In 1972 three members of the Japanese Red Army carried out a notorious suicide attack on people gathered in one of the halls of Tel Aviv airport; they killed twenty-six and wounded hundreds. Twenty days after 11 September, a Swiss man killed several members of the regional parliament of Zug and then killed himself. The two examples are given in response to those narrow explanations of the phenomenon of violence, death, martyrdom and suicide that see them in the light of the ‘clash of civilizations’, bearing in mind that one of the short spells of time that separates us from the American Unabomber, the Japanese Aum sect and Timothy McVeigh, all of whom were driven by the same profundities, their rush to the mainstream and their hatred of the federal government, to shorten the distance that separates us from the American Unabomber, the Japanese Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh, all of whom were driven by the same profundities.

The exclusive connection between Islam, martyrdom and suicide (the latter forbidden by Islamic law) is subject to an infinite oversimplification. The suicide attackers of Al-Qaeda and Palestine are Sunni Muslims, while self-sacrifice for the sake of a certain goal has traditionally been associated with Shi’ite Islam. However, in our own era, the Shi’ite Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 did not resort to suicide attacks, even if it has frequently threatened its enemies with shroudlets as a form of ritual folklore and revo- lutionary nihilism. It is true that it used minefields during the war with Iraq in the 1980s, crossed by human waves, most of which were made up of children, but this criminal tendency was the result of the au-thorities’ use of ideology and what is with-out doubt a modern tactic (remember Hitler’s conception of children in his last year or the use of infants in the Eritrean revolu-tion). If radical Shi’ites in Hezbollah were involved in suicide attacks against the Is-raelis in southern Lebanon, ‘secular’ groups such as the Syrian Nationalist Party and ‘atheists’ such as the communists also took part.

Generally speaking, both religious and temporal cultures all show this link between death, on the one hand, and on the other a protest against life and/or the annihilation or self-sacrifice for the sake of a certain goal. There is a tradition of the dramatic tension between suicide, urbanization and isolation is now one of the givens of post-Durkheimian sociology, even if many of the French sociol-ogists’ other conclusions have been forgot-ten. Just as anomie runs contrary to a per-sön’s individualism, so people’s day to day is a declaration that their individualism is in- valid and that they have entered a stage dif-ficult to reconcile with the course of life. At this point we see suicide reappear in wealthy, post-industrial societies, as though it were a social responsibility or even a duty to obstruct the advancement of modernity, but also to make each Arab see his or her life as something meaningful and not worth pre-serving. Whoever sees their own life in this way will never see any more value in the lives of others. In all cases, death may be round the corner.

Since 11 September 2001 many analysts and commentators have begun to ask questions about what lies behind Muslims willingness to die. The answer was soon to be ‘con- firmed’ by Palestinian suicide attacks. Natu rally, the question was who looked for it in religion. No doubt there are many who say to themselves: there is a Muslim type who is predisposed to die and longs to en-counter the houris in Paradise. But the ques-tion that has only rarely been posed is: what hatred and misunderstanding of our planet is it that creates this love of Heaven?

When your planet is pervaded by intoler-able injustices and circumstances impossible either to accept or to adapt to, you end up gratifying the commands of a faith that be-long to the realm of total absolutes. A plan-et such as this, particularly if reinforced by those sorts of convictions, may drive people to seek a Heaven even without hours. All reli-gions, not only Islam, have raised the ban- ner of martyrdom to which believers have rallied, combining dissatisfaction with the present with a total denial of their individu-ality while individualism in its modern sense naturally could not have existed in those times.

It was Christianity that developed the dis-tinctive idea of the theology of martyrdom. Countless legends have come down to us about the confrontations between repre-sentatives of the Roman Empire and coura-gious believers who bore the agonies of their torture with laughter. In medieval sources from Germany and Europe the rituals of the penitents became a widespread phe-nomenon; until recently, self-flagellation was still a well-known practice of devout Catholics, just as Filipinos to this day prac-tise live re-enactments of the crucifixion. The word martyr itself is derived from the Greek expression martys, meaning a witness (by Islamic law) is subject to an infinite over-simplification. The suicide attackers of Al- Qaida and Palestine are Sunni Muslims, while self-sacrifice for the sake of a certain goal has traditionally been associated with Shi’ite Islam. However, in our own era, the Shi’ite Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 did not resort to suicide attacks, even if it has frequently threatened its enemies with shroudlets as a form of ritual folklore and revolu- lutionary nihilism. It is true that it used minefields during the war with Iraq in the 1980s, crossed by human waves, most of which were made up of children, but this criminal tendency was the result of the au-thorities’ use of ideology and what is with-out doubt a modern tactic (remember Hitler’s conception of children in his last year or the use of infants in the Eritrean rev olu-tion). If radical Shi’ites in Hezbollah were involved in suicide attacks against the Is-raelis in southern Lebanon, ‘secular’ groups such as the Syrian Nationalist Party and ‘atheists’ such as the communists also took part.

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