

# Ugo E. M. Fabietti

## Is the 'Martyrdom' of Human Bombers a 'Sacrifice'?

### Definitions

There is a tendency to view as 'sacrificial' any act that, even at a distance, evokes the twofold dimension of a renunciation and/or gift for the purpose of receiving a benefit in return.<sup>1</sup> However, the sacrificial dimension is tinged with a particularly dramatic character when evoked within ritual references to war or religion. In both of these contexts, sacrifice is a means of 'thinking' about the dimension of transcendence (the Kingdom of Heaven, God, one's country, community, ideals, etc), that is to say, something that transcends and surpasses the individual as a mortal subject, transposing him or her into an eternal dimension; importantly, transcendence can, and in many cases must, be accomplished by means of an act of violence.

Particularly since 9/11, authors from different disciplines have compared notes on the topic of 'suicidal terrorism' in order to debate the following question: can suicide attacks carried out by Muslim men and women against military and civilian targets be considered acts of war and/or 'religiously motivated' sacrifices?

From a purely 'technical' point of view, a suicide act of this type has been defined as

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1. The difficulty of attributing a unitary meaning to the phenomena usually defined as sacrifices has been discussed by various authors (Detienne 1979; de Heusch 1986; Scubla 1992), and indeed it has been suggested that the term sacrifice should be abolished from the lexicon of anthropology and history of religions. This suggestion is a consequence of the disappointment felt by those in search of conceptual categories to include a large number of phenomena, which has prompted them to adopt a sort of epistemological nihilism: a resigned idea that the task of anthropology is to produce analyses of very circumscribed cases, 'uncompromised' by any attempt whatsoever to generalise. I believe however that, in this case as in others, the task of anthropological analysis is neither to resign ourselves to the 'particular,' nor to find at all costs general formulae to 'explain' the totality of phenomena that we tend to group linguistically under particular categories such as that of 'sacrifice.' Instead the task of anthropology is, I feel, to unravel the 'local' logic of every phenomenon, with a readiness to welcome the differences and discrepancies between the various 'local' manifestations, not as failures of the theory, but as opportunities to enrich our view of the phenomena we deem 'relevant' to our analysis.

a politically motivated violent attack perpetrated by a self-aware individual (or individuals) who actively and purposely causes his own death through blowing himself up along with his chosen target. The perpetrator's ensured death is a precondition for the success of his mission (Schweitzer 2000, p. 1).

The perpetrators' 'ensured death' as 'a precondition for the success' of their actions is closely linked to the fact that they pursue the goal of being recognised as 'martyrs' (*shahid*). The statements issued by past and aspiring human bombers, along with the comments of their supporters and of those who wholly or partly approve of their mission, always converge towards the notion of martyrdom (*istishahad*).

There is a definite semantic confluence between the ancient Christian model of martyrdom, according to which the man or woman who undergoes or voluntarily seeks it is a 'witness' (in Greek, *martys* means 'the witness'), and the Muslim martyr (*shahid*), likewise considered to be the author of a 'witnessing' (*shahadat*). The case of the suicide attacker further involves the idea of 'martyrdom as sacrifice' (*istishahad*).<sup>2</sup> In line with such a view, the ancient history scholar, G.W. Bowersock, has written:

Perhaps the most astonishing and influential extension of the concept of martyrdom as witnessing came in Arabic after the Muslim conquest of Palestine in the seventh century. Just as the Syriac speakers had done, the Arabs translated the Greek word as 'witness' into Arabic - *shahid* (1995, p. 19).

Just who, within Islam, may be considered a martyr (*shahid*), and for what reason, is a complex issue, full of doctrinary exceptions and subtleties. However, the notion of martyrdom (*istishahad*) is for the most part associated with the concept, likewise extensively debated, of *jihad*. Often hastily translated (into the European languages) with the expression 'holy war,' in reality its true meaning varies according to circumstances: from that of the 'struggle' of an individual to improve his or her moral condition, to the notion of a war proper, aimed at defending or asserting the faith (Mervin 2000). The issue here is not how to find univocal definitions for *jihad*, given that Islam, apart from a number of shared fundamental principles, does not display the same level of doctrinary unity as the Christian, or Catholic Christian churches in particular. Islam is made up of numerous different views validated by different discursive traditions, which are recognisable as 'Islamic' only when (and until) they are both self- and externally recognised as such (Asad 1986). Rather, the question of interest to us here is to ascertain whether we can identify in the *jihad* of an aspiring *shahid* a sacrificial element that does not emerge as such 'from the outside and afterwards' (as the

2. There are a number of Arabic terms to indicate ritual practice, which are all indistinctly translated by the term 'sacrifice.' The sacrifice par excellence, the one which Abraham did not carry out and which Muslims 'ritualize' every year on the occasion of the 'Id al Kabir, is called *'adhya* (which recalls the idea of 'giving') or more rarely *qurban*, a term used mainly however by Christian Arabs and in reference to the sacrifice of Christ (evoking the idea of 'closeness').

act of someone who 'sacrifices themselves for something'), but is a veritable self-sacrifice connected to a discourse, which may also be implicit, on *transcendence*. Transcendence and violence are almost universally closely connected; so much so that, as Maurice Bloch has stated, 'violence itself [appears as] a result of the attempt to create the transcendental in religion and politics' (1992, p. 7).

### Symbolic Change and Martyrdom as Giving

Generally speaking, the martyr (*shahid*) is understood to be a 'witness' (*shahid*). The reasons that may have prompted him or her to 'witness' are historically contingent; they depend on the existence of circumstances linking witnessing with the other term often associated with martyrdom (*istishahad*), namely the *jihad* (as understood by those who die fighting 'while seeking martyrdom').<sup>3</sup>

Most authors agree that acts of human bombing may be interpreted as an extreme means of establishing a symbolic exchange between the Islamic community, the enemy, and the bombers themselves (Asad 2007; Mbembe 2003; Strenski 2010). When however an attempt is made to relate human bombings to Islam, the points of view become varied and often sharply divided. Some maintain that these acts have nothing to do with the religious dimension as such (Asad 2007; Pape 2005), whilst others are of the opposite opinion. However, even among the latter group there are a number of important distinctions. These perspectives range from the belief that such behaviour is underpinned by 'typically Islamic' violence, to the view that nothing may be ascribed to the Muslim religion *as such*, but that a connection can nonetheless be established between these acts and the religious dimension. Strenski (2010), who adheres to the latter perspective, sees such acts as being accompanied by language and rituals that can only be defined as religious. Strenski's position is largely acceptable in my view, but we must take into account cases of human bombers who act without any explicit reference to the religious dimension. In fact, for this very reason, my own position is different again to those just outlined. Does a lack of reference to the religious dimension signify that there is no appeal to the sphere of transcendency? In my opinion, not. On the contrary, I am persuaded that acts of human bombing may be interpreted as having an underlying truly 'sacrificial configuration' that combines violence with transcendency, be it religious or profane.

It is believed that aspiring martyrs act before a community (*umma*) from which they expect to obtain recognition as representatives of a 'superior' authority. For that purpose they implement a ritual dynamic and a logic of giving, which Strenski has described as follows. The rituality concerns the preparations for undertaking the suicidal action: ranging from declarations of intent, written or filmed, to prayers and readings of the Koran, also filmed, to farewells

3. With all due consideration to proportions of scale, it is interesting to note the findings of Jean Flori in his study on the conception of the crusade in medieval Christianity. Flori has showed that, aside from the political and economic motives behind these large-scale 'military movements,' the spirit of the Christian knights who set out 'to seek martyrdom in the Holy Land' was by no means a secondary feature of that critical point in history (Flori 2009).

and proclamations about the aspiring martyr's motivation for the act they are about to carry out. In contrast, the logic of giving implemented in acts of human bombing captures, and morally obliges the public to recognise, the legitimacy and positive value of the martyrs' gesture. The announcements and declarations of intent released by human bombers always state that what is about to be done is for the benefit of someone else. It is a renunciation of life to ensure that the lives of others will be better. The logic of giving, is – as we know – based on the threefold obligation to give, receive and repay; it is therefore designed to arouse, in the givers' own communities, the feeling of a twofold obligation: 'to accept the gift of their deaths and, most importantly, to be *obliged* to repay this gift of their heroic deaths in some appropriate way' (Strenski 2010, p. 181). In this way, the aspiring martyrs impose on their public the obligation to 'render': reinforcing the idea of the goodness of the act committed, insofar as closely connected to the lofty ideal that prompted this 'renunciation' (sacrifice) of life. Within this logic, the human bombers lay down their lives in the attempt to produce a 'heightened sense' of collectivity within their community. Strenski defines this dynamic as an 'addition by subtraction' (p. 176) that engages the community in the fight for 'the cause.'

The logic of giving<sup>4</sup> assumes different meanings in different contexts and depending on its objective. Generally speaking however the purpose of these acts is to render *indisputable*, in the eyes of their own community, the authority of those who die for a cause – whether that of Islam, Palestine, the Shi'ite or Sunnite communities, etc.

### Contexts: The Human Bombers' Public

The context in which the figure of the witness came to coincide with that of the martyr, understood as a person who sacrifices their life for their faith was, as we have seen, Christianity and the late antique period in particular. It was in a judiciary, hence public, sort of context that the term *martys* (witness) found its true and original application: a context that only inasmuch as it was public could represent a witnessing of faith in the full sense of the term. Likewise, the social, political and ideological importance of the *jihad* today is defined 'not by its various local causes, nor by the individual biographies of its fighters, but as a series of global effects that have assumed a universality of their own beyond such particularities' (Devji 2005, p. 87). These global effects, which reach beyond single specific cases, Devji observes, are the product of the media environment through which the *jihad* is perceived. Devji himself, in support of this thesis, quotes the story, which appeared on a website sympathetic to al-Qaeda, of the motivations that drove one young man to join the *jihad*, and consequently to seek death as a *shahid*.

4. Strenski infers the presence of a logic of giving from the common root of certain terms in the Arabic language that connect the ideas of sacrifice (understood as the destruction of a life and as a renunciation) and giving, as in the word '*adhya* ('sacrifice').

One day he came across an audio cassette called *In the Hearts of Green Birds*. After hearing this cassette, he realized that this was the path that he had been searching for, for so long. This was shortly followed by some videos showing the Mujahideen from Bosnia. To him, it was as if he had found a long lost friend, from whom he could not depart. *In the Hearts of Green Birds* deeply moved him as it narrated the true stories of men who personified the message that they carried, men who were prepared to give up their most precious possession (life) in order to give victory to this Message (Devji 2005, p. 87-88).

What is interesting about this story is that for the aspiring martyr his encounter with the *jihad* through the media appears to be entirely abstract on the one hand and entirely individual on the other, that is to say, independent of any clearly identifiable and localizable intervention by any Islamic authority. The *istishahad* (act of martyrdom) itself has in fact become a space of 'visual discourse' in which a political communicative intention may certainly be situated, but also, and above all, represents to the human bombers themselves their destiny, mission, enemy and gesture, which, in the case of human bombings, is presented precisely as a 'witnessing' (*shahadat*).

This 'media environment' influences the protagonists themselves as well as their Muslim and the Western publics, who receive a 'uniform' message presenting the *jihad* as a 'global' fact, disengaged from any particular context and in which acts of human bombers project their hope of being perceived as martyrs by both Muslims and non-Muslims: a media representation of martyrdom and the *jihad* that multiplies, among those intending to take it up, the effects of the logic of giving mentioned by Strenski.

The contexts from which the original Christian and the current Muslim martyrs emerge are, in some ways and despite appearances, rather similar. For example, a public context and the presence of a visual communication space make both the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian martyr and the Muslim martyr of today into witnesses, given that they are *witnessed* (seen/heard) by others: by those who directly witness the process; and by the broader (today prevalently media) public of the suicide attack. Both contribute to the effectiveness of the act of martyrdom, because the protagonists are publicly *seen* and *recognised*.

## The Sacrificial Dynamic

The act carried out by the *shahid* is, by definition, that of a person who sacrifices themselves in order to witness to their faith or 'cause.' This extreme gesture finds its *raison d'être* within a particular positional and motivational configuration, underpinned by specific conceptions of 'sacrality' and transcendence, as well as by a particular view of the relation between body and mind. Although the notion of the 'sacred' is commonly linked with the idea of religion, the relationship is only partial, and stems from the association between the two terms established by Durkheim in his famous study of 1912.<sup>5</sup> In reality, Durkheim him-

5. 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden' (Durkheim 1915 [1912], p. 47).

self never inferred that the definition of the sacred as something 'separate,' 'forbidden' or 'inviolable' might refer to religion only. The notion of sacredness, as pointed out by Leiris (1939), may be usefully adopted to denote all those aspects of human life worthy of 'special attention.'

In a study devoted to *necropolitics*<sup>6</sup> in the colonial and post-colonial critical period, Achille Mbembe has written that in Palestine today 'two apparently irreconcilable logics are confronting each other: the logic of martyrdom and the logic of survival' (2003, p. 35), both containing concomitant ideas of death, terror and freedom. The context of the suicide attack described by Mbembe seems indirectly, and in a certain sense, to reintroduce the general logic of a sacrificial dynamic as outlined in many works of anthropology; while also evoking multiple interconnections between sacrifice and hunting, as a number of recent and less recent ethnological studies have highlighted (Valeri 1994).

In line with this view, the aspiring *shahid*, before carrying out the act that will (it is hoped) take them to their death, is subjected to a process of sacralisation, strongly reminiscent of that undergone by both the victim and the perpetrator in the theory of sacrifice proposed by Hubert and Mauss (1968 [1899]). In this theory, the process of consecration of these two subjects is viewed as a movement from the profane to the sacred (transcendent) and back again. Specifically, the basic structure of sacrifice postulated by Hubert and Mauss involves the progressive ascent of both victim and officiant from the profane state to a state of sacrality, culminating in the destruction of the victim himself, and the progressive return of both victim and officiant to the profane state: the officiant regains his normal role in society but 'with something extra' that has been acquired through his contact with the sacred; the victim on his part is transformed into the basic material that remains after his life has been 'donated.' Thus, upon their 'return,' both subjects have been transformed in relation to their initial status.

The aspiring martyr is usually 'consecrated,' or 'consecrates himself,' with prayers and declarations of intent regarding the motives that have prompted him to affirm the truth of his faith and of the cause, often after having received a blessing from an imam. It is only at this point that he chooses his target. He departs to 'procure victims for himself,' his 'prey.' The victims of the attack are a target-prey chosen in places where (similarly to animals at a pond) people gather by necessity or habit: a bus stop, a café, a supermarket. The attacker-hunter camouflages himself, concealing weapons on his body, ready to become a weapon himself. The attacker sets out on his or her mission as a 'sacralised' individual. Given that, together with the victims of his deed, the aspiring martyr will himself become a victim, he is at this point in a state of 'suspension.' This makes him, in a certain sense, 'already dead.' In fact the expression used by supporters to refer to the aspiring attacker is *al shahid al hayy*, 'the living martyr.'

As in a rite of passage (from ordinary human being to *shahid*), the suicide attacker places him or herself, through consecration, in a transitory state that

6. By necropolitics Mbembe means – reversing (in a specular sense) the expression 'biopolitics' coined by Michel Foucault – 'the power and capacity to dictate who can live and who can die' as the ultimate expression of sovereignty in the contemporary world (2003, p. 11).

precedes his or her ultimate transformation into the desired condition (that of martyr). It is no coincidence that in the interval between the consecration and the suicide action, the *shahid al hayy* subjects himself to the same purifying constraints laid down for other ritual occasions in the Muslim tradition. The idea that the aspiring committer of suicide is 'already dead' is also in keeping with the – widespread – tendency to speak of the person preparing to undergo a 'transition' (for example in rites of initiation), as a 'dead' person. There are two reasons for this: first, because the person's status is indefinite (they have lost one status but have not yet attained another), and second, because it is often only in this state of being 'apparently dead' that the individual comes into contact with the world of the invisible, normally defined as 'sacred': ancestors, divinities or anything else upon whom the life of individuals and the community depend, and that we refer to, following Bloch (1992), as transcendence.

Naturally the journey undertaken by the suicide attacker departs considerably from the pattern outlined by Hubert and Mauss in their celebrated study of 1899. In particular, in the case of human bombings, perpetrator and sacrificial victim are one and the same person. This variable – by no means unimportant for a public accustomed to imagining self-sacrifice only for the purposes of human redemption, following the model of the sacrifice of Christ (Asad 2007, p. 91) – does not in reality contradict the sacrificial dynamic. An anthropological view of physical self-obliteration, conceived as part of and essential condition for the aspiring martyr's success, entails reflection on sacrificial violence, conceptions of the body, and the relations between the latter on the one hand, and the transcendent and spiritual dimension on the other. The destructive violence unleashed by the act of self-elimination might be intended to signify, as Mbembe observes, that the aim of such a gesture is to 'close the door on the possibility of life for everyone' (Mbembe 2003, p. 37). This realisation seems at first sight to be in contrast with the 'desire for freedom' which the suicide attackers (for example the Palestinians) wish to express. While their gesture is certainly extreme, it is part of a more complex process and translates into action a particular conception of the relationships between violence, transcendence and life.

In his comparative study of the role played by violence in creating the dimension of transcendence, Bloch (1992) suggested that violence, far from being archetypal, may be the more general product of the various forms taken on by political relations. Bloch's idea is that by undergoing violence in the 'outgoing' phase (when for example an individual is subjected to rites that distance him/her from a certain status), the protagonist is dominated by the transcendent forces (ancestors, divinities) that, as often asserted, 'watch over' the rite. This violence 'kills' the person subjected to a rite (for example to an initiation rite) to the extent that the initiate is described as a 'dead person.' It is however in this intermediate state of suspension that the individual acquires the strength that will enable him/her to 'return,' 'politically' stronger than before. He or she appears to be endowed with a status superior to that previously held and now permanently abandoned. This strength comes from the transcendent world, specifically from contact with the powers transmitted to the individual when



'dead,' that is to say when (symbolically) part of the invisible world. Bloch maintains, on the basis of largely compelling ethnographic evidence, that in many rites of this type, the initiates, by returning stronger than before to the world of the 'living,' manifest their greater strength through violent acts that may range from animal sacrifices (followed by feasts) to hostilities against enemies. It is in this sense that the transcendent would appear to be the product of political relations, both within and outside the group.

### Immanence of the Body and Transcendancy of the Spirit

If the considerations just put forward suggest a political interpretation of the meaning of sacrificial violence as it is usually understood (i.e. as giving greater strength to the person committing it and to the community as a whole), the act of self-destruction pursued by the aspiring martyr may be seen as aimed at fortifying that person and their community in relation to the suffering endured at the hands of an enemy. Aspiring martyrs, through the 'consecration' that precedes their final act, 'acquire' a strength that can only come from the transcendent dimension: God or the particular community for whom they are sacrificing themselves. It is thanks to this 'added' strength that the aspiring *shahid* are able to fling themselves against their objective. It is a spiritual force that transcends the immanence of the body. The aspiring martyr's body is not in fact something to be protected. On the contrary, it has neither power nor value, as a body:

The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future (Mbembe 2003: 37).

Now, what is this process of abstraction, this supremacy, this prevailing over one's mortal condition, if not the force of a transcendancy acquired by the aspiring martyr through the process of consecration? The fact that the martyr 'operates with a view to the future' also indicates, in addition to a messianic conception of time, the 'direction' of the motivation for martyrdom: the martyr erases himself for the future of his supporters, his faith and his community. The body of the *shahid*, which in the case of human bombings is dissolved, is therefore only a means of attaining transcendancy. How? By sacrificing the body itself. This instrumental function of the body which, by destroying itself, approaches the transcendent, may be better understood in the light of the following passage from Georges Bataille, who, on the subject of the body and the spirit, has written:

it is man's misfortune to have the body [...] and thus to be like a thing, but it is the glory of the human body to be the substratum of a spirit. And the spirit is so closely linked to the body as a thing that the body never ceases to be haunted, is never a thing except virtually, so much so that if death reduces it to the condition of a thing, the spirit is more present than ever: the body that has betrayed it reveals it more clearly



than when it served it. In a sense the corpse is the most complete affirmation of the spirit. What death's definitive impotence and absence reveals is the very essence of the spirit, just as the scream of the one that is killed is the supreme affirmation of life (2006 [1973], p. 40).

In this perspective, the destruction of the body is not so much what 'frees' the spirit, as what makes it more present than ever; thus in the conception of the *shahid* (as in that of the Christian martyr) the more the corpse is dissolved, the more the presence of the spirit is enhanced.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, destroying oneself while stuffed with explosives is not only an effective means of surprising the enemy by turning one's body into a weapon to increase the devastating force of the explosion; it is also the aesthetic expression of a vision of sacrifice whereby what is corporeal disappears to make way for transcendency, seen as the ultimate reason for survival.

Recourse to suicidal violence is, as well as a politico-military act, a complex form of social communication, which as we have seen, places the martyrs in a position of authority over their community (Strenski 2010). Although shaped by media pressure, this form of communication in itself contains a particular conception of the individual, the community, the body, and transcendency, as well as of time and, naturally, of violence itself.

## Destruction and Construction

Form and meaning are attributed to violence as a form of communication within the typical languages and practices of a given historico-social context. Violence may thus be transformed into a process of 'construction through destruction, where the suffering of an individual can become a blessing to an entire society' (Aijmer 2000, p. 8). This implies the emergence of a particular conception of the relation that binds together life, death and rebirth, typical of all religious and secular conceptions that see the sacrifice of the individual as a means of asserting the 'eternity' of the group (the community of believers, the nation, etc.). The Muslim martyr's sacrifice (*istishahad*) in fact only makes sense in view of an after-life, which is not necessarily solely that of the martyr in paradise, but may also be the future physical and earthly life of his community.

A sacrifice can also be, as has been pointed out, an act

7. The dissolution of the body as a means of attaining transcendency and reaffirming the values expressed by that transcendency is a theme also to be found in Christian patristics. Ignatius Bishop of Antioch, who was condemned 'to the wild beasts' under Trajan (2nd century CE) writes thus in one of his epistles, in which he begs his fellow-believers not to do anything to halt his progress towards martyrdom: 'How glorious to be a setting sun, away from the world, on to God [...] I fear that your love will cause me damage for I shall not have such another occasion to enter into the possession of God. I am the wheat of God and I must be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may become the pure bread of Christ' (Quaesten 2000, I, p. 64, my italics. I am grateful to Marco Antonio Ribeiro for having drawn my attention to this passage).

that restores social agency to the [sacrifier]. The victim [of sorcery attack]<sup>8</sup> becomes a world maker who simultaneously engages in acts of self-recreation and is endowed with the capacity to consitute and reshape relationships in the world as these affect the victim's life chances (Kapferer 1997, p. 185).

Performing a sacrificial act seems to universally take on the meaning of becoming a 'builder of worlds.' This notion of a victim of violence who, to avenge the violence suffered, makes a sacrifice that can 'restore order,' seems to also fit the act carried out by the *shahid*. Perceiving themselves and their communities as victims of violence, they perform a sacrifice through which the forces capable of restoring order to the world may be released. However, their sacrifice is of themselves, in an extreme act whose purpose is to bring out those spiritual and transcendent forces on which the only possible order ultimately depends. It is solely within this peculiar configuration, made up of sacrality, transcendence and particular conceptions of the relation between body and spirit, as well as of political violence and messianic expectations, that we can attempt to grasp the specificity of this act whose nature is, I feel, fully sacrificial.

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8. Kapferer refers here to the sacrificial practices performed by the victims of witchcraft among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

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