

Some Remarks to Violence and Islam in the Time of *Death of God*.

LEVENT TEZCAN

1. REFLECTIONS IN CULTURAL TOOLS OF DEALING WITH VIOLENCE

Whatever connotations the term “Return of Religion” may contain, one constant seems to be uncontested: that it is always Islam that is meant by this revival. And if we define more specifically by confining ourselves to the question of violence and religion, we are directed immediately to Islam. That, at least, is the impression that has dominated since 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution and the attack on the Kaaba by Islamist terrorists. Who could seriously dare to claim that this is all just a misunderstanding, or based on prejudices against Islam? Some Muslims seem to be committed to supporting such a negative classification of Islam by all means. Several different conclusions can be drawn from this state of affairs. Let me state some of the popular versions.

One explanation that seemingly defends Islam is that none of this has anything to do with religion, instead social problems are the cause (economic inequalities, lack of political freedom, etc.). Many Muslims hurry on, by now somewhat frustrated, to emphasise that the word Islam means peace. In this argumentation of social causality the religion appears as a dependent variable.

According to a modified version of this thesis, religion becomes to some degree independent from this social determinism, but remains in the field of social forces. Islam seems to be violent due to its very nature, but this nature is constituted historically through the absence of modernity (Enlightenment, Reformation, etc.). The way the emergence of Islam was accompanied by wars and conquest from the very beginning, also plays a very important role in this argument.

In yet another explanation, religion is attributed a totally independent status and now it can be only the very nature of Islam itself that by necessity creates violence. According to this theory Islam has also been the main obstacle to modernity in Muslim countries – it is not the social circumstances that hinder Islam, but on the contrary Islam that obstructs individual evolution and social development.

It is not surprising that the hidden counterpart of statements about Islam has inevitably been Christianity, whether as a historically domesticated religion which has learned to accept its restrained role in society or as a belief that calls for peace as the very essence of its nature – as René Girard describes it, without forgetting its violent history. Of course none of these arguments are actually as simplistic as I have outlined here. I simplify not to shoot them down, but in order manoeuvre a way through them.

2. VIOLENCE AND HISTORICAL SENSITIVITY

What about our sensitivity regarding violence? Who are the subjects, we, who have been so sensitised in issues of violence? What are the conditions of the subject who attempts to understand the connection between violence and religion in this day and age? The subject deals with phenomena in a given historical state of involvement. Contextualising helps us to avoid hubris. For in all the general talk about the moral superiority of the modern Western world, certain historical experiences seem to have vanished from cultural memory. Neither with regard to the advent of the First World War nor to the period through until the end of the Second World War would it be easy to claim that a culture of peace prevailed in Europe and America.

It seems to me that this feeling of a general end of violence came up historically especially after the Second World War, and even more so after the end of the Cold War, when a stream of *renouncements of violence* can be observed in the cultural mood. However, this renouncement, this renunciation of violence has been accompanied by a far-reaching process of sanctioning, concentrating, monopolising violence in institutions, ultimately with a trend towards international institutions. Violence is being taken out of personal relations. The other side of depersonalisation of violence is the idea of the state of nature, and the political state starts by taking violence out of the personal realm. In that sense, as Derrida states that individual violence violates not only particular laws but also the order of law as such (Derrida 1991, 73). The violent gesture of sovereignty inbuilt in the heart of the law is still alive and as a principle stays beyond the law.

Of course, this universal principle necessarily appears in particular shapes, always contaminated by the struggles of particular forces and interests. If we for example look at the United Nations, which is universally respected, this structure is on the other hand legitimated and constituted by historical power relations, although on the other hand the universalistic drive in it produces pressure to overcome this current particularity in the name of principle. To sum up, the current sensitivity concerning violence applies especially to individual violence and violence outside of legitimised institutions. This process of monopolisa-

tion of violence has been accompanied by another development: the power to exercise violence is becoming invisible, replaced by therapeutic and disciplinary practices. Foucault's *Studies* (1977) conceptualised this momentous change in the operation of power with the term of *biopolitics*. Power no longer celebrates its sovereignty publicly on the body. Violence becomes invisible, translated into discipline, fostering, healing, etc.

A third phenomenon seems to become increasingly established in parallel with this development: Care for the victim. This offers a profound explanation for the current sensitivity in favour of the victim, e.g. renouncement of violence. This is the globalisation of the Christian culture of care for the victim that first appears in parts of the Old Testament and really comes to the fore in the Gospels. René Girard has developed this thesis in several books (especially Girard 2002). Here the genealogical perspective (Christian roots) meets the historical contextualisation (monopolisation of power in formal institutional structures; see also Derrida's term of "Latinization" in Derrida and Vattimo 2001). Put briefly, mimetic rivalry is triggered by human desire to desire what the others desire. In order to bring forth unanimity or communal harmony, the violence (resulting from mimetical desire) is channelled onto a scapegoat which embodies both: sacred and evil. According to Girard, Christianity as documented in the Gospels presents a systematic rejection of the mimetical mechanism; it rejects a unity reached at the expense of a victim. Girard refers to Peter (and later to Paul) who accept guilt themselves rather than blaming the victim. The Gospels stand up for the victim, put an end to sacrificial religion, and prepare the cultural ground for a demystification of social relations. The demystifying act, however, contains the inner threat too: society forfeits its ritual defence mechanism. Mimetic rivalry continues in the endless competition about who is the real victim, who suffers more and so on. We live in an age of affirmative victimhood, but according to Girard this is a perversion of the original message of the Gospels. Unlike Girard, Nietzsche interpreted that mechanism as being a result of the internalisation of guilt. He distinguishes Jesus (actually a new Buddha), from Christianity as religion. According to Nietzsche the resulting self-blame brought forth a culture of *resentment* which absolutely needs those who do not blame themselves, those who know no guilty conscience, in order to assure itself of its own moral superiority. We can match this love of the father who gave his own son in order to free us only if we feel guilt ourselves, if we feel responsible for that death. We can only cope with God's love by accusing ourselves and reimbursing our debt with interest (Deleuze 1985: 167).

It would be very interesting to discuss some of the conflicts with Islam in that light, for our time seems to witness a curious combination of extremes. On the one hand a culture with refined bad conscience as a cultural tool, but on the other hand a culture which doesn't accept that. That could be an interesting question for cross-cultural studies. Comparisons are more than a specific task for scientific analysis. We should consider them as real social operations the actors perform on their local arenas as an inexorable component of their self-understanding¹. I start with a general comparison of the concept sacrifice, before moving on to dramatic events of the moment.

3. ABOLITION OF SACRIFICE

By its abolition of the sacrificial cult, Girard states, the Christian Revelation not only demystifies the myths before it, but also makes it in principle impossible to create myths after it. In this radical dissolution of archaic sacredness Girard imbeds the opening of a future emancipated from old bondages and slaveries (2002: 229). This is an interesting point if we discuss the recent cartoon conflict from this perspective, which touched on the taboo against depicting the face of Muhammad (concealing vs. unveiling). Maybe we could interpret Girard's following statement in that context: By abolition of sacrifice, society on the other hand gives up its sacrificial immunisation. Again in the conflict over the Muhammad caricatures we experience an impulse to unveil which cannot be stopped by external religious instances but either by law or by morally loaded claims for respect. Indeed the dynamics of conflict the demystification unleashes become more dangerous because on the other side the Islamic religious culture is based on exactly the opposite, on the avoidance of unveiling. Of course, Christianity and Western societies also know bans and prohibitions regarding the sacred, these are (according Girard's theory) already in principle undermined intrinsically. Maybe this is where we find the reason for the radical drive to formal institutions that can only install a modus of handling and stop endless deconstruction temporally.

Unlike from Christianity, Judaism and Islam are ritual religions, both recognise specific ritual sacrifices. By performing circumcision and animal sacrifice (not any more performed by Jews) Islam has connected back to the Judaic tradition. The highest holy day of Islam is called the Feast of Sacrifice. On this day animal sacrifice is to be performed everywhere in the Muslim world. In Mecca during the pilgrimage animal sacrifice is part of a whole ritual, as stoning Satan is too. Within that rituality a specific culture of the body has been kept. Unfortunately this correspondence between ritual culture and the techniques of self have not been researched with regard to Islam. Let me sketch out some ideas about the body culture and sacrifice.

Due to its rituality it is highly important that the sacrificial act has to be performed with a knife. That may appear brutal to people in the West². Indeed at times there have been angry reactions in Germany - but also because the sacrificial act was performed in private homes, in bathrooms etc., and not in specific professional places like butcher's shops. Same problem repeated with regard to shehitah (kosher butchering). Shehitah requires the animal to be slaughtered while it is in a conscious state. Certain German organisations protested against that practice due to the pain the animals suffer, and some religious authorities like the Turkish Office for Religious Affairs responded to conflicts in Germany by issuing a fatwa allowing the animal to be anaesthetised before slaughter. On the other hand, the Higher Court allowed ritual butchering as an exceptional solution. This conflict has often been discussed by scientists and experts, but interestingly only in a juridical sense. The aspect of the specific nature of sacredness did not get taken seriously. The academic focus on the juridical aspect actually responded to the way the conflict was fought by the actors themselves. The rejection of sacrifice described by Girard found its empirical expression in the

critics' reaction to shehitah (butchering the conscious animal). According to him the abolition of (animal) sacrifice is connected to revulsion at the pain. I would add, not only disgusting the pain because the Islamic tradition also obliges some measures in order to limit the pain felt by the animal. Much more plausible for me is that a specific culture of body and its embedding in the institutional and production framework emerges here. On that issue, a specific inner connection between religion, capitalism and the culture of formal rights becomes much more apparent. I would like to try to approach it tentatively.

It is worthwhile noting that criticism of kosher butchering is expressed in terms of animal rights, not on the same level as the religious grounding of the Muslims. If the discourse means (in the sense of Michel Foucault) a regime of statements which allocates legitimate and illegitimate positions of speech, then the protest had to recur to a language of rights (of course it must not be forgotten that all this occurs under the historical condition of secularism). This connection between institutionalised rights and the rejection of sacrifice from the background of a de-ritualised religion is crucial and can – from a genealogical perspective – be connected to the context of capitalist production. Kosher butchering seems to partially resist capitalist logic where dispatching is a neutral act performed legitimately within the technical rationality. In that framework shehitah (kosher butchering) exposes itself as a culturally problematical (but legally allowed) phenomenon, because butchering and consumption are still tied to a sacrificial act. Maybe there is a similarity here to the arguments of Baudrillard (2003) that Islam to some extent resists modernity. Here there could be also a deeper, more intrinsic alliance between capitalism and religion (especially Christianity) than Max Weber proposed in his Protestantism thesis. Marx' description of capitalism, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" refers to the radical dissolution of everything into commodities, which means a demystification of things (1953: 205pp.), and the ground was prepared for this step in Christianity mainly by the abolition of sacrificial religion. Walter Benjamin stated that capitalism is a religion in which it is impossible to repay the debt. Jacques Derrida refers several times to such a connection in his text on belief and knowledge (*Glaube und Wissen*, Derrida and Vattimo 2001) but he fails to deliver a systematic analysis. The inner connection between debt, exchange and sacrifice appears in similar terms in Baudrillard's criticism of culture, but much more clearly:

God used to allow some space for sacrifice. In the traditional order, it was always possible to give back to God, or to nature, or to any superior entity by means of sacrifice. That's what ensured a symbolic equilibrium between beings and things. But today we no longer have anybody to give back to, to return the symbolic debt to. This is the curse of our culture. It is not that the gift is impossible, but rather that the counter-gift is. All sacrificial forms have been neutralized and removed (what's left instead is a parody of sacrifice, which is visible in all the contemporary instances of victimization). (2003)

I will return later to the idea that this alleged genealogical connection between the rejection of pain and the technical rationality of industrialisation finds its perverted expression in the language of American military, when the talk is of "surgical attacks" or "collateral damage". Clean surgical and industrialised death

without any bodily contact, any pain (as sudden death) on the one hand, and dirty plain murder on the other, culminating in the figure of the suicide bomber who touches others with his body, immediate bodily contact. These perversions, however, are not to be understood in the sense of causality. Such a logical deduction would be absolutely misleading. While both these expressions of body and death correspond with religious cultures, the work of modern rationality is needed for them to actually occur.

4. THE DEATH OF GOD

What does the death of God mean? How should it be related to the question of sacrifice? The first time Friedrich Nietzsche used it as a concept he was referring to Buddhism (1999, vol. 6: 186), but he later connected it more to Christianity (but not exclusively). If we follow the interpretation of Heidegger, the term means not just a theory but a fateful process embracing the whole planet (1963). It does not mean that the gods have disappeared, but rather that man has taken over the place of God (cf. Deleuze 1985: 168). This experience of God's death has been reflected affirmatively. In his specific interpretation of Nietzsche and Heidegger, the Italian philosopher Vattimo prefers a new understanding of Christianity based on the experience of the death of the (moral) God who still stood in the tradition of "natural religion" (2004). Girard's critical apology for Christianity similarly claims to escape historical Christianity and emerges within a space opened by this event. Inspired by European thought, Arab author Abdulwahab Meddeb looked for equivalent indications for the death of God in Islam (1994: 36). A relativisation of the verbal understanding of the Koran through the *imamat* (in Shia Islam) and the importance of saints seems to him to be the way God could die in that culture of an almighty God – but by doing so he reduces the event of the death of God to a hermeneutic problem³. When sociologists speak of a falling apart of value spheres (as Max Weber did) they translate the experience of the death of God into mechanisms of how society functions in the modern society. There is no central instance (highest value) in the struggle of titans. This lack of a highest value makes the competition between values much more dramatic. In the much more abstract language of the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, even the thesis of secularisation is thrown away. What we consider as the disappearance of religion is actually a transformation of the function religion was used to perform in the society. Each system operates autopoetically according to its own code, and does not need any mighty god. Religion too is forced to operate as a system; its differentiations however cannot advise the operations of other systems any more. The best explanation of what all that could mean when we consider Islam came not from science but from art. A cartoon (published in a French newspaper to support the Danish caricaturists) shows Buddha, Jehovah, Jesus and Muhammad. Jesus in the pose of the older brother tries to console Muhammad: "Don't complain Mohammad, we've all been caricatured here." In the light of these events it becomes clear that it does not matter what the particular cultural origin of the event of the death of God may be: as an event embracing the planet it challenges all belief systems including Islam.

Actually it would be wrong to state that the current violent reactions are the only possible reaction from the Islamic context. Islamic culture has created several cultural tools to water down rigid general rules, most of which originate from mysticism. By means of an unending deconstruction, the mystics searched for hidden sense and relativised the wording of Koran and commandments (as described by Meddeb, see above). By so doing, however, the mystics did not murder God, but connected to the culture of manners (*adab*), a culture of mannered behaviour: the importance of measure, to hold measure, to care for balanced behaviour. A common principle of the mystics was to keep this knowledge secret. When Hallac bin Mansur, a passionate mystic, announced openly “I am the Truth” (also in the sense of “God”), he got no support from the other mystics because he was guilty of having revealed the secret truth (Stauth 2003). This act of radical unveiling never attained a prevailing status in Muslim culture. One long-term effect of the avoidance of complete uncovering (as a fear of hubris) has been the emergence of a strong parallel underworld where humour, heresy, social criticism flourish⁴. Actually Turkish and Arab societies have always told much more dramatic insulting stories about religion, God and Muhammad than those found in the Danish caricatures or the novels of Salman Rushdie. The point is that people could shift between different realms. In the face-to-face interactions of private domestic milieus such jokes are very common. In the general public sphere, however, everyone has to tread carefully because here strangers with different interests and characters meet together. The most radical form of rebellion was rather quarrelling with God (Kermani 2005).

This classical way of dealing with ideas (a secret “murder” of God without an explicit announcement or confession) is becoming difficult. As a result of modernisation and especially cultural globalisation, the emergence of new communication media has created an abstract public place which is in principle endless and planetary, while at the same time the electronic media, primarily television, have transformed this huge public place of an abstract humanity into an intimate community in permanent communication. The jokes and insulting stories now come from everywhere and are no longer confined within the boundaries of small intimate groups. In the end they are vulnerable to rapid politicisation. The double structure of the old kind of communication allowed people to shift respectfully between different communication levels. Now we live in a gigantic space called world society which is simultaneously both public and intimate. Inequalities in opportunities belong to this world, as do asynchronicity of cultural changes. In that constellation it should not be surprising that cultural modes concerning how to regulate social behaviour meet and become easily inflammable.

The medium of television symbolises a general omnipresent attack, and this attack allows an old Muslim idea to realise itself: The *umma* as the worldwide unity of all Muslims. It is interesting that the utopia of an Islamic society was only able to emerge as a real option in the historical context of national state unity. And that utopia has become radicalised as a real option especially in the last twenty years – in the current age of rapid globalisation. It is due to this new mediality that the protesters around the world can conceive themselves as facing a general attack as members of a united community. Mass media displace us from concrete immediate life worlds: nations, cultures, religions are all exposed to one another.

Alongside the mass media, all modern institutions also transport this abstractness, formalness, impersonalness, even though television and advertising work endlessly to create the impression of authentic experience and immediate communication. Remember all those programmes that are “live on the spot”. Might it not be the case that the general impersonality of modern institutions and communication themselves create a demand for immediacy that is more radical than ever before?

5. RETURN OF RELIGION AS A RETURN OF BODY

Let me close those remarks with another example, which is much more dramatic than all the others. I am speaking of suicide bombers.

It is too easy to draw an absolute line between Islam and suicide bombers, and it is often done. But how can we be calm about Islam and violence, when there are several suicide attacks every day, calls for holy war (jihad), violent demonstrations and more? The topic of suicide bombers has been discussed widely in the media and in scientific discourses. We are told, for example, that suicide attacks were performed first not by Muslims but by the Japanese, and originally by secular groups rather than religious ones. It is further asserted that the idea of Holy War actually originates from Christianity and not from Islam. All that may help to relativise the issue, but is not enough. Let me take a look back at the genealogy of martyrdom in Islam and its transformation.

Never before did the notion of the martyr (be it in the Sunni sense or in the Shiite sense) designate an act of self murder. When Afghan mujahedins were attacked by Taliban suicide bombers, they were totally surprised because neither their culture of warfare nor the religious ideology contained anything to suggest that a Muslim could kill himself deliberately (cf. Kermani 2002). Of course, there is a powerful concept of martyrdom and we cannot ignore its usage among Muslims. Even those who do not agree with fundamentalist violence can accept the idea in general. And it should not be forgotten that distance from an ideology of martyrdom was able to emerge in Europe only after the catastrophic World Wars. Here I will show how radical a gap separates the classical concept of martyrdom from the modern suicide bombers. This difference concerns our modern mood!

In the classical concept of the martyr, the warrior is expected to sacrifice his life courageously and without hesitation. A promise of a good place in heaven may be the compensation for paying the ultimate price in a deadly game. The reward promised for facing death can depend on the specific religious culture, so in that sense the culture always matters. Actually, calling on men (and women) to die in war does not necessarily need an explicit religious ideology. Secular ideologies could prove equally effective. For all the preparation for death, the classical concept lacks something which is essential for modern suicide bombers. The classical martyr went into battle with huge degree of uncertainty. He had to face death but he was not allowed to kill himself deliberately; that is the preserve of God. The whole economy of belief depends essentially upon this unpredictability. If the warrior survived the battle he could gain the honourable status of “veteran” (Turkish: Gazi). The classical concept of the martyr makes no sense without this

status of wounded veteran, which indicates the radical randomness of human fate. Here the fear of hubris does play an enormous role. This is a mighty God who watches carefully over His competency, for which no-one dares to compete. This is the reason why some traditional scholars (clerics) were unwilling to unambiguously bless suicide bombings, even though it was for long time difficult also to give a clear condemnation due to the resonance among some parts of Muslim populations.

The suicide bomber, however, takes matters into his own hands. On his way to God he negates every possibility of contingency. With a radical self-empowerment (Schulze 2006) he trusts not even in God because God is incalculable. God never guarantees the death in the fight.

The modernity of the suicide bomber is based on his desire for a certainty and security that would not have come easily in the so-called pre-modern world. The suicide bomber disposes of his own body and fate in a sovereign gesture. Actually, in a certain way he mirrors the sovereign gesture by which the superpower presents its power by transcending international arrangements and law. Suicide bombers deactivate even God, actually take over his place. This gesture of sovereignty can ultimately emerge only from an act of murder of God. Paradoxically, suicide bombs are killing kisses young Muslim believers give God in order to artificially respire Him in a time of death of God.

As the flip side of superpower *surgical operations* (surgical military attacks) suicide bombing constitutes the same semantic field. Dirty, personal, palpable bodies from the periphery desire to challenge clean, impersonal, painless, high-tech machinery from the centre of the world society! This leads Baudrillard to the radical conclusion that suicide bombing or terror is the only way to challenge the system symbolically and so the only possibility to introduce the symbolic exchange again in social life. In debate with Derrida, Baudrillard stated that the problem is not that the West took everything from the rest (Baudrillard, Derrida and Major 2003). On the contrary, the West gave everything and deprived the others of the ability to respond adequately. For Baudrillard the death, the sacrifice is the only act the system cannot answer. Possibly his orientalism has something to do with this resistance to the prevailing culture which excluded the sacrifice, the death. Although there are slight suggestions of sympathy for suicide terrorism in the context of his general position on terror, it would be better to say that for Baudrillard suicide terrorism is paradoxically supported by the system that prohibits any other radical answer, as a counter-gift.

How far can suicide bombing be considered as a counter-gift? Does the suicide bomber really sacrifice something? To put it in Baudrillard's terms, suicide bombing marks the flip side of the industrial-financial-military complexes. The suicide bomber, however, does not just reintroduce the excluded body as a gift in the social relations. He rather creates the pure body. The act is no longer embedded in the complex social context of sacrifice. The latter recognises only the substitute sacrifice which is based upon the ban on human sacrifice. In that sense sacrifice always signifies a substituting act which makes social order possible. The replacement through animal sacrifice enables the individual to keep distance from total self-empowerment. They are not allowed to make a gift of themselves. Whilst traditional forms of religiousness (in orthodoxy, folk reli-

gion, mysticism, etc.) were used to repeatedly warn of hubris, the idea of suicide bombing is characterised by the immediacy which expresses self-empowerment. Each ritual (primary practices of symbolic exchange, also in communication with God) is now being performed to a radical conclusion. It crystallises to a singular gesture, culminates in the ultimate act. The suicide bomber dissolves into pure energy that has nothing to stop it. The introduction of a radical purified body into politics seems to respond to the rationality of the technical-military machine (zero death as goal, absolute security) which operates cleanly and by remote control. Whether this response can create a radical reversibility in the sense of Baudrillard, or rather reproduces and strengthens the system, is an open question. Is not worthwhile to consider the theoretical possibility that the suicide bombing perhaps perpetuates the “parody of sacrifice” (as Baudrillard calls the global hegemonic system) rather than reintroduce the sacrifice into the social game? Seen from that perspective, is not suicide bombing the specific historical form in which God is now being murdered in Islam (paradoxically in the name of Islam) – without of course the act being named?

¹ Comparison is essential for the term of culture. This was already inscribed in it during its emergence in the nineteenth century (Luhmann 1996).

² Similar reactions against sacrifice were articulated recently (especially as a middle-class approach) in Turkey too.

³ In another text (2006) he makes the point better: The shift of emphasis to the aesthetic, recitative dimension (or calligraphy) relieves

the believer of the supremacy of the signified over the signifier. Ring-fencing meaning in this way and preventing its explosion at the same time prevents the fundamentalisation of belief (2006: 22).

⁴ One can still observe this among the current Turkish cartoonists who play with this ambiguity: an official, publicly acceptable meaning is accompanied by a hidden meaning (mostly implying some sort of obscenity).

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