



Killing for Paradise

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Abstract

*The motivations of jihadist suicide attacks seem incomprehensible. However, numerous testimonies indicate that their death as martyrs is their only way to access paradise and its wondrous promises. Martyrdom appears as an option for those who feel a deep resentment and know themselves incapable of being “good Muslims” during their whole earthly life. René Girard, who was interested in this phenomenon (especially in his last book *Battling to the End*) provides us with some key elements to understand what we will call a neo-pascalian wager undifferentiating self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others.*

Keywords

Islamism; jihadism; suicide attack; sacrifice; mimetic theory; René Girard; Blaise Pascal.

Introduction

Ten years ago, in the epilogue of *Battling to the End*, René Girard wrote: “It is staggering to think that during the last three days before the attack, [Atta, the leader of September 11 group who piloted one of the two airplanes], spent his nights in bars with his accomplices. There is something mysterious and intriguing in this. Who asks about the souls of those men? Who were they and what were their motivations? What did Islam mean to them? What does it mean to kill oneself for that cause?”¹ I would like to address these questions, or at least to significantly contribute to their answers. The many testimonies, which are available today, can help us achieve this.

In a recent publication, Paul Dumouchel argued sacrifice had become “barren.”² And yet suicide bombings, such as those developed by the Tamil Tigers and promoted by jihadists, present themselves as a useful, if not fertile, sacrifice. Behaviours labelled as absurd from the standpoint of our occidental rationality have now been occupying the forefront of the media landscape for more than fifteen years. They have provoked military coalitions for

¹ René Girard, *Battling to the end* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 212.

² Paul Dumouchel, *The Barren Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015). See also Paul Dumouchel’s paper, “Terrorism: from Ethnic Cleansing to Lone Wolves”, in the present journal issue.

which numerous countries with yet divergent interests have gathered together. Those behaviours have enabled a small minority of jihadists – fighters or terrorists – to restrain public liberties, to shift economic policies, to disrupt populations’ movements, to increase expenditure on armaments and security, and to speed up innovation in those fields. Moreover, those behaviours call into question some peoples’ religious convictions by radicalizing them, and that is true not only for Muslims.³

How is it possible? There is one reason that can explain the strength of jihadists: they have inverted their own relation to death. In other words, they believe what they call their martyrdom will open the doors to paradise for them. Furthermore, their martyrdom will keep the doors open for members of their family. Such a role reversal between life and death, between the merits granted to pacific and pious people on the one hand, and those granted to murderers on the other hand, should be comprehended to evaluate the present situation – if only to define measures that will enable us to contain such violence, or to live with it.

Violence and the sacred have thus met once again, but this time in a largely renewed configuration. René Girard himself had recognized it 10 years ago: “(...) if I had written *Violence and the Sacred* after 9/11, I certainly would have included it in the book. 9/11 is the event that casts light on contemporary events because it makes archaism more intelligible. 9/11 represents a strange return to archaism in the secular times we live in.”⁴ Indeed, 9/11 and other previous similar events seem to reveal the current weakness of the three historically known methods for containing violence: the religious, the political, and the economic spheres.

In such a context, it seems essential to try to account for the success of Islamic propaganda and its origins, the way in which those beliefs represent a challenge to mimetic theory, and how it can help us analyze what is really at stake.

I. Foundations for Joining the Jihadist Project

Two beliefs mostly determine the impact of the Islamic message on its targets. The first one is the way in which the promise for eternal life is formulated. The second belief deals with an apocalyptic standpoint that is very much alive in ISIS’ rhetoric. Those two beliefs are the foundation for a shared jihadist identity.

A. Martyrdom and the six blessings hadiths

The Prophet is said to have claimed any Muslim martyr shall obtain “six blessings from God: 1) he shall be forgiven as soon as he sheds his first blood drops; 2) he shall enjoy his

³ Some Europeans rediscover their forgotten Christian roots to find their arguments against Islam(ism). Since George W. Bush Jr., American political speeches use the rhetoric of God against the “axis of evil”. In the jihadist threat, fundamentalists among evangelists, traditional Christians and Jewish orthodox see affirmation that only their radical religious option can resist jihadist expansionism. Consequently, these “threats” tend to distance them from the more tolerant views of their coreligionists.

⁴ René Girard, Robert Doran, “Apocalyptic Thinking after 9/11: An Interview with René Girard”, *SubStance* 37/1 (2008): 20-32.

place in paradise; 3) he shall wear the adornment of faith; 4) he shall be spared from the sufferings of the grave; 5) he shall be protected from the great terror on Resurrection day; 6) he shall be married to seventy-two large eyed *houris*, and he shall intercede for seventy members of his Family.” (From Al Miqdâm Ibn Ma’di Karib).

This hadith is very popular among jihadists and its authenticity is not questioned by them. It is easy enough to understand the reasons for its popularity; such promises exceed any others that religions of salvation usually make to the faithful. From this hadith, one generally remembers – if only to make fun of it – the martyr’s marriage to the seventy-two virgins, also mentioned in the Quran. Yet it is not the most striking of all.

From the moment one grants credit to this hadith, death becomes the best project one can possibly have in life. If the martyr’s first blood drops grant him forgiveness, he is thus granted full and eternal mercy despite any wrongdoings he might have committed. The martyr then gets a free pass to paradise. Moreover, he neither suffers at the time of his death nor during the final judgment. Last but not least, he is capable of distributing passes to paradise to up to seventy members of his family. In short, he has *Allah’s* delegated authority to condemn some of his family members to hell or, equally, to choose those to whom he grants eternal life.

Abou Maryam converted to jihadism and died in a suicide attack in 2015. Here are his words: “Martyrdom is probably the shortest way to paradise (...). I have directly seen it on the face of my fellow martyrs. I saw happiness on their faces (...)”⁵ Such artificial identity, claiming to adhere to the *Ummah* and the Muslim orthopraxy, results in a last-minute affiliation. It is nothing but an attempt to transform a bad Muslim into a “good” martyr. This “good” martyr is likely to benefit from all the advantages a godly life is supposed to bring to an observant Muslim without the life-long earthly dedication.

B. An apocalyptic thought that makes death urgent

A second foundation reinforces the impact of this hadith on its targets. Just like René Girard,⁶ jihad thinkers interpret the signs of the times and see the apocalypse approaching. Rather than toiling to create a better society, a terrestrial paradise, or a Muslim utopia, it is of first necessity to die before the end of times. The expansion of the Caliphate by means of war – which is practically unsustainable in the medium term – aims less at fulfilling a politico-theological agenda than at providing opportunities to die as a martyr.

A French specialist of Islam, Olivier Roy, clearly explains it in his book *Jihad and Death*. One urgently has to be part of the minority of “saints” who will be saved. Among the signs announcing the end of times as perceived by jihadists, Roy mentions death, illnesses, apostasy, heresy, individualism, natural catastrophes, wars, and so on. He adds: “If

⁵ Loubna Mrie, Vera Mironova, Sam Whitt, “‘Je ne cherche que le paradis’: rencontre avec le djihadiste français Abou Mariam”, *Slate* (October 5, 2014), <http://www.slate.fr/story/92937/rencontre-djihadiste-francais> (accessed August 15, 2017).

⁶ Already in the introduction of *Battling to the End*, Girard states “This is an apocalyptic book” (ix) and that “These are the ‘signs of the times’ that the future can be deciphered from the present: the prophet, like the strategist, has a responsibility to know how to read clues to the future.” (xvii).

accompanied by mass slaughtering, the death of a martyr stages a minor apocalypse while waiting for the grand finale.”⁷

Another hadith – that of the 73 sects – indicates all sects shall go to hell except for one. It reinforces the idea that creating a happy Caliphate for the community of believers is not the primary goal; rather, the goal is preparation for an end of times with a pitiless final judgment. ISIS naturally presents itself as the one sect that will be saved. A third hadith, one that became a genuine slogan of jihad, completes the other two by claiming: “Be aware that paradise lies in the shadow of sabers.”

Therefore, one has to die – under the right banner if time allows – in order to secure the last direct journey to paradise. One must belong to this 73rd sect and those who have not joined it before the unleashing of the end times will have every reason to regret it.

II. Two Challenges to Mimetic Theory

There are at least two ways in which this ideology and its relative success challenge mimetic theory. Whereas the sacred is expected to contain violence, in such a case it encourages the most violent behaviors. Moreover, suicide bombings seem to put into question one of René Girard’s main distinctions between self-sacrifice and sacrifice of others.

A. Sacred beliefs unleashing violence instead of containing it

Does the Muslim religion encourage its adherents to act violently or, on the contrary, does it encourage behaviors that avoid violence, at least inside the community of believers? One should certainly distinguish the religious institutions of Muslims from ISIS’ savage practices, thereby hoping for some peaceful contextualization. Yet there is no doubt the jihadists’ beliefs bear a sacred quality in the mind of their adherents: jihadists rely on texts of a corpus claimed to be authentic in order to kill and to die. Thus, the explosive belt is part of a standard package for apprentice jihadists as soon as they join the territory of the Caliphate – it protects them from dying in a way that leads to hell without becoming a Martyr in the first place.

We can conclude that ISIS propaganda is not a religion, but rather the opposite of any religion. This is a claim leveled by numerous Muslim authorities and believers. ISIS propaganda could, therefore, be called a millenarian ideology with religious invocation.

B. Confusing self-sacrifice with the sacrifice of others in a single act

After discussion with theologian Raymond Schwager, René Girard gave up the distinction between a sacrificial kind and a non-sacrificial kind of Christianity, a distinction first established in his book entitled *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. He then introduced another distinction, which simultaneously articulates and opposes self-sacrifice and sacrifice of others. Such a distinction is fully in line with Salomon’s judgment which enables one to identify the child’s true mother: truth is evidenced by the words which refuse violence made to the child, who stands as the victim of the dispute.

⁷ Oliver Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (Hurst & Company: London, 2017), 55.

Yet suicide bombings ultimately fail to differentiate between the jihadist's sacrifice and that of the slaughtered. In other words, the sacrificial agent and the sacrificed die simultaneously. As torn arms and legs mix inextricably in the explosion, the use of explosive belts further reinforces the impression of annihilation of all differences. In addition, suicide bombings underscore the faulty belief that the greatest good can result from the greatest harm. The six rewards of the hadith further promise that the martyr shall be spared from the sufferings of the grave, and shall then access paradise as early as he puts his victims to death. On the contrary, the victims shall be condemned to hell while their murderer shall obtain redemption.

Whereas differences lie at the foundation of all cultures, the ultimate lack of differentiation ISIS puts forth by confusing self-sacrifice with the sacrifice of others is its complete negation. Besides, it is neither about creating nor gathering for the Ummah, the fantasized assembly of believers and ultimate Muslim identity. Rather, what is at stake is the erasure of all traces of the past, especially pre-Quranic vestiges, as well as every hope for the future.

III. ISIS through the Lens of Mimetic Theory

Facing such confusions between violence and the sacred on the one hand and conflation of self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others on the other, we now have to bring a little order back into our thoughts. First, to understand the logic of jihadism, let us put aside our terrified reactions and question what I call the neo-Pascalian wager of jihadists. Second, we should now address the question of identity – essential to our discussions in this symposium – in a renewed light in order to understand how such a spiral of violence can lead one to kill for eternal life. Finally, we will see that jihadists' desire borrows from the three strategies identified by René Girard, thus showing the relevance of mimetic theory in this regard.

A. The terms of a neo-Pascalian wager

Our Western rationality fundamentally prevents us from recognizing any kind of rationality in the logic of jihadism. Like everyone else, and yet even more so, jihadists are subjected to a sense of insufficiency and set their only hope of plenitude on the afterlife. From this, dying as a martyr for Islam appears to be the only way to the Muslim heaven available.

As absurd as it may seem to us, it is tempting or even reasonable to make such a wager. At worst, if the belief is unfounded, dying as a martyr will put a spectacular and publicized end to a life full of failures, times in jail, frustrations, addictions and resentment, a life without any horizon. At best, this wager stands true and martyrdom will not only bring personal redemption to the martyr, but also the possibility to grant eternal life to anyone he may choose.

We might as well say that suicide bombings, or fighting for the Caliphate, turns the jihadists' initial sense of uneasiness into the rewarding conviction of forthcoming omnipotence. Thus their violent radicalization would have been a necessary precondition for a tremendous benefit. If ISIS offers a terrestrial foretaste to paradise by providing its recruits with matrimonial life and material comfort, it suggests martyrdom as an attractive

route to an eternal, good, and all-powerful life. In the eyes of jihadists, inhumanity is a sign of super humanity.

B. The negation of authentic affiliations and the exaltation of artificial identity

Last year, an English translation of René Girard's conference on "Les Appartenances"⁸ ("Belonging") dating back to 1998 in Messina, was made available to the *Colloquium on Violence and Religion (CO&VR)* readers. It is Girard's main contribution to the themes of identity and rivalry, both essential to our study.

The very term "identity" bears an inner contradiction that accounts for its ambiguity: it is about being simultaneously identical and unique with respect to others. Any true aspiring jihadist will indeed crave both. On one side, they look for the uniqueness of an Islam claiming to stand as the only true version, regardless of the ill-believers, the unfaithful, or the crusaders – all excluded and denied the basest human qualities. On the other side, aspiring jihadists aim to belong to a group that requires them to perform duties and to respect prohibitions, to adhere to the Quran and to some of its hadiths, to resort to Arabic stereotyped formulations running through Islamic speeches, to dress in specific fashions, and to use other similar signs of recognition. All of these are ways to distinguish between a claimed identity belonging to "us", and the denial of any identity for "them."

The variety of affiliations that distinguish one individual from another are reduced to the division between a unique jihadist identity, to which everything is sacrificed, and an ill-believing identity that justifies its violent elimination. Despite being undoubtedly made up, fantasized, and artificial, the jihadists' identity nevertheless contributes to legitimizing mass murder. Once settled and internalized, such an identity is also heavily anchored to the extent that most jihadists returning to their homeland cling to their addiction to jihad. At most, they may indeed reckon that ISIS, as an institution, does not live up to their expectations and disappoints their hopes. Yet the jihadist project remains attractive and the prospect of dying as a martyr is still highly desirable.

The growing lack of differentiation between ages, genders, owners of legitimate or illegitimate violence, the learned and the ignorant, the informed and the ill-informed, the pure and the impure, the allowed and the prohibited, as well as the shared willingness to acquire more and more possessions without ever being satisfied – all of this blurs the landmarks of young people in our societies. They demand a full measure of being, but they see themselves as unable to be fulfilled as individuals, with respect to the successful models presented to them. They view their own country as racist and hopeless.

As a consequence, some of these young people experience humiliation as an identity-related resentment, and they look for a way to achieve uniqueness. They suffer from a sense of profound hollowness as well as an idealist desire of making up for it by adhering to ever more radical ideologies. In their eyes, jihadism shows itself as the one and only way of

⁸ René Girard, "Belonging", *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 23 (2016): 1-12. This conference is a subtle analysis of the concept of identity and its ambivalence. Girard connects the concept of identity with the idea of belongings that, at the same time, make us similar to those who share the same belongings and differentiated to the extent that we are related to a unique set of belongings (in the same way as a genetic code).

becoming somebody and of improving their own self-esteem. As reality inevitably stands before them, they are left with nothing but martyrdom, their only way of escaping from deception and their only way to reach eternal plenitude. Death eventually develops from an obstacle to be avoided into a desirable model.

C. Combining the three strategies of mimetic desire

Let us now finish our brief examination of the useful insights drawn from mimetic theory. It is striking to note that jihadism combines the three main strategies of mimetic desire: pseudo-narcissism, pseudo-masochism and victimization.

Let us start with pseudo-narcissism⁹. Jihadism is not entirely foreign to dandyism, as we can see through the way in which jihadists grimly stage their own character, parade around on social media and publicize their acts. And it works – young girls propose to jihadists through social media, and take risks in order to join them. The media complacently reports on their audiovisual “testaments.” This occurs while mimetic competition arises between jihadists, as to who achieves the highest death toll or inflicts the most atrocious sufferings. Once again, the show business industry obediently echoes it all.

Then comes pseudo-masochism. René Girard offers insights about the resentment-driven masochist: he “(...) will reject those who feel tenderness and affection for him, whereas he turns eagerly to those who show, by their contempt for him, real or apparent, that they do not belong, like him, to the race of the accursed.”¹⁰ At the core of the Islamist propaganda lays the desire for revenge on the West. Such propaganda nurtures the illusory fantasy of a spectacular and final victory over the oppressors of the colonized and of the immigrants, over the Americans for their use of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as over the depraved and the party animals spanning the free world, and so on.

Finally, the victimization comes. There is, in the jihadists’ way of behaving, something of Meursault’s arbitrary murder in Camus’ *The Stranger*¹¹: he who suffers from society’s indifference and contempt imagines that acting in a reprehensible way will bring him the attention, even at the cost of being punished, thereby showing paradoxical interest for his fellow man.

By combining in a novel way these three strategies of mimetic desire, the jihadist finds in his martyrdom the means to: 1) claim for his sovereignty and hope to exemplify it

⁹ This concept is discussed in detail by René Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965), 105- 107 & *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1987), 367-381. The dandy or the coquette makes efforts to give others the illusion that they desire themselves. Yet, contrary to what Freud stated in his studies on narcissism, this strategy is not grounded in a genuine sovereignty but compensates the incompleteness that we experience by trying to attract other people’s desires. In Girard’s work, narcissism is more correctly defined as “pseudo-narcissism”.

¹⁰ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 178.

¹¹ René Girard, *To Double Business Bound* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 9-35. See also Jean-Pierre Dupuy, « La mauvaise foi et self-deception », *Raison Présente* (1996), <https://www.hprevot.fr/Forum-Confiance/Contributions/mauvaisefoi.html> (accessed August 16, 2017).

through his capacity to allow family members their entrance into paradise; 2) take a dazzling and unexpected revenge on the modern Western world that condemned him to a miserable existence; 3) fashion himself as a victim, obliging the others to pay attention to him that he never had. Nowadays, only a properly publicized martyrdom can allow such a desired achievement.

Given the combination of those three strategies pushed to their lethal extreme, terrorism indeed, as Jean-Michel Oughourlian has remarked,¹² presents itself as a pathology of desire.

Conclusion

A new episode of the “strange and tedious war” between “violence” and “truth”¹³ is unfolding before our eyes. There are reasons for hope and for concern. Above all, we should draw lessons about our own perception of death, and avert our gaze to increase our joy of life.

Let us first address a reason for concern. Whether or not their desire is labeled as pathological, we should recognize people susceptible to this message will always be among us. To flourish, they will rely on the intensification of mimetic desire and of resentment as staged in our world of hyper-competition. The ideologies inspired by anarchists-terrorists or by communists in the 19th and 20th centuries may seem less attractive than the six rewards of the hadith, yet their promises are less incredible and provide a significant capacity to attract non-believers. Moreover, the future of humanity and, more generally, of life on Earth as it stands in threat of our ecological irresponsibility, might well be a pretext for violent action that those of us disappointed with civilization could come up with. The *Festivism*, so pleasantly denounced by Thomas Clavel¹⁴ after Philippe Muray (of which he manages to regain the verve) in this volume has the precise effect to trigger such kind of reactions. Some of those who have not been invited to the “party” are tempted to spoil it. And the damages of *hyper-festivity* are likely to weaken a lot of inhibitions. In addition, the unfortunates believe to access the feast of a paradise made of never-ending enjoyment...

Nevertheless, there are also reasons for hope. The contagion of belief in redemption throughout pseudo-martyrdom is likely to reach its limits, if only because of ISIS’ depletion and disenchantment it has caused. In any case, the victims of terrorism in the occidental world are few in relation to other causes we accept as more or less inevitable, or as acceptable risks – such as domestic violence, domestic accidents and road accidents. Understandably, we fear the continuation of suicide bombings, and yet we have good reasons to put the figures into perspective. Incidentally, it would stand as a destabilizing replica in the eyes of their promoters – let’s just remind ourselves of the self-control demonstrated by Londoners in 1940 under the Nazi bombings. More generally, we might as well interpret outbreaks of violence in the name of Islam as the swan song of a religion strongly put into question by globalization. Beyond that, as those murders originate from

¹² Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016).

¹³ Blaise Pascal quoted by René Girard in *Battling to the end*, 80.

¹⁴ See *infra* Thomas Clavel, “Terror attacks and the Production of the Sacred”.

unreasonable beliefs, there are a variety of goals the educational community – families, schools and religious institutions – could target. They include better and earlier development of critical thinking, a greater distinction between beliefs and violence, and finally reduced vulnerability during adolescence.

I will now tackle a final question. If the strength of jihadists lies in their contempt for death, or even in their eagerness to die, one of our own weaknesses probably depends on our will to extend our lives as far as possible and at all costs, despite their lack of content and intensity. This is what Martin Scorsese's recent film entitled *Silence* (2016) strongly suggests, as it pictures the end of Christianization in 17th century Japan: Jesuit fathers have far more concern for the survival of their Japanese flock than the Japanese themselves since the missionaries promised them eternal life. If we accepted and fully recognized our own mortality, if we considered death as a constant possibility, we would then live every moment as though it were our last, and get more satisfaction out of our accomplishments. Whereas post-humanists are dreaming about extending terrestrial life at the cost of genetic manipulation, submission to artificial intelligence, and the implant of bionic organs, in suicide bombings, Islamists have found a natural path to follow. This path achieves much greater results at the expense of just one difficult moment – to fear taking action or to fail in action. Between those two options, we are left with the prospect of enjoying a happy life under the threat of an unpredictable, therefore stimulating death. This last one seems preferable.

Translated by Shawn Witkowski

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