

*ON SUICIDE BOMBING.* By Talal Asad. Columbia University Press 2007. Pp. 128. \$20.00. ISBN: 0-231-14152-1.

Any reader expecting to find out the “truth” as to the cause and nature of what Westerners label “suicide bombing,” particularly regarding what motivates suicide bombers to engage in such acts, will be in for a surprise. Rather, in this compact, meaty little book, Talal Asad explores with acuity Western responses to suicide bombing as these responses mirror Western law, psychology, ethics, theology, and Christian doctrine. In short, Professor Asad has once again turned his finely honed anthropological skills on Western assumptions, attitudes, behavior, and conceptions, often taken for granted, this time in regard to violence, suicide, and martyrdom. The results are not comforting for Westerners, particularly for those of us who are U.S. citizens.

For those who do not know him, Asad, a Ph.D. from Oxford, has devoted his scholarly life to a comparative study of Islamic, Christian, and secular construals of pain and violence. Son of a Jewish convert to Islam, Asad was educated first in a British missionary school in Pakistan. He later went on to do his doctoral studies under the famous anthropologist Evans-Pritchard at Oxford. He is now a distinguished professor of anthropology at the City of New York Graduate Center. His scholarship is copious, and he is perhaps best known to academics, particularly in anthropology, religion, and law, for *The Genealogy of Religion* (1993) and *Formations of the Secular* (2003). *On Suicide Bombing* is the publication of three lectures he originally presented as Wellek lecturer at the University of California in Irvine in May, 2006.

The book is organized as a response to a series of questions, raised in the introduction, in the context of the bombing of the twin towers in New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

“Is there,” Asad queries, “a religiously motivated terrorism [specifically Islamic]? If so how does it differ from other cruelties? What makes its motivation . . . religious? Where does it stand in relation to other forms of collective violence? How is the image of the suicide bomber, bringing death to himself and to others, addressed by Christians and post-Christians? (1)

He proceeds to explore what he finds to be the contradictions inherent in the Western effort to distinguish between morally good and morally evil killing, for example, through developing Just War theory and

concomitantly a Just War ethic. Each subsequent chapter focuses on a specific conceptual piece of the various conceptual frameworks that seek to make such distinctions. He makes very clear from the beginning that he is not arguing for the legitimacy of suicide terrorism; the argument he launches clarifies beyond doubt that, if anything, he is pointing out a wider context of the terrorism of so-called legitimate warfare, the self-deception that resides in our rationalizations of it in regard to motivation, and the misjudgment of suicide acts of warfare that take place in this wider context in relation to Christian and secular views of martyrdom and redemption. (1)

The first chapter focuses on the concept “terrorism”—its legal definition in contrast to war and therefore the possibility of a just war. His analysis in this chapter depends on the remarkable resemblance between war and terrorism in the violence both wreak, particularly on civilians, their chief difference lying in the sheer magnitude of death resulting from warfare. Their technical difference lies in international legal status. War, conducted under certain conditions (first and foremost that it is conducted by sovereign states), qualifies as legal; terrorism by definition is not legal (hence the designation “insurgency” to those who commit it). Having examined, among other things, the discursive practices surrounding such concepts as collateral damage, he concludes that in actuality there is no real (as opposed to political rhetorical) difference between the two in the violence that both wreak, beyond the sheer magnitude of devastation done by sovereign states to non-combatants, rationalized as collateral damage. He ends the chapter by noting with irony “the ingenuity of liberal discourse in rendering inhuman acts humane.” (38)

The second chapter exposes Western self-deception inherent in discussions of motivation—psychological and moral—as ethicists, social scientists, and secular scholars of religion seek to determine moral from immoral acts of violence—this time in terms of the uniqueness of the act of suicide terrorism. Viewed as an act of suicide, the use of one’s own body as a killing machine, particularly outside the realm of military violence, has particularly disturbed Westerners, whose experts become pre-occupied with the motivation of the bombers. Early in the chapter, Asad poses the question: “Is there a crucial difference between someone who kills in order to die and someone who dies in order to kill?”(40) His analysis in this chapter is noteworthy for, among other things, his critique of the Christianization of Islamic conceptions and acts of martyrdom. Here he elaborates at length Muslim discussions of *shadad*, noting that *istishadad*, a technique of *jihad* ending in self-

annihilation, is a totally modern idea. (52) Again he draws parallels between the rhetoric surrounding *istishadad* and Western conceptions, particularly Michael Walzer's portrayal of "the strong moral leader" confronted with the prospect of using nuclear weapons. (63) Asad concludes by agreeing that suicide terrorism is in fact unique, but not in the ways posed by Western experts.

Chapter Three presents Asad's view of the uniqueness of the act in response to the many questions raised at the beginning and all along the way. I won't even give you a hint as to what he proposes. I will only say that this chapter is theologically astute and perhaps the most difficult of them all for a Western reader, particularly a Christian one, to face up to. Asad reflects in his "Epilogue" upon what he has presented, stressing that "[g]ood arguments (and bad) are available to anyone who wants to justify the conduct of insurgents or of soldiers, or armies on the battlefield or of torturers in state detention centers." (96) Asad's job has been to point out what Conrad's Kurtz uttered as his last words in *Heart of Darkness*, "The horror, the horror."<sup>1</sup>

One could review this book in an academically picky way; if he or she did, I would claim that the reviewer just didn't get it. Instead I will raise some questions of my own: Shouldn't we as legal theorists, theologians, and ethicists admit that Just War theory and Just War ethics are simply inadequate to the task of regulating violence in response to insurgents, also known as revolutionaries, on an international scale? Modern Just War theory is premised on combat conducted between or among duly recognized sovereign nation-states. Technically speaking, insurgency in any form—domestic or international revolution—is illegal by international law. Theorists of Just War thus understand the violence conducted by sovereign nation states in response to insurgencies to be legal by an expanded version of Just War criteria (now including pre-emptive strike), in contrast to the violence of the insurgents, now legally defined as terrorism altogether. (Asad draws on Michael Walzer's work as exemplary.) To me this understanding stacks the deck in favor of justifying any means necessary to defeat those designated terrorists. Experience over the last eight years with the Patriot Act and with the torture of suspects has proved this to be the case. Furthermore, the recent change in leadership in the U.S. seems to be making little difference beyond a shift in U.S. focus from Iraq to Afghanistan.

This book should be of interest to ethicists, legal theorists, scholars of religion and violence, Muslim scholars of *Shari'a*, Christian

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1. JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS* 109 (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1993) (1902).

theologians, and a general, interested reader willing to keep reading. I taught the book last fall (2008) to undergraduates across disciplines and academic class and in an ethics course on love and death; I will co-teach the book to undergraduates in an intermediate level seminar on martyrdom this fall (2009). In the ethics course, my students were riveted by the book, wrote good short papers, and were engaged in lively discussion in response. They had one general complaint: Asad gives no suggestions on where “we” go from here.

They are correct. Asad offers no solutions. The issues are Westerners’ to address. But he does expose the contradictions inherent in our attitudes toward suicide terrorism in ways that clarify the problems posed by our present foreign policy, the violence it effects, and our moral justifications for it. In so doing, he lets none of us off the hook. Whether we voted for our particular leaders or not, we live in a democracy; they are ours; the policies they make represent us collectively, if not individually. We are responsible for them, for the actions they produce, and for their consequences.

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