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ASSESSING THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE TO THE ANNIHILATING SELF-COMMUNICATION OF A SUICIDE BOMBER

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Abstract: In a world, where cartoonists and grocery shoppers are gunned down in Paris, and journalists are beheaded on Youtube, the annihilating self-communication of a suicide bomber serves as a ready-made opportunity for a radical claim at sovereignty, if only for a moment. To bomb is to communicate an absolute immanence. Such bombing is a demand for a response.

This paper assesses the Christian's response to the use of such bombing-as-communication. It does so by first considering the agent of the response, and her self-identity as Christian, and then bombing as a form of self-communication, from: the perspective of its nature, the perspective of the horizon behind it, and the perspective of the horizon it points to. The paper goes on to ponder the response and its consequences, framed against an identity shaped by an understanding of Scriptural claims interpreted through the workings of Continental Philosophy.

A person enters a public space—market, café, church—unnoticed, identity camouflaged against the vernacular of the everyday. In a flash—self-communicating through willful self-annihilation—the anthropology of a hitherto unknown individual is irrevocably imbedded in the history(s) of other human anthropologies without any consent. In the violence of such a moment, against the compelling mystery of the self-erased suicide bomber, a starting point opens up for the Christian witness to the event to enter into, and to begin a radical exploration of mystery, identity, of the other, of one's self, framed against the Christian tradition, and reflected against the Christ.

The 'call' of the bomber cries to be heard and to be addressed: how this is met—defines the authenticity of the Christian identity. To assess the Christian's response to

the annihilating self-communication of a suicide bomber, it is evident that the bombing—as communication—needs to be addressed. Because the respondent is identified or self-identifies as ‘Christian,’ consideration toward this characteristic is also warranted. In fact, because this respondent was Christian before the bombing unfolded its presence into the event-ing of its absolute immanence, this Christian-ness is a fitting starting point. It is my intent to approach this topic in the following manner: (1) to consider the Christian identity of the agent of the response; (2) to consider the communication—its nature, the horizon against which it manifests, and the horizon to which it suggests; (3) to attend to the response of the Christian; and finally, (4) to ponder *the beyond* past the event and past the subsequent response.

TO BE CHRISTIAN

David Tracy notes, “Theology is about the vision of life and a way of life. We should never have split practices and theology.”¹ *Vision* and *way* are predicates that are revealed according to an *antéprédicatif* confession before God. For the Christian, God is interwoven with Christ, in divinity incarnate, God made flesh. In the Prologue to the Gospel of John, it is the λόγος that becomes σάρξ, flesh [Jn 1:14], the same λόγος which was before all beginnings, Ἐν ἀρχῇ: which was with God: which was God (Jn 1:1). This λόγος, often translated as ‘Word’ (masculine in Greek), is ζωή, ‘life’ (feminine), is φῶς, ‘light’ (neuter) [Jn 1:4]. Through this λόγος, this Life, this Light, all things came into being [Jn 1:4]. Jesus says later in the Gospel, if you abide τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ (in the

¹ Lois Malcolm, “The Impossible God: An Interview with David Tracy,” *Christian Century* 119, no. 4 (February 13, 2002): 30.

λόγος of me), you are truly my disciples [Jn 8:31]. The criterion is the keeping of the new commandment: to love [Jn 13:34] in a love that is not a conclusion to a calculus of theory-application, but is rather conative toward all actions.

God is Love [1 Jn 4:8]. Love is infinite. It is, therefore, at the center of every circle, and that center is at the center of everything, and thus defies circumscription. Jacques Ellul notes, “We can’t say why God loves, except that he *is* Love itself.” Ellul goes on to posit: “Jesus let himself be crucified for nothing. He had no plans either, nor did he know of any grand blueprints drawn by his Father. Jesus obeyed because he loved the Father above all... Love does not calculate.”²

Because “God has loved you first,” and without discrimination or purpose, writes Ellul, you are to love all others in turn, “with no aim, no goal, no purpose (not even to convert them); love them because you are love.”³ Love is beyond a singular act. It becomes the disposition, the style, *Stimmung*, *la mode*, which affects each and every moment of presencing our being-in-the-world. It is the elemental membrane, the *flesh*, through which, we are open to the world, and incarnate in it. Jean-Luc Marion notes, “The giving (*Geben*) gives to presence the gift (*Gabe*), so completely and radically that this gift alone occupies presence;”⁴ the giver has completely emptied herself in the giving.

At the same time, love is God, which is the infinite horizon against which we can reflect upon our actions, and their effects, and any error. For philosopher Michel Henry,

² Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, trans. Peter Heinegg (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 164.

³ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴ Marion, Jean-Luc, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’ as a Possibility,” in *Religion after Metaphysics*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall, trans. Lee, Daryl (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 181–82.

“God is that pure Revelation that reveals nothing other than itself”⁵—“the Revelation of God owes nothing to the world’s truth.”⁶ God is life. Christ is life. Thus, the simplest act of the Christian, in imitating Christ, “carries within it this self-revelation of absolute Life.”⁷ The Christian choosing Christ, chooses the λόγος—ζωή—φῶς, chooses God, chooses Love. Love as defined by Jesus in Matthew 5: 43-48, as indiscriminating, as in the manner in which God sends down his sunlight and his rain. The Christian’s vision and way profess and confess Life—λόγος—Christ as the radix. Christ is the *flesh* which marks, for the Christian, the center of the incircumscribable circle of the ineffable God.

The centrality of flesh is reflected in the Christian’s own corporality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty avers that a world can be had only by having a body.⁸ He pushes further, and claims, “The world is not what I think, but what I live [*ce que je suis*]; I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible.”⁹ Christ’s commandment is the currency of the praktognosis that uncovers the self-revelation of Life in the world, through the elemental *flesh* that constitutes oneself and one’s world. God, for Merleau-Ponty, “is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication, wherever men come together in His name,”¹⁰ in the praktognosis through the loving (ἀγάπη) touch, within the attentive look. For, as John exhorts in his epistle, if “No one has ever seen God,” then only “if we love one another,

⁵ Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁸ Taylor Carman, forward to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2012), xi.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxx-xxxii.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Faith and Good Faith (1946),” in *Signs*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 177.

God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” [1 Jn 4:12, NRSV]. The Christian confesses Christ, lives in His λόγος, and communicates Life—λόγος—Love—Light.

TO BOMB: TO COMMUNICATE

(1) *The Nature of the Communication.* To choose to use no words. In 1997, Osama bin Laden posited, “The President [of America] has a heart that knows no words. A heart that kills children, definitely knows no words. Our people in the Arabian Peninsula will send him messages with no words because he does not know any words.”¹¹ To bomb is to communicate. To use oneself as a component of the bomb is to willfully end the communication in the actual call—it is to add the prefix “self” wholly and terminally to the word “communication”—to communicate this to the very limits of one’s power—and to evaporate the moment’s message into the ineffable absence left behind. The bombing apes language: it is sonorous, it has an intended receiver, and it affects the receiver. But the bomb communicates no content. Its message is not circumscribed in language, only in a suffocating affectivity. The communication announces the selfhood of the bomber in absolute, fleeting immanence. The communication takes sovereignty of the moment by shredding apart the very flesh that incarnates self to world and world to self in the consistency of Life. The bomber escapes anonymity in the white light of erasure, not unlike the explosion of a star, that collapses back through itself into the alterity of a black hole, pulling all around it into its vortex of

¹¹ Bin Laden, Osama, “CNN March 1997 Interview with Osama Bin Laden,” interview by Peter Arnett, Video tape transcript, March 1997, <http://news.findlaw.com/cnn/docs/binladen/binladenintvw-cnn.pdf>.

instability, and leaving, in its wake, the kind of evil that John Caputo terms “irreparably ruined time.”¹²

(2) *The Horizon Behind the Communication*. To bomb is not to self-reveal. It is to annihilate self as a weapon in order to erase others. To bomb is to attack, it is to force a change in a status quo, wherein, according to Palestinian psychiatrist Eyad el Sarraj, “living becomes no different from dying.”¹³ The marginalized opt to be heard by any means necessary. Thus the poet Mahmoud Darwish can declare: “Sister, there are tears in my throat / and there is fire in my eyes: I am free. / No more shall I protest at the Sultan’s Gate... / It is time for me to exchange the word for the deed... / For in this age the weapon devours the guitar...”¹⁴

The choice to bomb to communicate is not a recent calculation. Nor is it indigenous to the Middle East. The first suicide bombing in modern times occurred in 1904, in Bialystok, by a young man, Nissan Farber, age 18. Farber was an impoverished Jew, an anarchist, an atheist, a member of the *bezmotivniki* (“motiveless”) faction of the *Chernoznamentsy* (Black Flag Anarchists). The *bezmotivniki* were so named because they did not care whom they targeted. Their goal was the destabilization of society and the de-mythification of the Romanov dynasty. In his wake, Nissan inspired others, and from 1904-1907, these young men and women, generally between ages 15 and 19, killed

¹² John D Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 5.

¹³ Cf., Eyad El Sarraj, “Suicide bombers: dignity, despair and the need of hope,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 4 (2002), cited in Riaz Hassan, *Life as a Weapon: The Global Rise of Suicide Bombings* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

¹⁴ Mahmoud Darwish, “Diary of a Palestinian Wound,” in *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, trans. Lena Jayyusi and Christopher Middleton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 201–02.

and maimed close to 10,000 persons, terrorizing indiscriminately the Russian bourgeoisie.¹⁵

The horizon behind the bomb is a horizon of exclusion with no access.¹⁶ Pope Francis, through his exhortation, cries out that “the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences” and “precious little dignity.”¹⁷ He goes on to note that “an economy of exclusion and inequality”—such as is allowed to presently exist in the status quo—“kills.”¹⁸ Moreover, for Francis, this inequality “is the root of social ills”¹⁹—inclusive of the violence in the world.²⁰

(3) *The Horizon in Front of the Communication*. According to philosopher Jean Baudrillard, such persons “shift the struggle into the symbolic sphere, where the rule is that of challenge, reversion and outbidding”—“death can be met only by equal or greater death.” Such a spiral becomes the horizon behind the “terrorist hypothesis”—“that the system itself will commit suicide.”²¹ Thus the bomber communicates an utterance, without content, but presencing disruption. The violence birthed exhorts the dominant other to retaliate and with greater violence, and in so doing, seduces the dominant other to sacrifice, in the process, any right to moral claim. In a spiral of greater and greater outbidding in death, there is no longer any room for Life—λόγος—Love—Light. There

¹⁵ Cf., Theodore H. Friedgut, “Jews, Violence, and the Russian Revolutionary Movement,” in *Jews and Violence: Images, Ideologies, Realities*, ed. Peter Medding (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43–58. See also, Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44–65. For statistics on casualties from that period of Russian history, see Gambetta, Diego, “Can We Make Sense of Suicide Missions?,” in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 285.

¹⁶ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit Us All?* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Mahmoud Darwish, “Diary of a Palestinian Wound,” in *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, trans. Lena Jayyusi and Christopher Middleton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 200–202.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

is only calculus of friend/enemy, life/death, either/or. Messages without words, like those promised from the Arabian Peninsula, beget invasions propped up on weapons of mass destruction. Messages without words lead to waterboarding and drones and the indiscriminate collection of metadata. Messages without words cause men to capture other men, and to keep these men *in absentia* for years, without charges, without trial. One of these men, a young father from Bahrain, had been held without charges, at Guantánamo Bay, for over 5 years. During his incarceration he tried to kill himself twelve times. In 2007, he was freed, and allowed to resettle to Saudi Arabia. On his flight to Saudi Arabia, he forgave America: for the torture; for five years of being stripped of all dignity.²² In a poem written during his incarceration, he pleads: “Take photographs of my corpse at the grave, lonely... / And let them bear the guilty burden before the world... / Of this wasted, sinless soul, / Of this soul which has suffered at the hands of the ‘protectors of peace.’”²³

THE RESPONSE

The bomber communicates his self into the everyday, and sets in motion a nihilistic momentum. Baudrillard, in “The Spirit of Terrorism,” notes that one may “try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it, [or] to find some kind of interpretation. But there is none. And it is the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” in *The spirit of terrorism and requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Turner, Chris (London: Verso, 2002), 13–14.

²² Jumah al Dossari, “I’m Home, but Still Haunted by Guantanamo,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2008, sec. Opinions, accessed January 24, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/15/AR2008081502985.html>.

the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible.”²⁴ Spectacle exists within the interstice between event/witness, between subject/object, between the speech utterances concerning something other than, something distinct from, oneself.

The spectacle need not be reducible to lose its claim on originality. The Christian reflects the image of God—Life, and the Word (λόγος) of this Life, according to Michel Henry, “speaks of nothing else but itself.”²⁵ The Word speaks in this manner, “because, as Word of Life finding its essence in Life, it is first in itself, in an absolute immanence that nothing can break.”²⁶ And if Christians “are in the word and speak only in its wake,” they cannot “evade it.”²⁷ In striving to follow Christ, the Christian strives to follow the commandment to love. This loving is not neighbor as self, but transcends such human mutuality, and models loving as Christ loved. It is a disposition that is without memory and re-positions its presence in the present of the moment, in the call of the face of the Other. It is a disposition that breaks open to include even the bomber as Other, as a human person graced in Life, and thus in the image of God. For Michel Henry, “Life has only one word, this word never hearkens back to what it said and no one can evade it. This Parousia without memory and without project, this Parousia of the Word of Life, it is our birth.”²⁸

Such a radical present is active, not passive: Life—λόγος—Love—Light, interwoven, all become the response to Baudrillard’s claim of originality and

²³ Jumah al Dossari, “Death Poem,” in *Poems from Guantánamo: the detainees speak*, ed. Marc Falkoff (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 32.

²⁴ Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” 7.

²⁵ Michel Henry, “Speech and Religion: The Word of God,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: *The French Debate*, ed. Dominique Janicaud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 225.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

irreducibility. Life is the absolute, and cannot be circumscribed. Life challenges the absolute claim of the bomber, because it can presence its Self in absolute immanence, with a constancy that the bombing event cannot match. The suicide bomber must self-erase. The suicide bomber cannot communicate again. In this sense, the effectiveness of the communication rests solely on the reception of his or her declarative gesture. Does the event beget a bidding war of carnage? Or does Life continue, does Love continue? καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν—“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” [Jn 1:5, NRSV]. If the Christian imitates Jesus, he must ‘nobody’ himself into the Light. “God was born,” writes Virgilio Elizondo, “among the homeless and rejected... God became the nothing of the world.” This was done, avers Elizondo, “so that the nothing and everyone else may know that no one, no one human being, is inferior to others.”²⁹ Jean-Luc Marion adds to this appreciation, noting, “By right, man resembles nothing, because he resembles nothing other than the One who is properly characterized by incomprehensibility.”³⁰ To *de-fine* is to force “a finite essence,”³¹ a blasphemy on God, whether forced on God or on his creature, his reflection. To bomb is to insert one’s anthropology and ideology into the anthropology and sociology of others without consent. It is to *de-fine* the immediate other as collateral, expendable, inferior. In the calculus of philosopher Luce Irigaray, to

²⁹ Virgilio P. Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee* (Oxford, UK and Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 38.

³⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, “Mihi Magna Quaestio Factus Sum: The Privilege of Unknowing,” *Journal of Religion* 85, no. 1 (January 2005): 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14–16. Marion sees this awareness as a disposition necessary for co-existing.

love is *to touch* in a way that “cannot be appropriation, capture”³²—it defies the terroristic act. “Love is patient. Love is kind” [1 Cor 13:4].

Love is not simply a simple conclusion to a calculus: thought-then-act. Love is a way of manifesting the flesh that is elemental to the manifestation of self and world. It is through this “thickness” that the Christian opens the world for her self to *touch*, and opens her self to take in the world through her gaze and her willingness to be touched. It is conditional to the indwelling of God (1Jn 4:12). Love makes no claim beyond its presence. Can theology be done from such an issuing place? Does it uncover a *vision* and a *way*? Perhaps all that is possible is the obedience toward G-d through the commandments. Perhaps it is the continuous construction, deconstruction, caused by the pull of the radicality of Jesus’s call out of the conventions of the status quo of our own collective acquiescence—the openness to receive the unanticipated with love and with welcome.

BEYOND

In essence, the response of the Christian is the Christian, and as the Christian is the Christian before the event of the suicide bombing, the Christian’s response is revealed in the entirety of its potentiality prior to the bombing. For the Christian to be authentic she must strive to make manifest an imitating of Christ, in the presencing of a love, which, according to Saint Isaac of Nineveh, “burns (and is made to burn) in the soul through mercifulness, gentleness, cheerfulness, and kindness shown indiscriminately

³² Luce Irigaray, *I love to you: sketch for a felicity within history*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125.

toward good and evil men alike.”³³ It is in this striving to dispose of one’s self to the giving of the gift that one begins to imitate the radicality of Christ.

David Tracy insists that, in the end, “it is in the public realm where finally we all either do or do not meet!”³⁴ If one strives to reside in the Word of Life, one is seen to reside in an orientation that reflects Life in its openness and its irreducibility. One is then seen to be the gift of a presence of a concrete³⁵ ποίησις (poesis) that is itself accessible, and that rests in an open willingness, as Heidegger notes, “that wills nothing.”³⁶ The Christian communicates an inclusive *vision* and a *way*, not as abstract concepts, but as the kind of *public* effects, which Tracy claims “may be disclosive and transformative possibilities available to all.”³⁷

On January 20, 2015, Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, spoke at the Mission Church in Santa Clara, California. He called for a “Samaritan Church”—a Church that heals. The Archbishop’s vision and way is a vision of Life and Love. I would like to end with the gift of his vision: “The Church is not here to judge, to condemn, to reproach or to reject anybody, but to embrace as in a home where love reigns for everyone who needs it. Following Jesus does not mean to participate in a triumphant entourage. It means to share his merciful love.”³⁸ In the striving to be an authentic imitation of Christ (Life—λόγος—Love—Light), the Christian

³³ Isaac, *The ascetical homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. The Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, MA: The Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), 114.

³⁴ David Tracy, “Religion and Human Rights in the Public Realm,” *Daedalus* 112, no. 4 (1983): 238.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61.

³⁷ Tracy, “Religion and Human Rights in the Public Realm,” 240.

³⁸ Jim McDermott, “Cardinal Rodriguez on Mercy, Divorce, Homosexuality, The Unfree Free Market and the Limits of Vatican II,” *America Magazine*, last modified January 21, 2015, accessed January 21, 2015, <http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/cardinal-rodriguez-mercy-divorce-homosexuality-unfree-free-market-and-limits>.

becomes the foundation for the possibility of such a Church. When the Christian strives *to be* Love, as Christ loved, *to be* Life, as Christ lived, the Christian herself becomes the response.

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