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Why Nietzsche helps to understanding the suicide bombers

The attack on the World Trade Center has been widely assumed to be a distinctly Islamic act of self-sacrifice. But do such acts of martyrdom really spring from Islamic tradition, or are they, rather, extreme expressions of modernity, of the culture we all increasingly share? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the roots of the self-sacrificial idea both in Islamic and in Western thought.

Within Islam, the idea of martyrdom and self-sacrifice has a very specific genealogy. Its origin is not in the Sunni tradition, to which the presumed perpetrators of the World Trade Center (and the Palestinian bombers also) were adherents, but in one of the key texts of the Shia tradition, the story of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet.

On October 2, 680, the second day of Muharram of the year 61 according to the Islamic calendar, the small caravan of Hussein ibn Ali, the third Imam of the Shiites, encamped at Karbala, a small patch of land on the Euphrates, seventy kilometres south of Kufa. The inhabitants of Kufa had refused to pay homage to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, whom they despised as a tyrant who had betrayed the Prophet's message. They had called Hussein to their aid, who until then had been leading a retired life in Mecca. At that time, the formal split of the Muslims into Sunnis and Shiites had not yet taken place, but the conflict between Hussein and Yazid, between the Imam and the Caliph, was to set the seal on this schism.

On the following day, the Umayyad army tracked them down and barred their access to the river. Hussein -considerably weakened by thirst and in certain knowledge of the outcome of the impending battle -released his companions from their oath of loyalty and urged them to flee the impending massacre. This detail is very important in the context of our discussion: Hussein tried to persuade his seventy-two remaining companions not to die a martyr's death. His companions, however, refused to abandon Hussein to the enemy army. And thus, on the morning

of the tenth day of Muharram, they went forth together into a battle in which all would perish.

No historical event has ever moved the Shiites as deeply as the Battle of Karbala. While Hussein himself symbolizes all that is good, just and innocent, his resistance is seen to represent all forms of protest against oppression and tyranny. In Hussein's agony, the suffering of the entire human race is expressed. His death became a synonym for the betrayal of humanity's hope of a better future. No episode in Shiite history can be understood without reference to the Battle of Karbala - certainly not the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which saw itself as a revolt against the Yazid of its own time.

Even now, everyday life is shot through with the symbols of those events. Those who visit Iranian cities in summer will everywhere find huge, ice-cold vessels, as well as local people offering them water. This almost religious reverence for water can be traced back to the thirst suffered by Hussein at Karbala. There is also the way in which those who write letters in Persian to friends or relatives don't sign off with "best wishes" or "with love". Instead they write: "self-sacrificingly yours". Hussein's "passion" became the founding myth in the cultural memory of the Shiites. The Caliph Yazid's disdain for his adversary his betrayal of the Prophet's egalitarian message, of his direct heirs, indeed of everything he stood for -is the seminal event on which the interpretation of the Shiites' entire subsequent history is based. It is a history which went wrong and was usurped by the Sunnis.

Over the centuries, the Shiites developed ritual ceremonies of mourning which are performed each year during Muharram. After 1502, when the Safavids became the first Shiite dynasty to take power in Iran, suffering and mourning, which under Sunni rule had belonged to a private, sometimes even hidden sphere of belief, took on a theatrical and public character. Now for the first time, the rituals were expanded into spectacular processions, combined with self-flagellation and mourning recitations by semi-professional singers, and later also with elaborately staged passion plays.

The Safavids expanded the rituals of mourning for Hussein -not least for reasons of power politics. As the majority of the Iranian population at that time were Sunnis, the Safavids aimed to draw them more closely to the Shia and to shore up hatred against the Sunni Islam which should be identified with the Arabs. The cult of suffering surrounding Hussein offered the best means of accomplishing this -as the passion and martyrdom of heroes are the outstanding theme of Iranian national tradition. Ancient Iranian legends, as well as Zoroastrian ceremonies and hymns of mourning, became associated with the cult of the Third Imam. According to Safavid ideology, his fate was identical with the fate of Iran.

While expressing grief for the death of Hussein, these rituals are equally a sign of penitence for the original failure of the community to stand by the Imam in Karbala. This introduces a post-Koranic notion of inherited guilt to Islam, which has no concept of original sin as such. According to the Koran, man is born good. It is thus impossible to derive a theology of redemption from the Koran itself. In Shiite folk religion, by contrast, is rooted the concept that while each Shiite shares in guilt for

the death of the martyrs, one can nevertheless find redemption through a properly repentant attitude -above all, through the intercession of an Imam, that is to say: a martyr. And naturally also by following Hussein into martyrdom itself. Although this fact is sometimes forgotten, it was Christianity, along with the Shia, that developed the most distinctive theology of martyrdom. There are countless legends which tell of confrontations between representatives of the Roman Empire and fearless believers who laughingly bore repeated agonies of torture. During the Middle Ages, the penitents' rituals in Southern and Western Europe became mass phenomena, and until the modern period flagellation was a widespread practice of Catholic piety, generally accompanied by the recitation of Psalms.

By contrast with Christianity, the Shiites' notion of inherited guilt has its roots on Earth -not in the heavenly origins of humanity. Guilt is not an essential part of humanity's earthly existence, but belongs rather to the history of Islam. It comes not at the beginning of the Revelation, but appears long after its end. But just as Christian flagellation promotes the experience of suffering, the imitation of Christ, while also serving as penance for one's own sinfulness, so Shiite ritual is not only the re-enactment of the initial suffering but also the collective penance of a community whose origins were marked by a failure in duty. And even if mainstream Shiite theology has not derived any model for worldly action from the concept of original sin, Shia ritual has repeteatedly inspired its followers to compensate for their failure not only symbolically, but also through concrete political activity. Since the Shiites see the Fall as a historical rather than a heavenly occurrence, redemption too is conceived of -by a minority -in revolutionary terms as a possible transformation of social conditions for which one should aim. For those who see martyrdom as their release from an earthly vale of sorrows, death holds no terror; and that is something with which political rulers simply could not and cannot deal, since death and torture are the ultimate means by which they assert their power.

Although the death of Hussein and the Shiite mourning rituals do not lead on a direct path to the suicide attackers, they did prepare the ground for the emergence of a sect like the Assassins. A special, esoteric cult of Shiites founded during the eleventh century, they represent the phenomenon of the terrorist who propels both himself and his victim to their deaths. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Shiite cult of martyrdom prompted many Iranian soldiers, including children and teenagers, to rush headlong into the Iraqi minefields, with the cry "Ya Hussein" on their lips. It also led in 1983 to a member of the Lebanese Hizbollah being willing, for the first time, to carry out a suicide bombing. His attack on the American Marine Corps led to the withdrawal of the United States from Beirut.

In Iran, the mentality of the religious martyr also takes hold even of secular, indeed areligious actors. The disposition towards self-sacrifice drives not only theologians but also intellectuals and students in present-day Iran to stand up in the face of all opposition for democracy, freedom of opinion, for a secular state -despite all the threats, arrests and murders. In everyday life, it finds expression in striking and often displayed altruism. But the suicide bomber, too, is a by-product of the general Shiite cult of martyrdom, albeit a marginal one which runs counter to scholarly orthodoxy.

Does the murder of Hussein and the cult surrounding his martyrdom lead us, by way of the Assassins, to September 11? In recent months there have been articles about the Assassins in many Western journals and newspapers; parallels between them and the attackers of New York and Washington. But a decisive link is missing from the chain: the cult of martyrdom is clearly a Shiite phenomenon which, in the first instance, only developed in opposition to the Islamic majority; many of its spiritual and ritual elements are alien to the nature of Sunni Islam, such as the idea of redemption, the need for repentance, the practice of flagellation and the idea of an imitation of suffering. By contrast, the ideology of the terrorists, as far as we know anything about it, is definitely Sunni. From a Western perspective, this may seem to be a minor difference, but within Islam it could scarcely be greater. The Sunni extremists regard the Shiites as heretics, and it is no coincidence that three years ago, the Taleban, with whom the leaders of al Qaeda have allied themselves, carried out a massacre of thousands of Hazara Shiites. At any rate, the line from Hussein - via the Assassins -to the flights targeting the World Trade Center cannot be a direct one.

The Assassins were a real historical phenomenon, yet they play no part in cultural memory, not even in Shiite Iran. The only Assassins with which comparisons can be made are the Assassins of novels and of Hollywood. As a myth of the global culture industry, they are also part of the stock of urban, middle-class consciousness in the Arab world, particularly of the second or third generation Arabs in Europe and America. The difference is that these really do relate the myth to themselves and imagine themselves as following in its wake: the myth, after all, presents itself as a characteristic feature of their own Muslim history and tradition. I have, of course, no idea if any of the attackers saw himself as a successor to the Assassins, but if so, he certainly didn't derive the idea from sources in Arabic tradition. Irrespective of that, the example also shows how isolated features from one's own tradition -which in this situation are without antecedents -have combined with foreign, specifically Shi'ite, possibly even Christian motifs, as well as with modern elements, images and structures of thought.

By contrast, the Taleban -and the Afghan Mujahidin before them -have always sought to avoid losses to their own side in battle. The idea of martyrdom as a goal was imported into the Afghan war against the Soviet Union by Arab guerrillas - although, at the time, not even they saw it as the conscious bringing about of death by self-sacrifice. It is known that, in the 1980s, Mujahidin representatives asked the Tamil Tigers if they could supply suicide attackers in exchange for money. The Afghans themselves fought courageously, but never in defiance of death. An indication of how remote they are from the Shiite cult of martyrdom is apparent from a recent interview with an intimate of the murdered Shah Massoud, published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. When asked why they had been unable to prevent this attack on the Taleban's fiercest adversary, he replied that they had reckoned with all eventualities -except that of a suicide attack. The reason, amazingly enough, was that suicide and suicide attacks are against the Afghan code of honour and could not have been expected even of the hated Taleban.

In the modern period, suicide has long been a familiar component of cultures other than the Islamic -particularly of Japanese culture which has given the phenomenon a

name. A markedly greater number of suicide attacks were perpetrated by the Tamils in their fight for the liberation of Sri Lanka. Only in Colombia has the phenomenon occurred more frequently -mostly on account of drug barons putting out contracts. In these cases, there is little in the way of ideological motivation: by agreeing to his own death, the contract killer secures many years of maintenance for his wretchedly poor family.

Two or three decades ago, hardly anyone in a Muslim country would have had any understanding of the concept of the suicide attacker. Leaving aside the Sunni world to which the cult of martyrdom is in any case foreign, not even Shiite resistance fighters ever thought of strapping a bomb to themselves and setting it off in a department store. The suicide attack played scarcely any role in the Iranian Revolution (in contrast to the idea of martyrdom as such: the readiness to confront the Shah's soldiers without weapons). Driven by religious blindness or political extremism, the cult did lead to the minefield walkers of the Iran-Iraq War, but it did not lead to suicide attacks -at least not until the 80s.

In the Lebanese liberation conflict, the Shiite Amal faction and Hizbollah have carried out fewer suicide attacks than, for example, the Communist groups. The first Arab suicide attack in the conflict with Israel did not take place until the early 1980s, by which time the conflict had already been under way for several decades, and it was carried out by the Syrian Nationalist Party which included a particularly high number of Arab Christians. When, some time later, the first instance occurred of a Shiite member of Hizbollah blowing up some American soldiers, the attacker was criticized by almost all the Shiite authorities in the land, not least because suicide is forbidden by the Koran. In the Sunni world, there had already been a spectacular suicide attack which, however, was not carried out by Sunnis: in 1972, three members of the Japanese Red Army opened fire on the waiting crowd at Tel Aviv airport.

They killed twenty people and injured eighty others, before they themselves were shot dead. The Libyan Head of State, Muammar Qaddafi, was to note scornfully that foreigners were fighting for the Arab cause, while Arabs themselves remained idle. Historically, it was precisely not Islamic culture, with its strict ban on suicide, that gave rise to the phenomenon of the suicide attack. Today, however, it tends to be associated with Islam -and not from any malice. In Israel, in Kashmir possibly in Chechnya -more recently also in Afghanistan, in all these countries Muslims have sacrificed their lives simply in order to kill as many of their opponents as possible. And although in Israel at least, as in Colombia, it is often the hopeless economic situation and the princely reward for one's surviving dependants that motivates poor Palestinians to blow themselves up, the religious aspect is no mere show, certainly not in the case of the leaders and fighters of al-Qaeda, almost all of whom come from wealthy backgrounds.

The idea of religious martyrdom has determined their thinking and actions for many years. For example, the writings of Abdullah Azzam, the mentor of Osama bin Laden, glorify martyrdom in a repugnant manner, giving the impression that the real goal in life is to get oneself torn to pieces by infidels in order to lay hold of the seventy-two virgins of Paradise. Azzam's right-hand-man was, for a long while, an

individual by the name of Tamim al-Adnani, another friend of bin Laden. In the 1980s, al-Adnani travelled around the United States, giving lectures in English in an attempt to recruit volunteers for the Afghan war.

Al-Adnani himself didn't seem much like a warrior, being short and extremely fat, and when he donned the garb of an Afghan guerrilla, he must have looked rather comical. The heavenly reward which he promised pointed to male inhibitions seeking an outlet in pornographic fantasies; thus he raved to his audience about the young girls who, following each sexual act, are transformed back into virgins -and other such stuff. As it happens, Adnani himself failed to find his way to the garden of martyrs. In 1990, he died of a heart attack in Orlando while visiting Disney World.

The leaders of al-Qaeda, an organization the structure of which bears the traits of a religious sect, are likewise no backwoodsmen, no uneducated villagers like the Taleban who gave them refuge. Coming from the worldly middle and upper classes who prefer a Western lifestyle, theirs are thoroughly modern lives which have been marked by the experience of religious conversion. Bin Laden himself, having attended the same school as Omar Sharif before him, first did the rounds of Beirut and Cairo nightlife, then, at the end of the 1970s, experienced a religious conversion and went to join the Afghan resistance. The presumed attackers of September 11 were all products of the Westernized middle and upper classes. Many of the attackers went to the disco at weekends, had girlfriends, drank alcohol. Their everyday lives, professions, knowledge and tastes had far more in common with bourgeois life in Athens, Buenos Aires, or Kuala Lumpur than with life in the Palestinian refugee camps, Egyptian slums or Yemeni tribes.

The way of thinking which a radical experience or personal encounter has caused them to adopt seems backward-looking, even archaic, and (if one thinks of the Shiite cult of martyrdom), although it does relate back to certain forms of Islamic religious tradition, these forms belong not to their own Sunni tradition but to the Shiite beliefs which they regard as heretic. If one thinks of the language and imagery of al-Adnani, it cannot be denied that this Shiite religious tradition has filtered into the terrorists' intellectual universe -but as merely one feature of a deeply syncretistic world view. They have constructed a tradition using quotations from the textual sources, but removed from their linguistic context as well as that of their historical reception, combined with borrowings from a past which isn't even their own, plus elements which are completely and utterly contemporary. The question of why people are prepared to transform themselves into living missiles cannot therefore be fully explained by telling the story of Hussein; but September 11 probably also cannot be explained without reference to this story. It does partly reveal the source of certain images associated with the phenomenon. But in order to understand what happened, one must tell another story, a modern story, or -to put it rather grandly -a story of modernity.

A German intellectual, Friedrich Brake, has written that the best aid to understanding September 11 is Nietzsche. Brake and, in a more profound sense, the Tunisian scholar Abdelwahhab Meddeb, in an interview with Lettre Internationale, was thinking of the theory of resentment from the first essay of the Genealogy of

Morals, and, indeed, this theory may well have influenced the psychology behind the attacks. I believe, however, that Nietzsche stands more fundamentally for modes of thought which, on September 11, found expression in action, and I am thinking here of a key concept of his which was also taken up by Fascism -that of active nihilism.

One of the most remarkable features of September 11 -and one which has received insufficient attention -is that it was not accompanied by any kind of declaration of responsibility. Equally, bin Laden has not denied responsibility, but has sought rather to give the impression that aeroplanes that fly into American skyscrapers simply rain from the heavens -as if they were a natural phenomenon and outcome of American foreign policy. The remarkable vagueness of motivation stands in contradiction to the unparalleled precision of the attacks. When, in the past, attacks were carried out by the Red Army Faction, PKK, Tamil Tigers, Egyptian Jihad, radical Palestinians or Jewish settlers, they not only took pride in claiming responsibility, they were also employing violence in the pursuit of concrete and identifiable political goals. But here? People lost no time in talking of a "declaration of war", and still no one knows who exactly declared war on September 11 -and on whom. On the United States as a sovereign state? On the West or on Christianity? On capitalism?

Even if we still lack evidence, there is much to suggest that it was indeed a cell within al-Qaeda that perpetrated the attacks on New York and Washington. And one can hardly imagine by now that the motivation of these materially well-off attackers was not a religious one. And yet what I would claim to discern in this extreme radicalization of belief is a variation on nihilism. "We have no answer to the Why", says Nietzsche; but the answer is not merely missing, it is being withheld. Nietzsche's nihilism is the "will to nothingness". It is not merely contemplation, not merely the belief that everything is worthy of destruction. Rather one should intervene personally, causing one's own destruction and that of other less enlightened people. The nihilism would only cease to be sicklied over by the pale cast of thought, if, Nietzsche wrote, a "dynamite of the spirit, perhaps a newly discovered nihiline" became available -even going as far as a "gruesome ethic of genocide". According to the logic of reverence for the creation that is expressed in the Old Testament or Koran, the utter destruction of oneself or of others is the most terrible thing of all, but in Nietzsche's thinking it becomes salvation. It is a privilege of human beings that they "can cross themselves out like a badly constructed sentence".

During the First World War, it was thoughts such as these, torn out of the context of Nietzsche's philosophy, which inspired students and intellectuals with enthusiasm for the Front, and in the Third Reich they bore yet more poisonous fruit. Their relevance goes beyond their immediate readership, as they don't represent teachings that one follows or rejects. One doesn't need to have read Nietzsche in order to think within a Nietzschean framework. His philosophy is the prophetic and still the most precise expression of the simultaneous self-exaltation and self- denial which seems to be part and parcel of modernity. In other societies and political situations, it adopts different terminology, patterns of justification, formulas and modes of action. It is a specifically modern mental framework, even when the images through which

it communicates itself derive from tradition, or at any rate from an alleged tradition. The terrorists' appropriation of a religious tradition is fundamentally no different from the way in which the Fascists made use of the obvious construct of an Aryan-German primeval history. It has scarcely more to do with the real history of the Sunni Arab world than has the Valhalla mythology of the Nazis with real remembered German history. The images may be old, traditional or archaic, but the use of them is decidedly modern.

Comparisons come to mind such as the Una-bomber, the Aum sect and, above all, Timothy McVeigh, all of whom also dispensed with any declarations of responsibility. The latter, in particular, seemed positively obsessed with destroying himself in the framework of a huge media event. Instead of trying to prevent or at least postpone his execution, he expended all his effort in making it possible for his death to be publicly broadcast. All these acts of terror bear witness to a generalized, pathological hatred which -unlike the hatred fuelling the attacks of the Red Army Faction, ETA or the Palestinian Hamas -is no longer accompanied by a concrete, identifiable motive. Terror, the aims of which are undeclared, is directed against an enemy which has become an abstraction, against a superior power which could be termed metaphysical.

This is more or less consistent with the way in which the attacks were staged as a media event for an audience of billions, including the ten-minute pause during which the cameras could be set up. That wasn't thought up by Afghan tribal warriors, but by people who are themselves part of the contemporary world which they are fighting. Further evidence of this is the prophetic setting and antiquated rhetoric which Osama bin Laden subsequently used in staging his appearance. Although he conjured up the linguistic impression of a tradition, the real heirs of the theological tradition speak quite differently. The same is true of his ideology, so far as remnants of it can be deciphered. The unity of state and religion that he probably has in mind is alleged to be a sine qua non of Islam, although the idea only took shape with the development of the nation state in the nineteenth century. Nor is the urge for self-destruction -defined and legitimized by the notion of individual or collective redemption -known to us from the Middle Ages.

The crazed killer is a modern being -and not only when he belongs to a religious organization. When, a few days after September 11, a Swiss citizen killed first of all some members of the regional parliament of Zug and then himself, one was relieved that the one attack seemed to have nothing to do with the other. Yet the two events are not so entirely unrelated. By means of a single act, the crazed killer acquires a surrogate for that which is lacking, almost by definition, in modern society: a comprehensive framework of meaning in which the individual has his allocated place. The act is preceded by a phase of withdrawal, separation, subjectively perceived rejection or conscious isolation - even when the outward forms of bourgeois existence are being maintained.

Stuck in a vacuum, the individual feels himself to be passive, anonymous, in every way forced to fend for himself. By shooting or bombing, he endows himself with significance, becoming, for a few seconds, the total man of action, the avenger of an injustice which is overwhelmingly felt, but which neither his personality nor

external circumstances have given him any chance of putting right. From being a nobody, he raises himself to a god. However senseless his action might appear when viewed from the outside, it is from destruction itself that he wrests an ultimate meaning. His abstract antagonist -the state, humanity, the environment, evil itself - becomes briefly tangible in the form of those at whom his weapon is aimed. One scarcely dares to imagine how much greater the injection of meaning, public attention and empowering action must be for those who, in their temporary seclusion, have been reinforced in their beliefs by political sects and have yielded to seductively coherent religious convictions. The thrill must be so much greater when the injustice which -by means of a symbolic single act -they are trying to put right, punish or at least point out is not just individually suffered but can be portrayed as the oppression of millions, whom they thereby release from passivity and from whose anonymity they emerge through self-destruction.

Those who seek the origins of September 11 in the Koran or in the Middle Ages are making the situation appear less dangerous than it is. It represents a kind of terrorism that can spring up anywhere in a modern society. It does require there to be a wretched people, as whose agents the terrorists see themselves and claim to act, but these wretched peoples are interchangeable.

None the less, one must also look at the political and economic background to the attacks. Even if the Islamic global terror network is very much a hybrid phenomenon, it still needs a social and political base in order to become so dangerous. It needs movements in society which support it and countries that protect it. The fact that it has all this is what distinguishes the al-Qaeda network from all other known variants on nihilistic terror. And here begins the third story which needs to be told, a story of Realpolitik. It tells of the Afghan refugee children in Pakistan, from whose ranks the Pakistani and American Secret Services created the Taleban, with financial help from Saudi Arabia to send them into battle against the Mujahidin, who had previously received support from the West and Saudi Arabia, but who had moved beyond their control.

However sympathetic the Taleban and their affluent Arab backers may be to each other's goals, however similar they may have become in terms of lifestyle and dress, they do come from totally different worlds and inhabit different versions of the present. The explosive synchronicity of non synchronous elements which characterizes Islamic terrorism is perfectly exemplified by this alliance of uneducated Pashtun villagers and rich Arab city dwellers.