states: “Muslims are people whose religion is Islam.” Someone who intended to learn about Muslim status in Australia probably would not need such clarification. Similarly, chapter two refers to Afghans being “introduced into Australia as camel drivers.” There is also infrequent uncritical acceptance of views presented by the interviewees. However, these minor irritants do not take away from the excellent historical account of the interplay between race, religion and security outlined by the author. Anyone interested in placing the current debates on the place of Muslims in Australia would benefit from reading this book.

Samina Yasmeen

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In this slim volume Talal Asad deconstructs the liberal discourse on the current categories of “war” and “terrorism” while extending and adding new dimensions to the already existing studies on contemporary modes of violence and terrorism. He advances his project of “deconstruction” of modernity and liberal democracies and elaborates on the continuities and cleavages between secular modernity and its past by discussing terrorism, one of the contemporary modes of violence. Whereas Asad examines the colonial and post-colonial construction of the categories of “war” and “terrorism,” he argues that these are constructed according to different logical criteria: the “war” derives its primary sense from the question of legality, and “terrorism” from the feelings of vulnerability and fear of social disorder. Hence the two cannot be rendered as mutually exclusive.

Asad has recourse to a variety of disciplines, theories and scholars to draw his arguments from and respond to the opinions opposed to his own. One encounters, for example, references to Michael Walzer, May Jayyusi, Bruno Etienne, Ivan Strenski, Sigmund Freud (d. 1939), Emile Durkheim (d. 1917), Max Weber (d. 1920), Robert Pape, Roxanne Euben, Richard Tuck, John Keegan, Jacqueline Rose, John Hamilton, Mary Douglas (d. 2007), Michael Hanake, Sayyid Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979) and Sayyid Qūṭb (d. 1386/1966), to
name just a few. These scholars range from military scientists to political philosophers; from historians of early modern western thought to scholars on religion to psychoanalysts and others. Asad also refers to important contemporary literature including novels related to war, particularly the war on terror. All this reflects the wide scope of the book as well as the author’s remarkable grip on the discourse from various possible angles.

Asad wants his readers to distance themselves—at least temporarily—from the popular discourse that prepackages moral responses to terrorism, wars and suicide bombing. He does so by offering a critique of liberal thought, especially its discourse on the war on terror and its claims of rational and moral superiority over other ideologies. He questions the popular discourse on terrorism in public, media, and scholarship, which seeks to grasp religious motivations behind acts of suicide bombing. Asad argues that speculations and theories regarding the motivations of a suicide bomber are fiction and hence cannot be verified (p. 3). This discussion is related with the main themes of the book which are: contemporary mode of violence (i.e. terrorism), war on terror, liberal democracies, the psychological aspects of terrorism, the possibilities of a religious terrorism, Islamic terrorism, the psychology of suicide bombers and of its victims, the anthropology of the concept of death in Western thought and of some related political and religious ideas and their development in Islamic thought.

Moreover, Asad critically analyses major theories on just war, terrorism, and suicide bombing along with the attempt to establish their relationship with Islam. He also raises the issue of culpability and argues that recent increase in Jihadism and sectarian killings are closely connected with US internationalist interests in the Middle East. He traces the genealogy of the doctrine of jihād, bashing the conception that it ever had a central place in Islamic thought. He finds this concept, however, to be strongly related with the foreign occupation of the Muslim lands. In light of this, for Asad, violence and suicide bombers belong to a modern Western tradition of armed conflict in defence of a free political community. He further pursues the argument that violence and suicidal terrorism are legitimate offsprings of the modern nation state and secular liberalism. What really stands out in On Suicide Bombing is Asad’s study of the response of horror to suicide bombing in what he calls the “western mind,” and his deconstruction of the current categories of “war” and theories of “just war.”

1 Robert Pape has drawn our attention to the strategic logic of modern and contemporary suicide terrorism. See his *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York, Random House, 2005). Several other studies have also tried to comprehend the nature of this brutal act of dying and killing.
Asad contextualizes his discussion on terrorism in the backdrop of US and Israel because the idea of “war on terror” and theorization on it were particularly developed in US, Israel and Europe. One of the basic preoccupations of Asad in this volume is a threadbare discussion of the motivation of suicide bombing and its relation to the Islamic culture of death. Asad asks: why is it that a religious interpretation of the bomber’s motivation to kill himself is so welcome to the scholars and the western mind? What is the difference between war and terrorism? What is the culture of killing and dying in the modern liberal secular world? He examines a wide range of sociological, psychological, religious and political theories regarding the above-mentioned questions and keeps the reader anticipating and guessing as regards the solutions the author might come up with.

This monograph is a result of the lectures given at the Institute for Critical Theory as the Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine in 2006. Through it Asad has contributed to an issue that is extremely important, sensitive and is related to all of us in today’s world. Several studies have been produced with a view to understand the “phenomenon” of terrorism, suicide bombing, Islamic terrorism, motivations of suicide bombing and the psychology of the human bomber. Most of these works are by scholars who have invested their energies in defining the concept of jihād and Islamic jihadism while exploring various dimensions of Islamic terrorism. Asad certainly adds a new dimension to the discourse by asking several important questions aimed at bringing down the discourse of “Islamic Terrorism” on a neutral plane to facilitate academic discussion and also by questioning and critiquing the prevalent theories of war and religious terrorism. Asad grapples with “Terrorism” while adding to and amplifying the already existing critical discourse on suicide terrorism and liberal thought. He forcefully argues that the nature of suicide terrorism is not religious; rather, it is a harvest of modern liberal secularism(s).

Asad has designed his questioning in the following order: “Is there a religiously motivated terrorism? How does terrorism differ from other cruelties? What makes the motivation of terrorism religious? Where does it stand in relation to other forms of collective violence? How is the image of the suicide bomber addressed by Christians and post-Christians?” By answering these questions, Asad lays bare the modern assumptions about dying and killing. These assumptions, he insists, are the Liberal West’s culture of War and a part of our modern subjectivity.

Asad’s first chapter, “Terrorism” (pp. 7–38), opens by questioning the Bush administration’s deployment of the term “war” against terrorism after 9/11 while pointing to the fact that in history governments have responded to
and dealt with terrorism with “police action” and not “war.” He questions why the term “terrorism” is so prominent in the world today while discussing certain types of contemporary violence (p. 8). He examines the “clash of civilizations” thesis which explains contemporary Islamic jihadism as the essence of contemporary terrorism and critiques the underlying assumptions of this thesis. He argues against the contention that civilizations are self-contained and have fixed values. He does so by tracing the “genealogy” of the development of the legal theory of jihad in different contexts and explaining the significance of concepts such as “holy” (muqaddas), dār al-ḥarb (the domain of war), dār al-Islam (the domain of peace) and dār al-‘ahd (the domain of treaties), in the history of Islamic thought. Inferring from this very brief but closely argued study, Asad concludes that “there is no such thing as clash of civilizations because there are no self-contained societies to which fixed civilizational values correspond” (p. 12).

Asad further demonstrates how terrorism is an integral part of liberal subjectivities and an essential product of the modern nation-state. He talks at length regarding the prevalent definitions of war and terrorism. Wars are moral in principle; terrorism, on the other hand, is not. Thus the liberal definition of terrorism allows the state to conduct itself freely against the terrorists precisely because the latter have no respect for the law. After thoroughly studying the political philosopher Walzer’s concept of war and terrorism and examining his analysis of the Israel-Palestine war/terrorism, Asad states his conclusion in quite satirical terms. He critiques the logic of supporting and moralizing the thesis of “just war” by Walzer and the use of coercion against the innocent populations in the combat fields by articulating the “need” theory in his Arguing about War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). Asad vigorously criticises Walzer’s arguments by countering his ideas on the distinction between different kinds of political killing, legitimate and illegitimate violence, the morality of killings in wars and immorality of killings in terrorism because states only kill out of necessity, targeting those who must be killed; on the other hand, terrorists kill innocent citizens. “Walzer pays no attention to a curious contradiction at the heart of the liberal West’s culture of war…the state’s need to legitimize organized violence against a collective enemy (including civilians) and, on the other, the humanitarian desire to save human lives” (p. 16).

Asad repeatedly picks up some of the terminologies employed by Walzer in his arguments to highlight the ambiguities, contradictions and failings of his discourse. He criticizes Walzer’s project of moralizing the war on terror by declaring terrorism an “evil” in principle and separating politics from the handling of violence:
Walzer does not discuss what kind of politics might be called for in a time of global crisis and instead supports an extension of the battle against terror into immigrant communities as a priority, making the liberal assumption... that the problem of politics is radically separate from the problem of violence and that it is the primary task of the state to exclude violence from the arena of politics and confine it to the domain of war (p. 17).

My argument, however, is directed against thinking of terrorism simply as an illegal and immoral form of violence and advocates an examination of what the discourse on terror—and the perpetration of terror—does in the world of power (p. 26).

Asad draws attention to the fact that states are also involved in organized killings of civilians. “Such violence is inseparable from the primary duty and the absolute right of the nation-state...to defend, or achieve, or deny the claim of others to sovereignty...terrorism experts who are employed by the state...propose that the definition of terrorism is an easy matter having nothing to do with politics...in other words, the discourse of terrorism is dependent on a constructed object (not an imaginary object) about which information can be collected” (p. 27) says Asad. Here his attempt is to highlight the cruelties of what is called “legalized violence” by nation-states and their use of force against their own civilians. He points out the atrocities and tortures conducted by armies and soldiers during wars. Asad employs the concept of “space of violence” while discussing the newly constructed object i.e. war on terror in the world of liberal democracy: “In a liberal democracy, all citizens and the government that represents them are bound together by mutual obligations, and the actions of the duly elected government are the actions of all its citizens. When the government acts against suspected terrorists and inferior military opponents, everyone is (rightly or wrongly) involved in the space of violence. There may be criticism...all citizens remain bound to the space of violence that its representative government inhabits” (p. 29).

Asad further comments on the colonial and then the contemporary culture of warfare which has destabilized the conventional understanding of war as an activity in which human dying and killing are exchanged. “The psychological effect of this unequal killing is mitigated by the fact that there is a long standing tradition of fighting against militarily and ethnically inferior peoples in which it is proper that the latter die in much larger numbers...” (p. 35). Asad concludes this chapter by insisting that there does not occur a conflict as such between two incompatible sets of values or a clash between civilizations; rather, what is at stake here is the fight of civilization against the
uncivilized. He asserts that western liberal democracy and terrorist activities are equal in atrocities and application of cruelty. Western liberal democracies also need to be reformed if the same is demanded of the Muslim world.

In chapter two titled “Suicide Terrorism” (pp. 39–64) Asad proceeds to discuss suicide operations through the lens of the current theories which distinguish them from war. Asad’s leading questions in this chapter are: how different are acts of suicide operations from the acts of war? Is there any crucial difference between one who kills in order to die and someone who dies in order to kill? Asad draws from sociological and psychological models according to which suicide can be regarded either as an instance of individual psychopathology or as a case of collective ideology.

The next question concerns what motivates a suicide bomber to kill himself? Asad confronts Ivan Strenski’s theory which draws from the Durkheimian school and proposes to understand the phenomenon of suicide bombing through the religious concepts of sacrifice and gift. Sacrifice is a social action which also has a religious resonance. The sacrifice of oneself is made as a gift to and for the sanctified nation. According to Asad, Strenski’s argument proceeds from the claim that since sacrifice is the essence of religious subjectivity, violence is integral to it. Asad rejects Strenski’s interpretation swiftly on three grounds. First, by stating that the only new thing in Strenski’s theorization is to label the motive of suicide bombing as “ritual” which, as a theme, allows us to speak of religions (p. 43). Asad then turns to Emile Durkheim who was the first to theorize and problematize the notion of “the individual” by identifying the social determinants of the most personal of acts, the suicide. For Durkheim all acts are social and if he were to, he would include suicide bombing in his category of “altruistic suicide.” Second, by explaining that the concept and ritual of animal sacrifice (dhabīḥah) in Islamic tradition which is offered for various reasons such as on the occasion of annual pilgrimage, as thanks to the deity, or as a sign of repentance, stating that suicide bombers and bombing do not belong to any of these categories. Third, by countering Strenski’s use of the term “holy” and “sacred” by stating that the central term in Strenski’s analysis is not the Arabic “hadiya” (gift) but rather “qurbān” (sacrifice) which is central to the vocabulary of Arabic-speaking Christians for Communion. Asad further comments on Strenski by stating that if one has to talk about religious subjectivities one must do it through the concepts people actually use. According to Asad, “Strenski’s redescription of motives in terms of the concept of sacrifice offers a religious model by means of which suicide bombing can be identified as “religious terrorism.” Also, “that appellation defines the bomber as morally underdeveloped and therefore premodern when compared with peoples whose
civilized status is partly indicated by their secular politics and their private religion and whose violence is therefore in principal disciplined, reasonable, and just" (p. 45).

From here Asad moves to the discussion of the formation of modern political subjectivities, especially Palestinian. Asad concludes the chapter by rolling his argument further down by stating that the act of suicide bombing is unique; and its uniqueness does not reside in its essence but in its contingent circumstances.

Asad deals with a different issue in the third chapter, “Horror at Suicide Terrorism” (pp. 65–92). He investigates the idea of horror as a common reaction to suicide and more specifically to suicide bombing. He draws upon anthropological writings in order to explain the notion that horror in suicide bombing has to do with the collapse of social and personal identity or dissolution of form. While tracing the development of the idea of horror at suicide bombing Asad refers to Christian theology and draws upon the Crucifixion of Jesus. Asad argues that the Crucifixion is the most famous suicide in human history but the horror is transmuted into the venture of redeeming humanity through the combination of cruelty and compassion.

The leading questions of this chapter are: Why do people in the West react to verbal and visual representations of suicide bombing with professions of horror? What leads liberal moralists to react to suicide bombings with such horror? Why are there so many articles, books...on the topic? Why are people so fascinated and disturbed by it? (p. 65). Asad attempts to provide a “tentative” answer to these queries by looking at the modern conceptions of killing and dying that have emerged out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Does the horror reside in the fact that the attacker also dies? Taking lead from the British psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose, he asks: “What is so special about suicide?” Then he refers to the status of suicide in Abrahamic religions and modern state laws. He also offers an insight into the conception of suicide in antiquity and explains by proferring two famous examples: one of private suicide as in the case of Socrates and the other of the public Crucifixion of Jesus. Asad argues that suicide was typically offered to elites who could legitimately take their own lives. These kinds of suicides indicated “undefiant deaths.” According to critics, these suicides are assertions of the secular humanist principle that fighting against the demands of external power is a sign of nobility. There is nothing horrible in violent death but only in the motive that defines it.

From here on Asad explains, rather concretizes, the idea of horror by referring to some published accounts which depict the shattering and mingling of physical objects and human bodies at the spot of suicide bombing. He refers
to the Biblical concept of creation and destruction as well as the Biblical figure and narrative of Samson who has become a great source for various western projects, both religious and strategic. Asad also turns to Franz Steiner's explanation of the word “taboo” which indicated danger in the Polynesian context of its origin, and since the idea of danger is both political and metaphysical, it is linked to a range of practices by which attempts are made to protect identities, beliefs and life. If what is valued is being menaced, it can be dealt with by distancing, expulsion or punishment. He concludes this spectacular chapter by commenting: “...what horrifies is not just dying and killing but the violent appearance of something that is normally disregarded in secular modernity: the limitless pursuit of freedom, the illusion of an uncoerced interiority that can withstand the force of institutional disciplines. Liberalism...disapproves of the violent exercise of freedom outside the frame of law. But the law itself is founded by and continuously depends on coercive violence” (p. 92). At the end of the chapter Asad repeats his query: does suicide terrorism belong to liberalism?

Chapter three is followed by an “Epilogue” (pp. 93–96). Asad’s critique of the war against terror emerges in its full vigour in this concluding part. He inquires into how the West comes up with new “logics” of attacking, for example, Iraq and then it finds reasons to not follow these “logics” that it had itself developed in some other cases. He writes: “I find this more disturbing than the sordid violence of individual terrorists. It seems to me that there is no moral difference between the horror inflicted by state armies...and the horror inflicted by insurgents...Today, cruelty is an indispensable technique for maintaining a particular kind of international order, an order in which the lives of some people are less valuable than the lives of others and therefore their deaths are less disturbing” (p. 94).

Asad folds up the discussion by giving his concluding remarks on the modern secular conception of life and death. According to him, the modern secular world has a self-contradictory view of life and death. The genealogy of this concept is a genealogy of shifting patterns of convergence and dispersal of contingent elements. According to Asad, these contradictions are many, and their consequences unpredictable. He refers to the inherent inequalities of the modern world: “On the one hand, the life of every human has equal value; on the other, the massacre of civilized humans is more affecting than that of the uncivilized.... in our secular world all these forms of violent conduct are thought ultimately to secure a kind of collective immortality—what some scholars call civil religion and others pseudoreligion” (pp. 95–96).

There are notes followed by an index at the end of the book which are very useful and should not be missed while reading and trying to carefully
comprehend the book. Although Asad’s methodology in *On Suicide Bombing* does not vary from his previous works, nonetheless the present work has an academic project as well as a humanitarian one. At the humanitarian level, Asad is more concerned with locating the causes which result in the creation of terrorism instead of rationalizing the motivations of a suicide bomber. He contends that “the creation of terror and the preparation of atrocities are aspects of militant action in the unequal world we inhabit, of our notions of what is cruel and what is necessary, and of emotions with which we justify or condemn particular acts of death dealing” (p. 2). With his vigorous discursive questioning throughout the book, Asad points out the inherent contradictions and flaws in the modern secular policies and the West’s undue interference in and exploitation of the Middle East. In Asad’s words, “... it is not cruelty that matters in the distinction between terrorists and armies at war, still less the threat each poses to entire ways of life, but their civilizational status. What is really at stake is not a clash of civilizations...but the fight of civilization against the uncivilized...what is especially intriguing is the ingenuity of liberal discourse in rendering inhuman acts humane. This is certainly something that savage discourse cannot achieve” (pp. 37–38).

Coming to the academic aspect of the project, Asad provides the whole enterprise on terror and terrorism new directions by offering a powerful argument against major political scientists who support the granting of moral advantage and legitimacy to coercion against the enemy.

One of the significant features of the book is Asad’s use of the typology of antonyms which fully describes the contradictions in the modern liberal thought and international politics. His use of civilized vs. uncivilized, freedom vs. unfreedom, rational vs. irrational, constructed vs. imaginary, war vs. terrorism, torturable vs. untorturable helps him completely put his argument upfront against the banal and binary system and standards of the modern liberal world.

Another striking feature of the book is that Asad underlines various kinds of subjectivities which exist in today’s world. He refers to modern subjectivities, religious subjectivities, political subjectivities, Palestinian subjectivities and liberal subjectivities which have been constructed in the post-colonial world of modern nation-states amidst an unequal and unbalanced share of political and military power.

There are, however, a few questions that arise after reading the book. Asad has essentially addressed himself to the horror of suicide bombing in what he always refers to as the western mind. This western mind, in Asad’s view, is a liberal mind. What is the location of this “western mind?” Where
does it exist? Can we categorize the “western mind” essentially as a “liberal mind?” How about the non-liberal conservative minds? And although it does not fall in the scope of this book, Asad leaves the non-western mind completely unexamined. The brutal act of suicide bombing does leave an impact on the non-western mind as well: what is the response? Given the fact that most of the suicide bombings are now taking place in non-western countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the populaces in these countries are, either directly or indirectly, victims of this horrific act of violence, I hope that this question will soon be taken up as a subject of study and the torture and suffering people are going through will not be left unaddressed by the academia. Moreover, while discussing the case of suicide bombers, Asad focuses his discussion on Palestinian suicide bombers and their motivations in taking their own lives. What are the reasons for this focus although the book has been written in the context of the post-9/11 incident in which no Palestinians were involved?

Notwithstanding this, the book is a very engaging read. Although small in size, it is a very profound discussion of ideas, definitions and genealogies. One significant feature of the book is the new set of insights offered by the author into the Islamic concepts of jihad, martyrdom and sacrifice. This work is a great addition to the available discourse on suicide bombing and terrorism from the pen of a seasoned cultural anthropologist.

Sadia Mahmood

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