

Martyrdom, Suicide Terrorism, Religion and Psychological Climate. A Cultural Psychiatry Perspective

Donato Zupin¹
Elisa Rapisarda²

Abstract

Background: Suicide terrorism has increased exponentially in the last decades, becoming a topic debated in public opinion as well as in scientific discussion. Simultaneously extreme right-wing terrorism with a Christian connotation is re-emerging. Political, religious, social, cultural and psychiatric factors have been identified. Psychiatrists' reactions have deeply diverged, ranging from refusing to handle this matter to accurately investigating the phenomenon and attempting to identify the biological causes of the "wickedness".

Aims: To retrace the history of suicide terrorism in psychiatric and anthropological studies and make a cultural psychiatry contribution to this field of investigation.

Methods: Literature on suicide and far-right terrorism is analyzed and discussed by adopting a perspective of cultural dynamic psychiatry.

Results: It is possible to trace a common historical root in the Christian and Islamic traditions regarding martyrdom, suicides and murders for religious reasons. These two traditions have progressively diverged, and the similarities and differences may be connected to the different forms adopted by suicide jihadist and far-right Christian terrorism. Specific beliefs and culturally ratified operations, such as transcendence and martyrdom training techniques, contribute to creating the psychological climate which foreshadows the terrorist's performance.

Discussion: Western and Islamic traditions lie within a common matrix with variations regarding the construction of the forms of the supernatural and related cultural techniques. These in turn show a deep imbrication with the internal psychic dynamics, that allows detachment from humanity and the resolution to die. If suicide jihadist terrorism is connected to geopolitical and cultural Middle Eastern issues, the modality in which this violence is staged and managed in terms of media, draws its form from Western dynamics.

Keywords: Definition Of Spirituality, Cultural Psychiatry, Jaspers, Ponce, Religion And Mental Health.

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Correspondence to: ¹ Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist. Italian Institute of Transcultural Mental Health. Mental Health Department of Trieste. WHO Collaborative Center for Research and Training in Mental Health – Trieste.

²Anthropologist. Italian Institute of Transcultural Mental Health. Researcher at Brain Circle.

E-mail: donato.zupin@psiculturale.it

Dear colleagues, Good morning!

I really want to thank you for being here this morning, and I also want to thank Prof. Fernandez and Chen for organizing the NY WACP Congress, as well as Prof. Bartocci for organizing the Pre-Congress.

As you can see, today I'll talk about: *Martyrdom, Suicide Terrorism, Religion and Psychological Climate*. This is a complex topic. One of the reasons for this complexity is that we are human beings before being professionals and, when facing these shocking phenomena, we have the same feelings that any other average person of our culture would have, which, when it comes to terrorism, is deeply influenced by the media.

Media representation of terrorism is often polarized on two opposite positions (Powell, 2001; Lewis, 2005; Von Sikorsky et al., 2017), that can be summarized in the two following statements: "Terrorism implies Islam" versus "Terrorism has nothing to do with Islam, it's about criminality, or war".

For example, as Merkel said in the Independent: "Islam is not the source of terrorism" (Osborne – Independent, 2017) and "Muslims are not terrorist" (Alnatour – HuffPost, 2015); but also: "The distortion of Islam drives to terrorism" (Rabil – The Washington Post, 2018). Another example, this from an Italian newspaper (an awful one), that the day after Paris attacks titled "Islamic bastards" (Belpietro - Libero, 2015). That's the first polarization: Instrumentalization of religion Vs Islamic fanaticism; but there is another Mad Vs Bad. This belongs to an ancient debate in forensic psychiatry (Fornari, 2015). We can see Donald Trump saying "These animals are crazy" (Emmanuel – The Telegraph, 2018), while Pope Francis thinks that Jihadist attacks are "homicidal madness" (BBC News, 2017), the CIA Director states that ISIS is not Islamic, but "psychopathic" (Rayman – Time, 2015) but on the other side "terrorism isn't just 'mad', 'irrational', or 'inhuman'" (Ramadam – Politico, 2016) (See tab. 1).

But what happens if we turn away from the media, to read some psychiatric literature? It's not so different, sometimes. Here you can see a very renowned author like Stahl searching for the biological roots of the "Evil" (Marazziti and Stahl, 2018), he talks about a "Mysterious biological root".

On the opposite side, a position statement from the Royal College of Psychiatrist claiming that "radicalization is not a mental illness" (Royal College of Psychiatrist, 2016), and consequently: "Mandating a doctor to attend a counter-terrorism workshop is medically unethical" (Summerfield, 2016) (See tab. 2).

But what if one of your patients says: "Doctor, I'm thinking of blowing myself up"? It happened to me. In that moment I realized that the polarization I just described was fading away. I couldn't tell her: "This is a mental disorder, we can treat it, and there is a good chance that you can recover", nor could I say to her: "Ok, no problem, this is your political choice and as a psychiatrist I can't be involved".

Fortunately, some authors try to bypass the polarization I just described, and clearly recognize that terrorism is both a military strategy and a political and social fact; but still, it's not giving enough importance to the fact that terrorism has psycho-cultural dimensions, like any other human activity (Post, 2005a and 2005b).

It must be remembered that we're not taking into account the so called "lone wolves" (lone actor terrorists), that in fact show a high incidence of psychiatric illness compared to the general population (Corner, Gill, 2015; Corner et al., 2016); here we're talking about organized groups of individuals.

The majority of scholars agrees that: "*The most outstanding characteristic of terrorists is their normality*" (Crenshaw, 1981). A leading author in this field, Post, says: «Explanations at the level of individual psychology are insufficient. It is not going too far to assert that terrorists are psychologically "normal" in the sense of not being clinically psychotic» (Post, 2005a); and «A clear consensus exists that it is not individual psychology but group, organizational and social psychology, that provides the greatest analytic tools to understand this complex phenomenon. Terrorists have subordinated their individual identity to a collective identity, so that what serves the group,

organization or network is of primary importance. For some groups, especially national-separatist terrorist groups, this collective identity is established extremely early: hatred is “bred in the bone”. This in turn emphasizes the socio-cultural context, which determines the balance between collective and individual identity». (Post, 2005b). Post mostly dedicated himself to the psychological and social analysis and invites us to consider the psycho-cultural foundations of contemporary terrorism.

But what about the cultural aspects of the phenomenon? Probably this is our task. At the Italian Institute of Transcultural Mental Health, Professor Bartocci already had a presentation on this topic, in 2001, in Cairo, at the congress hold by the World Islamic Association for Mental Health (Bartocci, 2002). Our fellow anthropologist Elisa Rapisarda and I investigated too. We thought that if we want to understand something more, we’d have to ask anthropology and history.

And what could we find? There are three points I’d like to draw your attention to.

First Point

The idea of martyrdom has common historical roots in Christianity and Islam. Martyrdom is a word that comes from the ancient Greek and it means “to witness” (Skeat, 2013 [1882]). From the second century after Christ it acquired the meaning of giving life in order to defend honor, an idea, or faith. Take Seneca for example. He was a Roman philosopher, convicted to death by the roman court, but he decided to drink the poison before being executed. This behavior has an history. There’s a geographical, historical and cultural continuity, because in the same region – and precisely, in the Eastern Roman Empire – some centuries later, Christian martyrs were allowed by the church to kill themselves in order to defend or reconfirm their faith.

The first Islamic martyrs appeared in the Koran, between 622 and 632 ce. Both ancient Christians and Muslims, martyrs could kill themselves.

But things changed in late Christianity (Bowersock, 1995). We have the case of the 10th century Templar Knights: men that belonged to this religious order were warriors and monks at the same time. A good Templar knight wished to die in battle, and there is a prayer written by Saint Bernard that clearly prescribes it (St. Bernard, in: Bartocci, 2002), but he wasn’t allowed to commit suicide. There’s a change from ancient Christianity to late Christianity on the possibility of committing suicide (See tab. 3).

The fact that it is allowed to kill the enemy if needed is a common feature of all three groups (ancient Christians, late Christians and Muslims) (Bowersock, 1995) (see tab. 3).

Given this premise, we can look at today’s events with different eyes. The Jihadists, of whom we hear so much, are as prepared to kill the others as they are to kill themselves.

Allow me a quick digression on an example of a Western form of religious terrorism: Anders Breivik in 2011 murdered 77 people in Norway in order to protest against the idea of a multicultural European Union and the “invasion” of Muslim immigrants. He declared that he was carrying on the heritage of the Templar Knights (Breivik, 2011). The title and front cover image of his manifesto openly recall the classic Templar Knight iconography and quotes Saint Bernard’s prayers that we previously mentioned (see pic. 1).

He regrets surviving the attack, as he believes he wasn’t allowed to kill himself. He shows coherency with late Christianity tradition (see tab. 3).

Second Point

Second, Prof. Rovera and Dr. Daverio spoke about the relationship between culture, language, and internal psychological dynamics (Daverio and Rovera, 2019). In our case the question becomes: what kind of sub-culture is related to which specific language and internal psychological dynamics, in order to be a suicide terrorist? Or a martyr, if you prefer.

Jihadist suicide terrorists, before committing the act, prepare themselves for the sacrifice by performing a series of rituals and prayers. At the end of which they consider themselves, and are considered by the surrounding communities, to be *Shahid al hayy*, that literally meaning “living martyrs” (Fabietti, 2007). They enter in a suspended state in which they are no more live human beings, nor already biologically dead. That’s a very powerful concept from a cultural dynamic psychiatry point of view. Try to think what could happen in your inner world, if all your surrounding

community would say to you: “You’re alive, AND dead.” You’re not angrier than before, happier or sadder, but properly: alive and dead at the same time.

This is a strong contradiction of common logical rules that can only exist in a culturally constructed supernatural dimension. In the same dimension, there’s another point that’s worth noting. In some ways the suicide terrorist act is considered to be a ritual sacrifice offered by the community and as in any sacrifice, there’s one who makes the sacrifice and one who is sacrificed. Usually both deserve special prayers before the ritual act.

What’s interesting here is that both prayers address the same person. In fact, the suicide bomber is considered to be both, the one who makes the sacrifice (because he kills people) and one who’s being sacrificed (because he dies in the explosion) (Fabietti, 2007). So, he’s at the same time alive and dead, the one who makes the sacrifice and the one who’s sacrificed.

These logical contradictions probably are cultural techniques used to reach an altered state of consciousness, that of the religious ecstasy, that creates a state where the individual is capable of extreme actions, like killing himself or carry out a massacre of people (Bartocci, Zupin, 2016). Bartocci and Dein (2006) studied the function of these rituals and cultural beliefs, that seems to have a specific goal: to encourage the detachment from the physical and social reality.

Third Point

Third, I’d like to say a few words on how terrorist groups and organizations use the media. The self-proclaimed Islamic State has always used every digital communication tool: posts on Facebook, blogs, Twitter, high quality videos (see pic. 2, 3 and 4).

A specific religious tradition prescribes the cultural techniques necessary to reach the state of detachment from the physical and social reality in which extreme acts (like killing oneself or others) are carried out, but at the same time, violence is staged in ways that are managed and broadcast in a virtual space following typical western dynamics (Atran, 2006; Aggarwal, 2019).

At this point you’re probably wondering: “Where do we go from here?”.

Going back to my patient willing to blow herself up, at least now I feel I can get away from the stereotypes we discussed at the beginning... Do you remember? Instrumentalization of religion Vs Islamic fanaticism, and Mad Vs Bad.

It’s fundamental to understand these three statements:

- The common historical roots of religious terrorism;
- The relationship between language, culture and the inner world;
- Specific cultural tradition for suicide bombers, but typical western dynamics in media representation of violence.

I feel that keeping in mind these statements, I can have a better comprehension of my patient’s culturally determined inner world, and this can help me to have a better therapeutic relationship. Maybe, in such a therapeutic process, one goal could be to reach a more flexible interaction between mood, ideology, and life plans. Reaching the point where her ideology is serving her well-being, and not the opposite. A negotiable balance between everyday life and culture. Like in the Palio of Siena we’ve just seen; where the horses are allowed to enter the Church – and you can throw your saints image in the pit when you’re angry with them because you lost... And take them out when you want to make peace with them!

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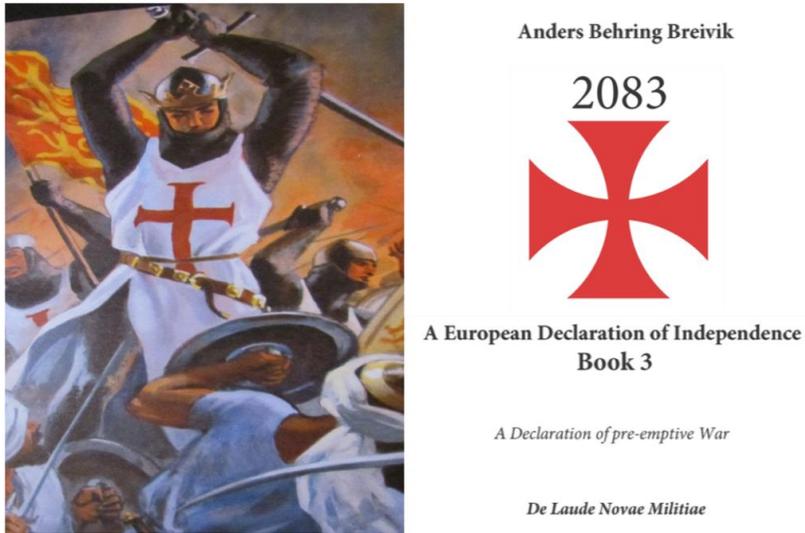
Tab. 1

OPPOSING POSITIONS	Terrorism implies Islam: YES	Terrorism implies Islam: NO
MEDIA	The distortion of Islam drives to terrorism (Rabil – The Washington Post, 2018) Islamic bastards (Belpietro – Libero, 2015)	Merkel: “Islam is not the source of terrorism” (Osborne – Independent, 2017) Muslims are not terrorist (Alnatour – HuffPost, 2015)
OPPOSING POSITIONS	MAD	BAD
MEDIA	Donald Trump: “These animals are crazy” (Emmanuel – The Telegraph, 2018) Pope Francis: Jihadist attacks are “homicidal madness” (BBC News, 2017) CIA Director says ISIS is not Islamic, but “Psychopathic” (Rayman – Time, 2015)	Terrorism isn’t just “mad”, “irrational”, or “inhuman” (Ramadam – Politico, 2016)

Tab. 2

OPPOSING POSITIONS	MAD	BAD
PSYCHIATRIC LITERATURE	Biological roots of the “Evil [...] mysterious biological root” (Marazziti, Stahl, 2018)	Radicalization is not a mental illness (Royal College of Psychiatrist, 2016) Mandating doctor to attend counter-terrorism workshop is medically unethical (Summerfield, 2016)

Picture 1



Tab. 3

IDEA OF MARTYRDOM	SUICIDE	MURDER
Ancient Christianity	●	●
Jihadists	●	●
Late Christianity	⊘	●

Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4

