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RESPONSE TO GIL ANIDJAR

Talal Asad

City University of New York, USA

I have approached each new writing by Gil with pleasurable anticipation, expecting to find in it a challenge to further thought. This essay has not been disappointing. Besides, here he has dealt with my publications with characteristic generosity. (I wanted to say ‘with Christian charity’ because of the way he has glossed over my intellectual shortcomings, but I’m not yet *quite* sure to what extent one should identify secular kindnesses with Christian virtues.) At any rate, let me deal first with some misunderstandings before addressing his intriguing treatment of Christianity, religion and modernity.

Gil reminds me that people don’t always find suicide bombing horrible, as when they read about Tamil Tigers, and warns me against naturalizing horror. He is quite right, of course. That’s why in the first three pages of the third chapter I mention cases in which representations of the sudden destruction of human life don’t evoke the same sense of horror (and I also cite Tamil suicide bombers) and I acknowledge the well known fact that ‘for the western media the sudden death of Europeans is more shocking than that of non-Europeans, and there are historical reasons for focusing on non-European militants who kill Europeans.’ I then go on to say that all of this may be true, but it still doesn’t tell us why horror is expressed, when it is

genuinely expressed, *and what horror consists in*. I don't think the horror as such is directly or uniquely related to Christianity – or at least to the Crucifixion – and therefore I don't think that the site of the Crucifixion is especially relevant (remember: the most dramatic instance of suicide bombing was in New York). My references to Christianity (and to the Crucifixion) in this chapter are part of an exploration of the violence of *suicide* – rather than of suicide bombing as such – to the powerful emotions evoked by suicide in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to the mutually constitutive sensibilities of cruelty and compassion going back to the Crucifixion that are now nurtured in liberalism: 'I want to suggest that the cult of sacrifice, blood, and death that secular liberals find so repellent in pre-liberal Christianity is a part of the genealogy of modern liberalism itself, in which violence and tenderness go together. This is encountered in many places in our modern culture, not least in what is generally taken to be just war.' In the last two pages I give several tentative explanations of the horror at suicide bombings, among them 'the tensions that hold modern subjectivity together', tensions that are 'necessary to the liberal democratic state' but that threaten to break down completely when a sudden suicide bombing takes place. In other words, I agree completely with Gil that it is important *not* to 'naturalize' horror.

However, when Gil writes that my sentence 'Inscribed in the body is an image of the future that is nothing more than a continuous unbinding or emptying' recalls for him 'the *kenosis* of God in Jesus Christ' I find myself puzzled. *Kenosis* (mentioned in Paul's Letter to the Philippians) has been interpreted as God emptying himself of his divine attributes in order to take on the limited form of a human being (the Incarnation), but a process that left the godhead unimpaired. I speak simply of the dissolution of the human body and the emptying of life in the process called dying. I make no parallels between this *disincarnation* and the incarnation of God in man. The former is not a translation – when life 'leaves' the body (as the idiomatic expression has it) it doesn't go somewhere else, it simply ceases. The process itself has no meaning – again, unlike *kenosis*. And when Gil asks, sceptically, 'Does this refer to *every* body?' the answer is: 'No, of course not. It refers to aging bodies that are slowly dying.' And I refer not to the thought of death but to the process of disintegration that the *body* anticipates.

The final misunderstanding relates to what Gil takes to be my injustice to May Jayyusi's essay that I discuss at some length in chapter 2. Gil's comments here reminded me in a way of Samantha Powers' review of *On Suicide Bombing* where she remarks of the unfortunate author that 'by the end of the book, his rage has overtaken him'. When I read this I was bewildered because it revealed the truism that what matters is not what one thinks one has written but what the reader construes. Style is, of course, integral to what one says, and where one thinks that one is being ironic, or

disagreeing with someone in an interested way, the reader's reception of it may be utterly different. At any rate, I was a little startled at Gil's chiding me for my 'undeserved disapproval' of Jayyusi because although I had some reservations concerning her argument, I thought her essay excellent. Its account of Palestinian resistance to the Israeli Occupation, which I summarized without criticism, is informative and persuasive. In her conclusion she cleverly inverts Agamben ('If *homo sacer* is he who can be killed and not sacrificed ... then the martyr here inverts this relation to sovereignty, transforming himself into he who can be sacrificed but not killed'), making him an active controller of his destiny. My comment on this in the book is that 'This is arresting but Jayyusi's explanation in terms of *shahada* [martyrdom] needs to be complicated further.' To ask for complication is not, I submit, a dismissive attitude. My complication consisted of putting her concept of *shahada* into a wider tradition of Islamic thought in which it no longer appears simply as a chosen act, such as the death of a suicide bomber performing a sovereign act or of a warrior who falls in a voluntary *jihad*. Since the term *shahid* (martyr) encompasses different kinds of 'abnormal' death that have often *not* been chosen (including militants assassinated by Israeli drones, bystanders killed in Israeli air raids, and children shot by the IDF soldiers), I suggest that the term applies to someone who is 'struck by a fatal calamity, whether natural or human', and who is thus 'constituted as a sign of human finitude in the world created by an eternal deity'. I discuss this at some length because the thrust of my overall argument is to move away from explanations of suicide bombing in terms of individual motives, away from representing it as 'sacrifice' – a concept heavy with Christian significance. It is in this context that I say Jayyusi 'concedes too much to current fashions in explaining suicide operations as a perverse form of national politics'. Of course Jayyusi doesn't think that Palestinian resistance is perverse – and nor do I. But according to fashionable liberal commentators, Palestinian nationalism may be legitimate but suicide bombing is a pathological expression of it.

Sometimes Jayyusi writes in a way that unintentionally allows fashionable liberal readers to confirm their prejudices. For example, referring to the daily humiliation and oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli state, she cites Hannah Arendt's famous statement about rage arising 'only when there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not'. If this is left without further elaboration, it may give the impression that Palestinians, like other orientals, are given to bouts of uncontrollable anger that interferes with rational thought (as Samantha Powers suggests when she refers to my 'rage'). So my response to Jayyusi here was this: 'I suggest, however, that the relevance of Arendt's statement is not its reference to uncontrollable rage (planned suicide bombing is not an instance of uncontrollable rage) but its concern with an act of death dealing that reacts to injustice by *transgressing*

the law. The stress here should not be on violence but on spontaneous action when legal political means are blocked.'

These are small points, and they don't get to the heart of Gil's stimulating exploration of 'religion' and 'Christianity'. But since he has chosen to do this through my writings let me first try to restate briefly what I think I was trying to do as far as 'religion' is concerned. My 1983 article, reprinted as chapter 1 of *Genealogies of Religion* ten years later, sketches the historical evolution of the term 'religion' in relation to both creative and repressive powers. I argued there against anthropological attempts at producing universal definitions of 'religion'. My primary point was that the concept of 'religion' has Christian roots, and that in an important sense it is (as Gil rightly puts it) a translation of Christianity – or as I put it (and Gil doesn't like this formulation) as an abstraction and generalization of elements regarded as basic to Christianity. I was also concerned to point to the particular significance of 'belief' for modern religiosity, because I tried to locate the concept in *historical practices* of excluding or including, celebrating or denouncing, encouraging or penalizing, by different kinds of people inhabiting diverse relations: theologians, lawyers, practitioners, preachers, politicians, administrators, parents – as well as academic scholars. So I agree with Gil that 'religion' is a polemical concept, and I am sure he will agree with me that the practices of orthodoxy (teaching of and obedience to truth) are not *merely* polemical even if – especially if – they are embedded in power.

Genealogies of Religion as a whole was concerned to question the attempt to look for a universal answer to the question 'What is religion?' It was a mistake, I suggested, to take symbols as expressions of 'religious belief' and then to interpret their meanings from an anthropological perspective. What a particular discourse means is to be found in how it is used. The book's discussion of ritual as doing the right thing in the right way at the right time (chapter 2), of conviction and pain in medieval legal punishment and Christian discipline (chapter 3), of St Bernard's teaching his novices how to restructure their worldly desires (chapter 4), of cultural translation as interpreting versus re-learning (chapter 5), of Islamic preaching as a theological-political-moral intervention (chapter 6), of blasphemy in the context of post-colonial sensibilities and imaginative critique (chapters 7, 8), are variously directed at understanding aspects of 'religious tradition' in particular places and times. None of them is premised on a definition of religion – or of Christianity for that matter – and if I use the word religion or its cognates it is primarily to refer to Christianity (in one chapter, and scattered in other places, I use it also to refer to Islam) because that is how that word is primarily used in the West. Indeed, in none of these chapters do I provide a definition of religion as such. They are all concerned with elucidating particular discourses and practices, in which the word 'religion'

might appear *as part of a vocabulary in use*, that articulates particular relations of trust and mistrust, particular acts of truth and power – and of indifference.

To define is to repudiate some things and endorse others. Defining religion, I have stressed, is not merely an abstract intellectual exercise; it is not just what modern scholars do. The act of defining religion is connected with anxieties and comforts, it responds to different problems and interests, connects with institutional disciplines and emotional attachments. In the past, colonial administrations used definitions of religion to control and regulate the practices of subjects. Today, the secular state is required to pronounce on the legal status of such definitions and thus to spell out immunities and obligations. Legal definitions of religion are not mere academic exercises: they have profound implications for the organization of social life and the possibilities of personal experience. For this very reason academic expertise is often invoked in the process of arriving at legal decisions about ‘religion’. What I’ve wanted to do is not simply to reject any or all definitions of religion but to open up questions about where, by whom, and in what manner – i.e. in what social context and in what spirit – the definitions are produced and put into circulation. That is why, following Wittgenstein (as Gil correctly notes), I use the idea of grammar. Grammar is not a limitation to what can be said, it is only the limit, the condition for speaking *competently* in a particular discourse. It outlines what I have elsewhere called a ‘structure of possible actions’.

Gil is quite right to say that ‘without a concept of Christianity, and therefore without an anthropology of Christianity, no [adequate] answer to the question of religion . . . could ever be forthcoming.’ And he is right also to insist that such a concept is necessary to an anthropology of ‘modernity’. I don’t think, however, that that makes Christianity (or religion) and modernity (or secularism) mutually substitutable. Thus I see ‘terrorism’ as a modern concept, constructed within liberal democracies, integral to their mode of governing, and then adopted enthusiastically by authoritarian rulers in Asia and Africa to try and control their own populations. It would be decidedly odd, I think, to say that ‘terrorism’ was a *Christian* concept. Today, ‘terrorism’ is a concept that belongs to governmentality, and as such it aims to regulate the behaviour of large populations by calculating probable trends and risks; it is not concerned to cultivate and discipline individual souls.

Have I misunderstood Gil in thinking that he merges modernity with Christianity? In saying that *both* are polemical concepts he may in fact want to stress that their fluid character – oscillating between identity and difference, incorporation and fragmentation, between the conceit of uniqueness and the desire for universality – makes them appropriate for discourses of power. Certainly, Gil is drawing in a very original way on the long tradition in which different aspects of modernity are connected to Christianity: the



Protestant ethic to the spirit of capitalism, Pauline universalism to political equality, Calvinist discipline to the early modern state, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation to secular humanism, etc. Of course, there have been critics of each of these alleged connections, but the criticisms have had very little effect. (Is that a sign of the tradition's intellectual vitality or of its hegemonic power?) I myself have suggested that Gauchet's explanation of secularism as the historical extension – intention? – of Christianity is really a secular version of the miracle of the Incarnation. Gauchet, however, isn't alone; a number of philosophers and social theorists have also joined the ranks of those who draw productively on 'Christianity' (Agamben, Badiou, Žižek). Gil has very elegantly argued that 'Christianity' ('religion') is a *hegemonic* concept. So I want to ask him what is at stake in this discourse that wants to see 'Christianity' ('religion') *infusing* things that people think of as 'secular' (economics, politics, human rights, 'European civilization,' etc.). What are its implications for non-Christian traditions and conditions within and beyond 'the West' – if, indeed, they have any place at all in our global capitalist world?