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## **A Weberian Theory of Suicide Bombers**

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Conversations with Omar Lizardo, John W. Meyer, Francisco Ramirez, Yi Han, and Colin Beck have been most helpful in trying to pin down the internal moral architecture of the complex social act that is the Martyrdom Mission.

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### **Abstract**

Terrorism is a traditional weapon of the weak. From a world-system perspective it is a tactic that can be used by peripheral actors to make a political impact upon core interests. In recent years this tactic has taken a new turn, variously called "suicide terrorism", "suicide bombers" or "Martyrdom Missions." There is, though, little systematic sociology about such practices (Bergesen, 2006a). What is proposed here seeks to begin filling this gap. The idea is this. If an economic practice like capitalism might have an ethical base rooted in religion (Max Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis) perhaps a practice of political violence, in the form of martyrdom mission suicide terrorism might also have an ethical justification/motivation in religion as well. If there was a Protestant ethic and a spirit of capitalism, might not there also be an Islamist ethic and a spirit of martyrdom missions? This proposition is tentative, constituting something of a rough outline of possible dynamics involved. Hopefully what follows will stimulate further discussion and research.

## **A Weberian Theory of Suicide Bombers**

The transformation of the age old act of terrorism, the use of violence against non-combatants to psychologically affect a third party, into a practice where initiating actors also kill themselves is, perhaps, the defining form of political violence of our time (Gambetta, 2005; Bergesen and Lizardo, 2004, 2005; Bergesen and Han, 2005). Such martyrdom missions are associated with radical Islamist organizations<sup>1</sup> (Bloom, 2005; Davis, 2003; Devji, 2005; Khosrokhavar, 2005; Gambetta, 2005; Oliver and Steinberg, 2005; Pape, 2005; Reuter, 2004; Sageman, 2004) raising the question of the influence of religion upon political violence.

One possible source of explanatory theory is Max Weber (1992) who thought the Protestant Reformation produced an ascetic work ethic that had a natural affinity with the spirit of capitalism as it emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. He died before what many see as the Islamic Revival or Reformation of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Had he had lived longer he might have noted not only the effects of puritanical ascetic religious ethics on economic life, but also upon political violence. Who knows, he might even

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<sup>1</sup> Other groups have also used suicide practices, ranging from Japanese kamikaze pilots, Arafat's Fatah faction, and the Tamil Tigers from Sri Lanka.

have written a second book: *The Islamist Ethic and the Spirit of Martyrdom Missions*.

This paper proposes a similarly controversial thesis, that the ascetic self-discipline associated with radical Islamist groups generates a jihadist ethic which is the bedrock of modern Islamic suicide terrorism, that is, martyrdom missions. For Weber religious belief in no way constituted the sole cause for the rise of capitalism, but comprised more of a psychological or motivational component that supported the new form of economic life. I take the same position. An ascetic Islamist ethic, should one exist, is in no way the single cause of suicide terrorism. As capitalism also involves economic factors, so do modern terrorist practices involve questions of power, resistance, competition, strategy, and other political factors. But radical Islam is, I feel, in some fundamental way clearly associated with the outbreak of this type of violence. Such a linkage of religion and political violence is controversial and there is little precise understanding of the nature of these practices. I offer my thesis only as a first step in starting a social science dialog as to the nature of the Martyrdom Mission. The Weberianesque account offered here involves some modifications of Weber's initial assumptions.

First, I do not assume that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation was a one-time world historical event. Reformations, as religious crises and revivals, are endemic to the geopolitical tensions and crises of the ongoing

world-system. This means the oft discussed Islamic Revival/Reformation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a repeat of the more general globological process of crises in existing belief systems generating reformulations and new moral orders, that the world-system witnessed some 500 years earlier in central Germany.

Second, I do not assume that Protestantism can be understood as just another religious belief system, but must instead be seen as a resolution to a crisis that struck Latin Christendom as a whole. The same holds for today's global jihad which can be seen as a reaction to a more general crisis in traditional jihadic theory and practice.

Third, I do not assume that ascetic self-discipline is unique to Protestantism and monastic religious life. Instead I hypothesize that the ascetic component is at the heart of all religions, which involve moral imperatives for the self to discipline itself to perform religious tasks of one sort or another. What is important is the placement of such ascetic self-discipline in the overall flow of religious behavior.

### **The Protestant Reformation**

Traditional Catholicism assumed that humanity was weak, being in its natural condition a religiously unregulated state of nature. As such, now and again, mankind was open to sin. For the Catholic believer this act of sin triggered a compulsive asceticism to perform a variety of atonement

practices: go to confession, light a candle, pray to a saint, attend Mass more often, and so forth. Once the proper Church practices were performed, atonement was attained, and the believer returned to the original state of unregulated nature. As Weber noted this was the classic Catholic cycle of sin, atonement, redemption, and release. But for the new radical Protestants these post-sin atonement practices, this safety net, so to speak, was now eliminated by the Reformation's rejection of Church ritual. The replacement moral order centered upon pressing the pre-sinning self into service by self-disciplining it to never sin in the first place.

In effect, what Protestantism did was to move the ascetic in Catholicism up front, prior to the act of sin. If Catholics were guilty for what they had done, Protestants were now guilty for what they might do. The old trigger of a behavioral act of sin was no longer necessary, for now the Protestant was self-disciplining the self 24/7. The radical Protestants put the atoning cart before the sinning horse, as the Protestant life now involved, in Weber's words, "a life guided by constant thought...it was this rationalization which gave the Reformed faith its peculiar ascetic tendency."

The key change wrought by the Reformation was that ascetic self-discipline was now trigger-free, hence a 24/7 constant moral self-disciplining by the Protestant of their daily, in this world, self. This meant the object of religious discipline was also no longer Church sanctioned practices (various sacramental and atonement rites) but the believer's

ordinary, daily, natural, in this world, self. One manifestation of such self-monitoring in this world was self discipline at work and hence the classic Weberian observation about the emergence of a work ethic. This brings us to another reformation/revival, the Islamic Reformation from the late 19<sup>th</sup> through the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (for a summary of the indicators of an Islamic Reformation see, Bergesen, 2006b).

### **The Islamic Revival/Reformation**

Both Reformations share a key similarity: ascetically driven religious practices are moved from having to be triggered by some uncontrolled event to being the moral responsibility of the believer prior to, and independent of, any triggering event. As noted Catholic atonement rites had to be triggered; but the same held for traditional Muslim jihadic practices. Reflecting the core differences between the more communal and individualist orientations of Islam and Christianity, the equivalent of sin as a trigger was various geopolitical events/crises within the international system. War, conquest, border disputes, or the ebb and flow of raids, constituted triggers that often resulted in the call for traditional Jihad (Bonner, 2006). But even here jihad still wasn't a personal responsibility, for classic jihad had to be called by the Caliph, led by a leader of the Muslim community, and there were elaborate rules and procedures as to when to fight, who could be killed, treatment of women, children, prisoners, and so forth. Like Catholic dogma, church rules

and rituals, over the centuries Muslim jurists and religious scholars, spelled out the specifics of appropriate jihadic practices.

The dependence of the command to fight (the ascetic compulsion, the thing to do) on a triggering event can be seen in Quranic quotes, such as Surah 9 verse 12: "But if they break their pledges....then fight these archetypes of faithlessness who have no [respect for a] binding pledge, so that they may desist." Here breaking the pledge is the trigger followed by the command to fight. But such traditional logic is now changing, for many argue Jihad is no longer required to be either set off by a triggering event, nor constrained by the institutional procedures spelled out in centuries of juridical rulings. What this means is that the practice of jihad is less and less a defensive response to some triggering geopolitical event.

Consider the influential Muslim Brotherhood theorist Sayyid Qutb. He argues, "Islamic *jihad*...has nothing to do with the wars people fight today, or their motives..." What we see now are centuries of juridical specifications for appropriate conditions for jihadic practices being swept aside by the new reformers/radicals, much as radical Protestant reformers swept aside centuries of Catholic post-trigger atonement practices 500 years earlier.

Weber once commented that the ascetic had been freed from medieval monasteries and let loose on daily life. So too with jihad. It is now being freed from its institutional constraints and transformed into a personal

proactive moral responsibility. Referring to jihad, Qutb argues, "what kind of man is it ...who...still thinks that it is a temporary injunction related to transient conditions and that it is concerned only with the defense of the borders" (Qutb, 2003a: 8, nd: 64). Jihad is less and less defensive, meaning it is less and less activated by a triggering event like an attack on national borders. In these newer formulations it is becoming more proactive. "Those who believe in God...do not want permission in order to fight for God's cause" (Qutb, 2003b: 182). And why? Because he argues, "Jihad, or striving for God's cause, is a deal made by every believer....It is a course of action that is necessary....The deal made by every believer must be fulfilled, or else he is not a believer" (Qutb, viii, 269). That is, as he says, "The motives of Islamic *jihad* can be found within the nature of Islam" (Qutb, vii, 8). The jihadic cart is being placed before the defense of borders trigger.

In the pre-Protestant moral universe one worked for only material rewards and in the pre-Islamist universe one only engaged in jihad when Muslim lands were attacked and/or in response to the Caliph's call. But for Protestant radicals one now worked for the sake of work and for today's Islamist radicals, one engages in jihad for the sake of jihad. The new mandate is quite clear. One shouldn't limit, "*jihad* to the narrow sense of defending the 'land of Islam'...[for] these verses here declare very clearly the need to fight unbelievers...without reference to any aggression they might

have perpetuated" (Qutb, viii, 266). The classic trigger is gone. And the response is to move the ascetic discipline to fight in the cause of God up front, prior to any trigger. It now also becomes, for the believer, a 24/7 responsibility. Jihad has gone from a defensive-after-a-triggering-event communal responsibility to an a-priori-proactive-personal-responsibility. There was a natural uncontrolled randomness to international life that triggered jihad (raids, border skirmishes, war, invasion, etc.) but with the radical Islamist believers this trigger was unnecessary. Jihad is now a condition of faith. It need not be triggered. This we could call the first stage in the rationalization of jihadic practices. A second stage centers upon martyrdom.

## **Martyrdom**

The new a priori proactive logic for jihad also operates for becoming a martyr, that is dying while fighting in the cause of God. Death, as the gateway to martyrdom, is no longer left to the ebb and flow of battle but is now moved up front, a priori, before battle, to become a moral responsibility of the believer. Like traditional jihad (fighting in the cause of God), traditional martyrdom (dying while fighting in the cause of God) was also a triggered response, for if, from fighting in God's cause you were killed, then you became a martyr and were taken to Heaven by God. As fighting in the cause of God (jihad) was moved up front prior to a triggering geopolitical

event, so now, in turn, is a martyred death moved in front of fighting in God's cause. This is the second rationalization of jihadic practice. Jihad before trigger, and martyred death before jihad.

A martyred death no longer comes at the hand of the unbeliever, but now from the faithful jihadi, for the ascetic Islamist is now so self disciplined that they can self control themselves to the point of death, and, thereby, in effect, front end martyrdom, making what was previously triggered by others a moral mandate for self to do to self.

In comparative terms, broadly speaking, why wait for the trigger of a sin to trigger that ascetic discipline to lead a believer to Catholic atonement rites, and now, 500 years later, why wait for the trigger of death at the hands of the enemy to attain martyrdom? Why not take that into one's own hands? That is, in traditional Islam you fought in the cause of God and maybe you died and maybe martyrdom was awarded. Now you die before you fight to guarantee martyrdom. It is the modernist project of further rationalizing life identified by Max Weber now taken to a new level by the new ascetic Islamists, the analog's to yesterday's ascetic Protestants. Earlier the irrationality of adventure capitalism was standardized by the moral compulsion that was the Protestant work ethic. Today the irrationality of possible death in the ebb and flow of battle as a trigger for the status of martyr is now standardized by the moral compulsion that is something like a jihadic ethic. The irrationality of natural fighting as a trigger for martyrdom

is now removed as the source of that religious status. You can now attain it on your own. It is the Protestant Ethic taken a) to a new institutional domain (politics not economics) and b) deepened in its ascetic hold on individual self-discipline. Martyrdom is no longer something that randomly happens as a by-product of the nature of human conflict; it is now a calling, a task, hence a “martyrdom mission” like a “work ethic” earlier.

The Weber observation about asceticism is, in effect, doubled. The Protestant denies the self this and that and lives the austere life. But while more ascetic than the traditional Catholic, it turns out that this is perhaps only a halfway asceticism. There was, it turns out, another step to go. Weber died too soon to see this; he never saw the martyrdom mission. He never wondered how is it that a belief system can be so austere that it eliminates the belief’s holder, which, if I may digress for a moment, suggests a distinctly Weberian theory of suicide.

At present the sociology of suicide is dominated by Emile Durkheim’s (1951) groupist account. Social integration—very strong, or very weak, or abrupt in changing—generates rising and falling rates of suicide. But what if there was also a Weberian theory of suicide as well? What if, regardless of the degree of integration of the group, the beliefs of radical sects were of such a nature that the denial they commanded of the self was of its own existence?

For Weber it seemed odd, if not unnatural, that one would work for the sake of work, or accumulate for the sake of accumulation, regardless of the amount attained or the human needs met or satiated. There was no natural account for such action, and so Weber hypothesized it was the product of a cultural code, or ethic, initially possessed by radical religious sects, his radical Protestants.

And now does this not repeat? Do we not witness, again, a new set of behaviors that seems unnatural, that seem to run against natural propensities to life and well being. That one could kill others for cultural reasons as part of a political act is the hallmark of modern revolutionary violence, but here is a new addition: now in the name of a cause is not only the moral mandate to kill others but to kill self as well. Here death isn't about being caught as a terrorist, or about a bomb accidentally going off in one's hand, or of being turned in, or seen, or shot. No, it's none of these, for these are how perpetrator's die in "traditional terrorism," where the perpetrator killed others, for a cause, and even innocents for a distant target, but not self, unless that accidentally happened. But now? It's all moved up a moral notch. The asceticism has increased. Self control; self monitoring; self discipline has been retched up. The old radical puritans, the old Protestants, even the old revolutionary socialists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, wouldn't recognize the new martyrdom mission. Calm, cool, rational, planned, and not out of desperation but in a positive way, a life

takes, at one and the same time, itself and the other. And this is done on a scale that crosses groups, countries, nationalities, and global regions. It is something that social science barely grasps at all.

### **Summary/Conclusion**

A number of hypotheses were advanced:

1. Reformations/Revivals recur, and given the heightened moral integration of the world-system over time, the Islamist Reformation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should have a higher degree of ascetic self discipline at its moral core than the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As an alternative, or supplementary hypothesis, perhaps Islam is more ascetic than Christianity to begin.
2. All religions have an ascetic dimension. It is the moral compliance component that disciplines the self to perform a variety of religious practices. In traditional religion (Christianity or Islam) the ascetic component is often activated by a triggering event. In traditional Catholic Christianity given the triggering event of a sin believers feel the ascetic self discipline to engage in a variety of atoning practices. In traditional Islam given the triggering event of war, border disputes, invasions, and/or calls from a Caliph, the Muslim community feels the ascetic discipline to engage in jihadic action.

3. Given a Reformation/Revival, such ascetic components are moved prior to the triggering event, thereby eliminating the practice's dependence upon external events to put them in motion. In effect, the radical Protestant puts the atoning cart before the sinning horse, and the radical Islamist puts the jihadic horse before the geopolitical triggering event; the radical Muslim engages in jihad in a proactive, a priori, manner.
4. Radical Islam is different from radical Protestantism, for it has a double ascetic quality. The first ascetic self discipline is to take away the accidental nature of triggering events to set jihadic practices in motion. Like the radical Protestant the radical Muslim is now personally responsible for jihad and can, and should, be its sole initiator.
5. The second ascetic involves the further rationalization of jihadic practices, including the removal of the accidental nature of death from jihadic fighting as a condition for martyrdom. Death is now moved up front before battle, which itself had been moved up front before the geopolitical trigger. For the radical Islamist, death is a

personal responsibility which precedes both jihadist fighting and the geopolitical trigger.

6. There maybe an elective affinity between this double ascetic of the radical Islamist ethic and the psychological logic, or "spirit" of suicide terrorist practices, yielding martyrdom missions.

In sum, then, did the Protestant Ethic cause the rise of capitalism. No. Weber never argued that. Does an Islamist double ascetic ethic, should it exist, cause suicide terrorism. Probably not in the strong sense of cause. Is it the case that a social science of suicide terrorism can be derived from an extreme version of an ascetic ethic held by puritanical fundamentalist groups. Maybe. It is certainly an hypothesis worth investigating further.

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