On "Sacrifice, Gift and the Social Logic of Muslim 'Human Bombers'"
What Got Me Started; What Kept Me Going

Discontents about theorizing in religious studies – theorizing in 'thin air'?

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

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

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

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

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

A series of inescapable facts and impressions....

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

- Seemingly *senseless, irrational, meaningless, fanatical, crazy, profoundly sad, sick*....

- Obvious connections with religion

- Widespread and commonplace tendency to avoid *understanding* and engage in value

judgments – either denunciation or celebration.

- a lesson for 'theory and method'? The need for *understanding* – phenomenological or hermeneutic method – is as great as ever.

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

Some Main Points of the Argument

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

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

- <u>Contesting sacrifice</u>, <u>contesting the gift and the giving</u>: older Abrahamic sacrificial ideology of sacrifice as a prudent 'giving *of*' seems to have given way among Islamists to an ideology drawn from the model of Muhammad's assertion of his willingness to 'give *up*' himself totally.

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

- In the human bombers' act of giving, receiving and reciprocating, the <u>sacred</u> is deployed.

- This deployment of the *sacred* does not mean either that such a deployment is *good,* or

that <u>what</u> is deployed is *good*. In this sense, the phenomenon of the human bombers as a *religious* phenomenon may be considered a model case of <u>religion as 'bad.'</u>

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