost selves, shared humiliation, mental outbursts, anxiety, or a pathological need to have enemies, etc.³ A majority of psychologists view suicide terrorists along the same lines as they view lonely and lost individuals, though none of them demonstrate characteristics consistent with a suicidal condition and act alone based entirely on his/her personal reading of the problems they are trying to solve. Just the opposite can be the case when they belong to a group whose members of fully aware of what they are, strongly determined, and act with a clear understanding of their purpose.

Political explanations—the most comprehensive has been offered by Robert Pape,⁴ who emphasizes the fact that religious fanaticism is not the foundation for

suicide terrorist practices. According to political explanations, suicide bombing is an international coercive strategy aimed at pressuring a superior political power to make political or land concessions. In military terms it can be characterized as an asymmetric warfare conducted by small groups of non-state actors against a big state or a number of states. Terrorists consciously and rationally perfect their weapons and came up with an idea of human bomb which has been successful in obtaining demands from governments committing what they perceive as injustice towards them. But this analysis for the most part ignores the role of Islam in this process, its unique characteristics as a religion, historical practices, Islamist political ideology, and the early indoctrination of Arab youth in refugee camps, all of which seriously contributes to the development of this lethal weapon. Also, certain characteristics of the terrorist mentality must be spelled out because they are not just subjective factors which are irrelevant in the analysis of the content of a certain political strategy, but factors which contribute to the formation of very objective behaviors.

Anthropological explanations in the analysis of suicide bombing, in my opinion, come closer to the level of sophistication of the phenomena under investigation because they proceed from a particular culture, operate with a complex of different factors—historical, social, religious, and perceptual, and present facts in a non-judgmental manner, which is extremely difficult considering the violent nature of the events we are trying to explain. Surprisingly, such different experts as anthropologist Talal Asad,⁵ and senior counterinsurgency adviser to the Multi-National Forces in Iraq, David Kilcullen,⁶ both take similar approaches when talking about the right methodology in the analysis of terrorism and suicide bombing. Instead of using the "abstract or cross-cultural definitions of religion," Talal Asad advises us to look at religion as a "social and historical fact, which has legal dimensions, domestic dimensions, political and economic dimensions."⁷ David Kilcullen also notes that "since the new threats are not state-based, the basis of our

³ See for example the above-mentioned book by Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, or, Anver Falk, *Fratricide in the Holy Land* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

⁴ See Mia Bloom or Anver Falk, cited above.

⁵ Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁶ David J. Kilcullen, "[New Paradigms for 21st Century Conflict](#)," in *Countering the Terrorist Mentality*, eJournalUSA, electronic journal of US Department of State, May 2007.

⁷ Interview for *AsiaSource*, December 2007.

approach should not be international relations (the study of how nation-states interact in elite state-based frameworks) but anthropology—the study of social roles, groups, social status, institutions, and relations within human population groups, in non-elite, non-state-based frameworks.⁸

Cultural anthropology, however, might view the use of violence and violent behavior as intrinsic features of any social order whether it is ancient or modern, industrially developed or backward, ours or theirs. Violence is used for the formation of social order and touches practically all the aspects of human life which are tightly interwoven at the initial states of human civilization; at the more advanced stages, it becomes a prerogative of religious or political elites and is used as a means to maintain or defend a particular social order and values. Talal Asad, in his book *On Suicide Bombing*, states that both isolated suicide bombers and well-organized modern states turn to violence to secure the wellbeing of their actual or potential communities.

Can we differentiate between these two kinds of violence? Can violence be just and unjust and can it be grounded religiously, habitually, politically, or legally? Can religious pronouncements, decrees and past religious practices provide justification for violent actions in the present? To answer these questions, the anthropological perspective is not very useful since cultural relativism views the use of violence, suicides, and sacrificial behavior as matters of cultural perception and sensitivity. In other words, we tend to judge something as wrong and unjust simply because we, looking from the inside of our own culture, see it in this way.

It appears that there is no way out of the vicious circle of cultural relativism apart from the application of a different kind of reflection. This alternative approach, I contend, is the phenomenological one, which allows a researcher to be both inside and outside a particular culture, experience, or political position. The phenomenological approach does not consider suicide bombers' actions as social facts, political statements, or religious events. These actions are performed by a certain kind of people with certain states of mind. These states of mind cannot be completely determined by and described in terms of a given religion or culture. Two sets of factors participate in their constitution:

(a) internal—various acts of consciousness, and (b) external—cultural habits, religious ideas, or political moods. The phenomenological approach moves closer to consciousness, though not as empty (there is no such thing) but as filled with meanings; it makes a move to "things themselves" as they are given to consciousness. By suspending the validity of an actual religious faith, cult, or behavior, the phenomenological *epochē* permits consciousness to present these phenomena as meanings and to analyze the elements that participate in their constitution.

For example, a phenomenologist does not need to believe in the Christian Trinity in order to understand what this faith involves; he does not need to be a part of sacrificial festivities in Islam in order to understand what they are needed for. And yet he is *in* the experience he is trying to understand from within though he is not affected by it since its validity is neutralized through the bracketing procedure of analysis. The difference is similar to that between live bacteria causing disease and a dead one in a vaccine securing staying healthy. In this sense you can say that if you understand the meaning of something you have an experience of this something, i.e. you are affected by it, but at the same time you are immune against its potential destructive capacity. Observing states of mind from such a position, the phenomenologist turns his/her attention to more elementary concepts that are familiar and presupposed in a given experience, for example, in religious faith. One can find these concepts present in many different religions and cultures. Therefore, it is in the logic of the phenomenological approach to look into other religious and cultural traditions to present more clearly the meanings we want to discover.

In the present case, faced with the task of understanding human bombs, the cultural environment in the Middle East, and the *Jihad* in radical Islamist ideologies, we have to search for the meaning of death specified in such acts as suicide, martyrdom, and sacrifice. It should also be mentioned that death couldn't be accessed by the human senses or mind in any other way, but only in terms of the meaning of death, as both Jaspers and Heidegger contend. That is why phenomenology is not only highly appropriate in the analysis of suicide bombing, but is the only methodology that can help us to understand this phenomenon.

⁸ David J. Kilcullen, op.cit.

Explicating the Meaning of Suicide, Martyrdom, and Sacrifice – A Phenomenological Approach

A suicide terrorist complex, viewed phenomenologically, is a state of mind that can be traced in human behavior in different cultures. But only if we take a more radical reflective position toward ourselves and see our beliefs in juxtaposition with the other religious traditions we can grasp the specifics in each. We can endlessly argue about how drastically different Christianity, Judaism and Islam are on the issues of sacrifice and death, but once we see them in the context of other religious perspectives, say, those of Buddhists or Shintoists, the differences between these three Abrahamic religions are diminished significantly.

Islam

According to practically all sources and all authoritative interpreters, there is only one sentence in Koran which can be interpreted as banning suicide, but in fact it is not quite clear what it exactly forbids when it states "do not kill themselves" and many read it as "do not kill each other."⁹ There is a forbidding suicide statement by Prophet: "whoever commits suicide with a piece of iron, he will be punished with the same piece of iron in the Hell."¹⁰ But Islamic spiritual authorities inspire Moslem believers to commit *jihad*, viz., a self-sacrificial struggle for the success of the Islamic cause which can be fulfilled in four ways: (a) with faith in his heart; (b) by preaching or proselytizing with his tongue; (c) by good deeds with his hands; and (d) by confronting unbelievers or enemies with the sword. According to Bernard Lewis, however, the majority of classical theologians and jurists interpret this in a military sense because *Jihad* is central to the Muslim perception of a world divided between *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (abode of war).¹¹ *Jihad* is needed to perfect the first and to extend the second. The aim of *jihad* is clear – to establish God's rule on earth by compelling non-Muslims to embrace Islam. In Islamic practice one who is killed in *Jihad* becomes a martyr who is entitled to have a special place in Paradise and even be rewarded with virgins. *Jihad* received a special

treatment in the *Hadith* which further develops its content in the direction of military actions, viz., the holy war against unbelievers. The Assassin radical sect's founder, Hasan al-Sabbah, promised its members paradise if they died in the course of their mission.¹² All peaceful interpretations of *Jihad* are found in the earlier verses of the Koran when Mohammed and his followers were a small group ready to make compromises. Once Mohammed's followers became stronger, they advocated violent *Jihad* more actively and these verses became more authentic, according to the principle of abrogation, viz., that the Koran's later verses are more authoritative than the earlier ones.¹³ Thus aggression and fighting were initially forbidden; later it became permissible (Koran 2:19) and subsequently obligatory (Koran 9:5). The "verse of sword" thus abrogated, canceled, and replaced the 124 verses which call for tolerance, compassion, and peace.

The most influential Islamist ideologues, Abu Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, and Hasan al-Banna, put *Jihad* at the center of their teachings. The most recent Palestinian Jihadist, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (1941-1989), claimed that "violent revolution through *Jihad* against both secular governments in majority of Muslim states and against the West is necessary and that Jihadists and terrorists themselves are invincible."¹⁴ Azzam was the major influence for Osama bin Laden and his second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who pronounced *Jihad* against both an internal enemy (Arab infidel regimes) and external enemies in areas which are not controlled by Moslems on the basis that "Islamic law states that the Islamic faith is more important than life, honor, and property." Such slogans as "Europe is the cancer, Islam is the answer" and "Islam will dominate the world" are to become a reality through suicide bombing which is a "legitimate technique" to carry out these intentions. Mawdudi, Banna, and Qutb also developed Ibn Taymiya's ideas of *Jihad* (Islamic scholar of 13th –14th century) and warned against reemergence of *Jahilia*, the pre-Islamic state of ignorance, fighting, and barbarism, and anarchy.

¹² See Bernard Lewis, *Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003).

¹³ David Bukay, "Peace or Jihad? Abrogation in Islam," in *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall, 2007.

¹⁴ David Bukay, "The Religious Foundation of Suicide Bombing, Islamist Ideology," in *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2006.

⁹ Koran, Verse 4:29

¹⁰ Hadith Bukhari: 2:445

¹¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 72.

HAMAS in its 1987 charter adopted the suicide bombing ideology and practice against Israel. Two of the highest authorities in Islam law, Sheikh Sa'id al-Tantavi, head of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdallah al Sabil, a member of the Saudi Council of Islamist Clerics, decried suicide attacks on the basis that Islamic law forbids killing civilians, suicide, and protects Jews and Christians as the people of the Book; but if they are outside the Islamic country they can be killed in the name of Jihad. The most radical Jihadist mind belongs to Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi who with the Koran in hand justifies suicide bombing, acts of terrorism, and the murder of civilians, making *Jihad* for the sake of God totally legitimate religiously.

Mohammed M. Hafez, a visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Missouri in Kansas City, writes that the Islamist ideology took a new spin following the war in Iraq.¹⁵ The government shaped on the principles of secularism and nationalism, with Shia representatives portrayed by the Jihadists as a plot led by crusaders and Zionists. Secularism divides the world into religious and nonreligious spheres and the true Muslims must reject it as violation of God's commands. Nationalism, by stressing identity based on common language and geographic borders, opposes the real unity of Muslims in a global community without borders.

Judaism and Christianity

While suicide, as the attempt to interfere in one's destiny determined by Allah, is banned in Koran, sacrifice, including sacrificial death in Jihad, is legitimate and appears always to be valid since the Moslem faith must be constantly advanced or defended. On the other hand, in Judaism and Christianity a martyr is a person who sacrifices his life, suffers torture, and would be rather killed than to renounce his or her belief.

In what follows, I will refer to the data collected by Grigory Chartishvili in his two-volume study on the problem of suicide.¹⁶ This is a comprehensive work dedicated to different understanding of suicide in

different cultures, major religions, philosophy, psychology and literature. It is a very handy source reference offering information on a touchy subject and I find it extremely useful to trace suicide themes through history, cross cultures, by way of interdisciplinary methodology.

In Judaism suicide is banned, but in the Old Testament there are a number of cases (seven) where suicides are justified, mostly as a means to avoid shame or disgrace of being enslaved, as echoed in the Masada fortress and later in Jewish communities under the threat of forced conversion to Christianity, and most recently in the fate of Treblinka Jews for whom suicide was the act of liberation from inhumane treatment. The famous case of Samson is more complex because he is glorified as hero for the way he slew Philistines by way of his death. Still another aspect of the meaning of suicide can be found in the story of Abimelech, who killed his seventy brothers to become king. Later in a battle a woman threw a fragment of millstone at him and injured his head. At once he asked a young man to slay him with a sword for he did not want to die from a woman's hand. But at the same time it was the way God punished him for his wickedness.

The Talmud allows a Jew to kill himself if "he is otherwise to become an idolater, murderer, or adulterer" (*IVS* 65). In post-Talmudic times, suicide is qualified as the one of the worst crimes for the same reason as it was condemned later in Islam, namely, the rejection of God's judgment and disregard to the future life. Though these kinds of crimes were not for humans to judge, since they were beyond human capacity to understand, only the heavenly office was in position to consider these cases. An attempt to commit suicide was punished with lashing. If a person succeeded in his act he was not denied burial rites though they were performed in an abridged manner, and relatives were pitied but not the one who died from his own hand.

In the New Testament there is only one suicide—the notorious suicide of Judas, who is strongly condemned not as a self-murderer but as a traitor. But the most challenging case of suicide was that of Christ himself. If one holds as true that Jesus took death upon himself willingly, being fully conscious of his mission on Earth, serious questions arise with regard to the nature of God. The early Christian martyrs followed their master's way by reenacting their Lord's passions and suffering on the cross, and many died by being inspired by Christ's painful death.

¹⁵ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, (US Institute of Peace Press: 2007).

¹⁶ Grigory Chartishvili, *The Writer and Suicide*, (Moscow: Zakharov, 2006). [Henceforth cited as *WS*.]

Nevertheless, suicide is considered a great sin in Christianity, since one who commits such a sinister action threatens God's full control over life and death. Suicides were feared as being inspired by Devil. The hearts of those who had committed suicide were sometimes pierced with a wooden stick, as in the case of alleged vampires, and they were denied proper burial procedures and rites. Augustine wrote that suicide was "a worse sin than a murder, for there is no one left to repent" (WS 59). Thomas Aquinas viewed suicide as a triple crime against God who gives a gift of life, against social laws; and against human instincts of self-preservation. A criminal legal provision against suicide was lifted from British law only in 1961 (WS 59).

On the other hand, there are Christian martyrs who gave their life for their faith, Crusaders, and thousands of Old Believers, who preferred to burn themselves rather than deal in any way with the government (perceived as a Devil's tool), sometimes on a very routine matter, such as answering standard demographic questions on census form. But it is important to keep in mind that most of these acts of suicide have been committed without the intention of hurting or inflicting damage on others. When these acts did have such an intention to fight for the sake of the faith, this did not imply an intention to die on the side of performers themselves. Crusaders were ready to die for the cause, but death itself came as a by-product of their activity and as an occupational hazard. They did not use their death as weapon.

However, the idea of God holding the ultimate knowledge of life and death, the supreme control over life and death, and as a consequence the prohibition of suicide seems to be common ground between all the Abrahamic religions. This principle becomes even clearer if one juxtaposes ideas associated with life and death in these religions with the views of some Eastern spiritual traditions. For our purposes, then, it makes sense to briefly look at the Buddhist and Zen ideas of death and suicide

Sacrifice and Suicide in Abrahamic and Non-Abrahamic Religions—Major Differences

Buddhism attempts to transcend the difference between life and death. It claims that both life and death are states that, being reflected on, can generate the expansion of consciousness. They become relative states of consciousness in the process of approaching advanced stages of enlightenment. For those who mastered expansion of consciousness life does not have

a supreme value and death does not carry a tragic element. That is why a suicide is permissible if an adept has reached a considerably advanced stage of his awakening and, in his opinion, there is nothing else which could be a condition for further enlightenment or bring him further knowledge necessary to maintain his presence in the fullness of consciousness. Though there could be situations when a suicide is welcome for "it moves a person ahead on the chain of reincarnations and can even break it" (WS 93). Buddhist monks, who become politically active trying to stand up against oppressive policies of government in many Buddhist countries, whether long ago or in recent history, provide telling examples of these attempts at self-transcendence.

Indeed, most Eastern religions see no sense in suicide since they hold to the truth of the idea of reincarnation. In Hinduism, Brahmans were allowed to commit suicide at a considerably old age and if they had at least one son. He will be born again and his action will be taken in consideration. In Taoism a sage is immune to death because he already knows the whole, which embraces nature and heaven. Immortality consists of natural change of seasons. Consequently, for a sage to be immortal includes his death.

A Japanese version of Buddhism, Zen, is "tougher, more severe, and dismal teaching" (WS 78), partly because it contrasted itself against the indigenous Japanese religion, Shinto, which "worships all forms of life and is totally oblivious to the reality of death" (WS 78). Samurais have adopted and even developed the Zen teaching proceeding from their own experience of constant improvement of killing techniques, preparedness for defense, and perpetual fighting. The best warrior is one who is not afraid to die. The most certain death is the one by one's own hand because in a battle there still is a chance for survival. Therefore, the best kind of death is suicide. A very elaborate and complex code of suicide was worked out to make it difficult for Samurais to conduct a proper suicide, which was indeed genuine and answer to its spiritual purpose. Can we call this act suicide? When a person gives up life, not as a burden or a source of pain, not because he wants to finish suffering and put an end to destruction of both physical and mental condition for the activity of the Self, but because he has developed a state of mind which does not need life to live and does not need death to die, what do we have as regards the meaning of suicide? Can one call Samurais victims of their own beliefs? Or can we call their actions sacrifice based on their own principles?

In this regard, Kamikazes deserve special consideration in the context of the analysis of suicide terrorist behavior. The practice was widely used by the Japanese military starting in 1944 out of humiliation and as revenge over losing war. It is well documented and reflected in many books and movies. But for our purposes the most interesting is not Kamikaze motivation, which was clearly nationalist and needed no religious justification. We need to consider later reflections since these reflections demonstrate how perceptions of death and attitudes toward suicide are deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

A story of young Japanese soldiers who willingly sacrificed their bodies to fight an enemy has been highly poeticized and mythologized. The Kamikaze warrior was compared with Sakura, a cherry tree flower in blossom.¹⁷ Cherry trees have beautiful flowers, perfect ones, flowers with no fruit; this flower in full bloom stays open a few days and then with a wind blow falls on the ground in its peak beauty with no sign of withering. In essence, the Kamikaze warrior perceives this when he performs his act and this is how he makes sure that he will stay in people's memory as forever young, strong, and tender. He becomes immortal. This is how all three notions (death, suicide, and sacrifice) are linked in perfect aesthetic unity.

The total opposite is the case in the Abrahamic religions, where God is a powerful and controlling figure who loves and protects his creation. In other words, God loves humans but punishes them when they go beyond divinely established limits. Life and death are in God's hands, not in the hands of humans. Death in the Eastern spiritual tradition is not a forbidden fruit. An individual can claim his right to die and "consume" the knowledge death is loaded with (a near-death condition, living in the presence of death, contemplating the meaning of death, etc.) once it illuminates him and offers a path leading to the experience of the sublime, bliss, harmony, and eternal beauty. It is not surprising that Japan is among countries where suicide rate is the highest.

Clarification of Terminology

Now we are in a position to further clarify the major terms that are in operation while thinking about suicide

terrorism. The common expression "suicide bomber" is misleading though it reflects our perception of actions of people who want to die with the intention to kill. Mentally they are in the state of mind similar to that of a person who is about to commit a suicide. But in most cases a suicide bomber is not suicidal. He or she is perfectly stable and fully conscious of the end of the act, which is not to kill oneself, but to kill others. Thus the suicide bomber manifests characteristics consistent with rather healthy mental states: deep social concern, engagement with the right cause of action, determination, focus, etc. The fact that they give up their lives for the sake of a great cause does not make them socially or religiously ostracized for their weakness and the violation of God's law. Rather, it makes them heroes in the eyes of their communities and martyrs in terms of their ideology. They are Jihadists (those who struggle) and use their lives and bodies as smart lethal weapons. Killing one's self is a means, a tool to fulfill trans-subjective goals. That is why it is better to call them "human bombs" rather than "bombers." The Russian language differentiates between suicides (самоубийцы) and death-marked dealers (смертники). Definitely some religions and cultures are more generous providing justification for such actions; but the content of ideas or social and cultural conditions are not sufficient to explain why certain individuals become suicide bombers. Certain psychological predispositions are required, but not necessarily a psychotic mentality obsessed with death and dying.

The term "martyr" is also misused when applied to the human bomb. We have to make a distinction between its two usages, direct and indirect, literal and metaphorical, religious and ideological or political. The first reflects a believer's involuntary great suffering, pain, and death as a result of persecution for his/her faith or great oppression of those who share this belief. The second stands for a person's voluntary act of death intended to obtain all kinds of outcomes, whether to influence or pressure a political party, kill people, cause suffering, disseminate fear, create material damage, consciously conceived and willingly executed in a planned manner. The first is a manifestation of strong faith; the second is the ideological and military application of faith. Hugh Barlow introduced a new

¹⁷ See, for example, Rikihei Inoguchi, Tadashi Nakajima and Robert Pineau, *Divine Wind*, (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

term "predatory martyrdom"¹⁸ which reflects unique features of the behavior of Islamist martyrs.

The concept of "sacrifice" also needs further clarification in the context of a particular culture. Here again two aspects of sacrifice are to be differentiated: religious and political. A particular religion might and might not include a provision for sacrifice. But a politically charged religious ideology, of which Islam is the best example, relies on, calls for, and glorifies such sacrificial acts. Distinctions must also be drawn between religiously required sacrifice, for example, the sacrificial expiatory death of Christ and its unbloody repetition in the Mass, which brings salvation to humankind, as developed in Christianity and sacrificial acts at war or self-denial behavior which, according to this belief, help a community to survive at difficult times. Can one qualify the behavior of suicide bombers as sacrificial—if they act as though they have a win-win scenario in their mind? In fact, their sacrifice is laden with gains. For themselves they secure their place in Paradise and in historical memory of their people; for their families they often provide financial means and respect of the entire community; and for their communities they forge the next step for the glorious future of Islam. Death appears to be more like a smart investment rather than a sacrifice.

On the other hand, one who commits a politically motivated sacrifice might at the very moment of the detonation of explosives feel authentic religious elation caused by a successful execution of God's will and one's own destiny. It is not a relief associated with liberation from unbearable pain, burden, suffering, or disgrace; neither is it the soldier's pride of feeling good for the job well done. It may be difficult to assess if such person acts as a religious believer or political pragmatic. Or at this highest point, face to face with God, can we really dissociate one from the other?

Does Death Attract Humans?

Suicide-Wish – A Symptom of A Profound State of Mind Facing the Transcendental?

Are there Positive Elements in Death-Drive or Death-Obsession?

So far we have been dealing mostly with the content side of the states of mind of suicide bombers, i.e., with

what religious and ideological doctrines as well as cultural habits offer as motives or justification for such acts. But it is obvious that all these ideas and provisions can work only if they are seeded into the right soil. The human mind should be receptive in a certain way to take them in, brew them in a certain way, and shape a certain behavioral outcome. In common language the formulation of this problem would sound something like "Are suicide bombers crazy?" But there are more formal and scientifically sound ways to put it. Has a suicide bomber's mind been victimized by powerful illusions? Are those who sacrifice their bodies to the great cause so naive that they cannot differentiate between facts and metaphors? Are suicide bombers psychotics whose minds are fixated on the reality of death, which appears to be a quick fix for everything by a single blow? Are self-sacrificial states of mind infected with death-obsession? Is there a terrorist complex or a suicide bomber complex treatable by way of psychoanalytical techniques or using methods of cognitive psychology? A professional therapist, psychoanalyst, or neurobiologist might be able to answer these questions. I can view them here from the perspective of a phenomenologist who attempts to understand them in a wider cultural or spiritual context, i.e., to address the meaning of suicide, the meaning of sacrifice, the meaning of martyrdom.

Jaspers' approach in the analysis of suicide is similar. The sciences of psychiatry and sociology can offer explanations to suicidal behavior because they treat it as a result of a particular cause, i.e., as a disease, or as statistical data. In this case, suicide is how police and relatives see it, and it can be logical. In the second instance, however, we cannot explain it; we can only try to understand it because suicide always remains something unclear, a mystery, a limit situation for a human soul facing the abyss, the sphere of the transcendental, and the realm of absolute freedom. Following this path, a human being can develop an existential profile, gain his/her authentic being, and taste real freedom. In other words, contemplations of the meaning of suicide can bring a person something positive.

What about other death-laden situations? In most cases we are inclined to think about any idea which carries a death seed as troubling, be it a noble wish to save humankind fighting for the just cause of democracy, an unjust cause of *Jihad*, or a selfish desire to escape unbearable psychological pain. But when we try to understand from within a suicide or readiness to

¹⁸ Hugh Barlow, *Dead for Good*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

die, not to explain it as a fact by finding its cause, such situations do not look like totally negative and destructive acts of the human psyche. We have seen how one's decision to fight the right cause all the way to death can mobilize the human mind. We have seen how Jihadists became extremely focused and determined after their decision to die for their cause. We have seen how strong the inner integration of suicide bombers was. One can argue that such cases are the result of massive brainwashing. Or one can treat them as acting under the influence of a psycho-drug, Amok-driven and moving like zombies. One can argue that the proximity of death does not activate their will toward the transcendental, but just the opposite, makes it dysfunctional, so that they can be used as means to reach the goal of disseminating fear among the population of democracies and forcing governments to make concessions.

Yes, one can argue in this way. But I am trying to make a point that psychologically near-death experiences can be an integrating force for the Self. Somehow experiencing proximity to death empowers the human mind. It could cure neuroses, fears, frustrations, and anxieties; it could even tame a blind anger. History provides many examples of this, beginning with Christianity for which the near presence of Apocalypses was crucial, especially during the early periods of its formation, up to existentialism for which awareness of death was a tool to engage human reflective potentials, to shape the authentic Self under the advance of mass culture, totalitarian ideologies, and technological one-dimensional ways of thinking. If there are obstacles on the way of a more profound understanding of the near-death experience, whether tradition, religious norms, or cultural habits, which do not allow people to become more aware of their death, to enjoy more degrees of freedom, to take more responsibility for their actions and be accountable for them before their own conscience, then such obstacles need to be discussed and analyzed.

As mentioned above, however, it is not clear whether near-death experiences, gaining self-awareness in proximity of death, or taking death into one's own hands, are valid or illusionary states of mind which can be solutions to the problems one faces inside or outside oneself. But we can question the foundational status of any faith or any ideology. Any faith or ideology can be an illusionary state of mind based on an arbitrary set of presuppositions or, say, a misfit value system. No matter how we answer these

questions we can analyze and can learn from all states of consciousness, whether illusionary and wrong, or adequate and right. We desperately need to learn from the experience of those who willingly subject themselves to the direct exposure of their own death. After all, it is not only Jihadists, but modern biologists who make people think more and more about the human capacity to control life and death. If God makes concessions and grants his true followers the right to manipulate their own lives for his own sake, if the radical Islamist ideology is developing even faster, and if God, pushed by modern biology, is losing his grip on human life and death, in short, if the further secularization of the human mind is increasing at an uncontrollable rate, human beings must take seriously the task of securing a rational basis for the right to live or die for themselves. Yes, people have to exercise these rights with tremendous care and understanding; they also have to train and perfect their reason to deal with all the new demands of situations involving decisions over life and death. The comprehensive secularization of the human mind which manifests itself in the emancipation of death from God's domain presupposes that the human mind becomes more mature and more responsible and can handle its functioning under the influence of the most comprehensive freedom. Misuse and abuse of death-drive, seductive ideological illusions, manipulative imposturous faiths, and misapplications of the right to die are real dangers in the contemporary world because they are driven not only by the science-based secularization of the human mind, but by its complete opposite, namely, the further imprisonment of human minds by mass-culture. The first topples down the idols, the second rebuilds them up right away.

A mass-culture factor is not just an adjective used to nuance the contemporary process of secularization of mind in the West. It affected cultural developments in the East as well. Though many Moslem scholars, not necessarily radical anti-Western minded Islamists, have reproached contemporary Western culture, and American in particular, for its materialism, pragmatism, and lack of spirituality, one can make a counter-argument that suicide bombers are also the products of mass-production and the pop tendencies in contemporary Moslem culture. The substance and applications might be different, but the mechanisms are the same. Material mass-production brings abundance of cheap and easily available material pop-culture products; spiritual mass-production manufactures

spiritual pop-products, glossy revelations, and glamorous picturesque paradises. All that conditions the consciousness of millions and spiritual work in pop-religions is turned to be effortless. Sound-bite sermons come as commodities available in the theatre near you; spiritual quests which used to be life-long existential engagements are substituted with immediately gratifying one size fits all formulas; and salvation is only a mouse-click away. These quick-fix answers attract people because they do not require extensive reading, searching, and allocation of other resources. They are present everywhere in the world, whether the Middle East, the Arab world, European countries, or the Americas; and they become potential human resources pools for ideologues of terrorism and suicide bombing. If both of tendencies related to the status of human mind in the contemporary world, i.e. the science-based secularization of human mind and mass-culture captivation of human spirit, keep on developing, all kinds of man-made violence, including suicide bombing advocated by radical Islamist ideology (which is a quasi-religious reaction to modernization penetrating the Moslem world) will keep on increasing, even though there are some indications that acceptance of violence and supporting bin Laden in some predominantly Moslem countries is declining, especially in those which suffered the most from al-Qaeda, Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁹

Summary

In this essay I have attempted to look at suicide bombing from the phenomenological point of view, i.e., to consider this phenomenon from the side of its content as ideas and practices developed by religion and the religious political ideologies, and also from mental presuppositions shared by suicide bombers. Some interpretations of the contents of Moslem faith, historical circumstances of spreading Islam in the world, and specifics of modern radical Islamist political ideologies provide substantial justification for a strong advocating of violence and using suicide bombing as the strategic weapon to gain political results. Still, such ideology would not work apart from dispositions in human mentality to adopt such ideas and make them operational. I made some comparison of the concepts of

sacrifice, martyrdom, and suicide in different spiritual traditions in order to determine some specifics of those concepts as present in Abrahamic religions. Jaspers's analysis of suicide provides a basis to demonstrate that mental states related to committing religiously or politically motivated suicides are not necessarily those which are traditionally associated with suicidal conditions described by psychotherapists. Finally, I looked at a death-drive in a positive perspective so we can learn something important for understanding the processes of integrating the Self, regardless of whom this death-drive belongs to, and apply it to understanding the right to die.

I realize that one very important aspect of the whole issue of violence as a necessary element of human community and culture, namely, sacrifice, did not receive the attention it deserves in this essay. This happened because I also realize that this subject requires putting the central idea, the major event, the very drama and the nerve of Christianity on philosophical trial, namely, the self-sacrifice of Christ. When C. G. Jung made an attempt to subject sacrificial acts to his rational interpretation (rational from his point of view) he first mentioned that what he was about to say could sound like blasphemy, but he still intended to go ahead with it because awareness in this matter was crucially important for him. In short, analyzing the content of the universal Christian message, love, and the means of its delivery, human/divine self-sacrifice, might add to our comprehension of human sacrificial behavior. But this is a topic for a different study.

¹⁹ See the poll's data collected for the [Pew Global Attitudes Project](#) and published in September 2007