

Introduction

I began writing this book after I had read the letter found in Mohammed Atta's luggage on September 11, 2001.¹ What fascinated me was the letter's tone of calm serenity and its counterintuitive appeal. How could a statement inciting its receivers to kill, to destroy and be destroyed, I wondered, exude such solemn serenity? The utter strangeness of this document captivated me. If given attentive reading and decoding, I felt, it promised to open a window to a mind otherwise hermetically closed and enigmatic to us.

Reading the letter, I sensed that the contrast between the presumed function of the letter and its emotional tone held the key, or at least one of the keys, to the mystery of what lay behind the attacks. As always, when reason and feeling seem disjointed, or even clash, what counts, what is believed by the receiver—whether observer, listener, or reader—is the feeling tone. This is what needed to be attended to first. Obviously, the affective register of the letter in no way expresses the mental state we would expect it to express. Direct hatred and fury, condemnation of the people who were to be killed, and a pitch made to hit them hard—all these were missing. The letter carried an altogether different mood. What this different mood was, how it was generated, and what its psychic purpose was, will be one of the focuses of this book.

Psychoanalytic Understanding

Although drawn from various sources, this work is primarily psychoanalytic. Reading the letter through the prism of psychoanalysis, with attention

to some of its surrounding cultural and political contexts, proved quite fruitful, and led to further thoughts and then to more connections. My thoughts were mostly embedded in psychoanalytic concepts that enable us to think about people's mental states, their motives, and the influences that go into making them perceive themselves and others in certain ways rather than in others. Psychoanalytic thought also has much to say about the relation between the individual and the group, and about collective processes that are steeped in group emotions and perceptions. Psychoanalysis is singularly equipped to investigate human action through its conceptualizations of inner processes and structures that are generated by internalized interactions and identifications with other persons. Clinical experience and its theorized concepts, in tandem with knowledge that is gained through identification and empathy with other minds, steeping oneself imaginatively in the emotional states of the others' and of one's own interiority, makes it possible to understand something about those states of mind. A great part of psychoanalytic theories and concepts of human psychodynamics are based on the knowledge gained from one's trained inner experience while entering another person's mind during psychoanalytic work in a therapeutic setting. Immersion in another person's states of mind, and concurrently in one's own resonant emergent forms of awareness, tapping into the parts of oneself that correspond to the psyche one wishes to know, modulated and articulated with other kinds of knowledge, lead to the grasping of links between subjective experience and mental processes. Obviously such an idiographic and attuned approach is very different from the nomothetic procedure of taking another person to be an object of knowledge by assessing and measuring the *behavior* of that person or that person's group. External observation is a perennial source of knowledge, but it is enormously augmented by attending to the ways one is *impacted* by the other to be known. Heinrich Racker,² Heinz Kohut, or Thomas Ogden, are a few among many psychoanalysts who have written illuminatingly about these issues. A cultivated, reflective, "mentalizing" mode, in which we perceive the other person as an intentional subject with a unique interior world, makes it possible to trace the most diverse and the most unexpected ways of thinking. Extensive brain and infant research has yielded a corpus of knowledge regarding the centrality of affect in providing knowledge about other people (cf. Joseph LeDoux, Colwyn Trevarthen, Edward Tronick).³

The need to identify with the mind of the religious terrorist in order to understand it poses enormous problems, since the effort to emotionally understand such a person entails an act of partially identifying with an individual whose cultural and ideological background is not only quite alien to the one undertaking this task, but, most pointedly, whose professed intention is to annihilate her. Note that I use *terrorist* deliberately, even as I am aware of the controversies regarding political differences and questions of values, embodied as they are in the saying that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. I use the term *terrorist* since I believe that Islamist extremists are not freedom fighters, nor politically oriented negotiators, but are mainly preoccupied with disseminating the terror of death and with dying and killing, that is, with taking life. I call them religious terrorists because the matrix for their mentality, their underlying mode of thinking and language, is religious. Yet terrorists are also human beings and as such need to be understood for their own sake—as human beings. At the same time, they and their environment also need to be understood on pragmatic grounds, so as to be defeated, as terrorists want and plan to destroy us. In effect, the curiosity to understand the terrorist's mind per se is superseded by the pressing urgency to comprehend one's enemy.

The Difficulties of Identificatory Knowledge

There are two possible kinds of objection to the claim to know, however partially, the mind of a terrorist. One is methodological, the other affective. The methodological argument claims that we cannot know an absent person, whether nonpresent, uncooperative, or dead. The other objection touches on the formidable affective difficulty of identifying with minds of deadly enemies. First, let us look at the methodological objection that claims that in order to gain knowledge of an individual, one has to speak to him—that is, to interview, or better, to psychoanalyze him. This can be countered by pointing to the productive tradition of writings in which the attempt is made to psychoanalytically understand historical figures that the author never met personally. Freud's writings on Leonardo, and Erikson's on Martin Luther, Gandhi, and Hitler, are a few among many other testimonies to the fact that valuable knowledge can be gathered from oral and written materials, culled from rituals, documents, or artistic objects, as long as one approaches such productions

from various perspectives within oneself and lets them resonate with the subject of contemplation. Texts or textlike products can be analyzed, further constructions can be hypothesized, which then can be deconstructed and read against themselves. Informed, intuitive-imaginative synthesizing of various and contradictory sites of knowledge, supported by psychoanalytic theory, enables us to project ourselves into the minds that dwell behind the written, televised, or otherwise mediated expression. As to the liability of reading one's own fears and desires into the other, this can only be answered by the judgment of the reader as to whether the interpretation offered is coherent and adequate enough to make sense and illuminate the *interpretans*, or if, on the contrary, the interpreter's subjectivity functioned as a distorting lens and produced a tendentious or unconvincing account.

This links the methodological issue with the affective one. The emotional intensity involved in our having to think the mind of someone who desires and has sworn to annihilate us (and who may increasingly possess the means to do so), a mind, that, furthermore, is at least partially immersed in trance or in other altered states of consciousness—hypervigilant yet numbed, calculating yet dissociated—creates formidable barriers to understanding. These issues were intensely debated among the analysts, sociologists, and literary critics who gathered on the PsyBC Internet site in 2004 to discuss what later became two of the chapters of this book (Chapters 1 and 2). Our discussion concerned the possibility of thinking under conditions of terror and hatred—the terror and hatred coming toward us, the participants, from the direction of the object and subject of our thinking. The awareness of how one is perceived by such a mind—whether as an intensely targeted, particular goal for destruction, or as a faceless, impersonal source of evil—seemed to be nearly intolerable to some of us.⁴ To fathom the psyche of the terrorist, we have to enter states of mind that may be terrifying, foreign, and hateful. The refusal to identify with convictions that aim at one's own annihilation is all too understandable. There is a powerful desire to alienate oneself from such sinister registers, to split them off, to amputate horror from one's awareness so that it is not felt to be part of oneself. Creating distance from unmitigated hostility aimed at oneself is needed for the sake of sanity and balance. Achieving significant identification with annihilatory intent toward the self may feel dangerous, deeply aversive, even perverse.

But it is not only the anxiety attendant on the imagining of explosive hatred and violence against the self that may make thinking ineffective. There is also the shame of being helpless in the face of such violence, the insult of our total vulnerability and the shattering of our belief in warranted safety, coupled with the shame at being so hated, all contributing to the reluctance to look at the contours of the terrorist mind and identify with it from the inside. The effort that may be needed to overcome this resistance may be compensated by a certain painful fascination as well as by the anticipation of the mastery over shock and fear that comes with understanding. The ambivalent desire to enter the inimical sensibility of the terrorist, the need to know and temporarily make the antagonistic mind our own and share it to some extent, was one of the motives for writing this book. After all, the terrorists not only inflict physical violence and instill fear in us, they also attempt to impose their own fantasy on a world that is now forced to confront this inimical vision without itself being heard or believed.⁵

September 11 and the other suicide bombings are spectacular, grand-scale acts of communication that use the media to send messages in a war of ideas that is going on at present. Osama bin Laden's messages to the world are cast in terms of justice and punishment; he speaks about the West feeling what the oppressed Muslims feel: fear and humiliation. The mechanism by which he intends to mete out this punishment involves processes of identification: Westerners will come to share the bitter taste dishonored Muslims carry, that is, they will identify with the fury and helplessness of the oppressed and violated inhabitants of the House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*).

But the stakes are higher than notions of revenge and punishment. Bin Laden wants to punish and humiliate America for profaning the sacred places of Islam in Saudi Arabia, Jerusalem, and elsewhere by its very presence—not necessarily as a colonizing force, not even as a commercial or diplomatic presence. Any non-Muslim presence in Muslim lands is a profanation. This expressly *religious* intention sees the purging of Muslim lands from non-Muslim presence, together with the toppling of not-properly-Muslim Arab, African, and Asian governments, as first steps in the campaign of spreading the (s)word of Islam to a world that is deeply sunk in hypocrisy, lies, corruption, and darkness.⁶ Thus, on the fourth anniversary of 9/11, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri gave an interview to *As-Sahab* (the media

production house of al-Qaeda) that was subsequently released on various Islamist Web sites. After explaining to Americans that their culture is defunct, Zawahiri invited them to Islam: “[We call upon Americans] to be honest with themselves and to realize that their current creed—which is composed of materialistic secularism, the distorted Christianity that has nothing to do with Jesus Christ, the hereditary Crusader hatred, and their submission to Zionist hegemony over money and politics—this creed, this mixture, will only lead them to destruction in this world, and torments in the Hereafter.”⁷ Bin Laden differs from al-Zawahiri’s call to conversion, assuming a different position: he issues a call “by Allah’s leave” to every Muslim individual to fulfill his religious obligation in any country he can, “to kill Americans and their allies . . . and seize their money wherever and whenever they find them.” He calls on Muslim *ulema* (legal scholars), leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on the Devil’s army, the Americans and their allies “from the supporters of Satan.”⁸ In a letter to the Saudis, bin Laden writes that “there are only three choices in Islam: either willing submission; or payment of the *jizya* [which signifies economic, though not spiritual, submission to the authority of Islam];⁹ or the sword—for it is not right to let him [the infidel] live.”¹⁰ The matter is summed up for every person alive: either convert to Islam or submit and live under the suzerainty of Islam, or die.

Ironically, there is a grim parallel between the terrorist ideological attempt to erase the habitual modes of belief and mental existence of non-Muslims or not-good-enough Muslims, and the individual career of a terrorist who erases his individuality when he enters the physical milieu of training and the psychical mindset of indoctrination that prepares him to sacrifice himself to God. Once the would-be suicide bomber becomes part of a totalitarian group, in the training camps of Afghanistan or elsewhere, he enters a system that works against individuality, memory, and continuous personal history. The parallel between this silencing and the desire to mute the masses of infidel enemies cannot be ignored. Terrorism aims at destroying thinking and personal existence on both sides of the religious-ideological divide.

When an analyst attends to her own fantasies and reveries while intently listening to a patient, noting the flow of thoughts, feelings, and images that come up in her as a running commentary on the patient’s speaking and emoting, she tacitly works with the assumption that the human mind is endowed with exquisite, built-in mechanisms (mirror-

neurons, recently discovered and elaborated, being but a small portion of these mechanisms) for apprehending the other's state.¹¹ Spinning such fantasies, like dreaming, like committing parapraxes and slips of the tongue, like performing symbolic actions, means creating end products pulled together from moments of learning and inference, subliminally organized in piecemeal fashion. These then become indicators that can be used to obtain meanings not accessible in other ways, in a kind of knowledge that supplements theoretical and more objective knowledge. Spontaneous acts of imaginative visualization, such as the one I described in the Preface, illustrate this kind of perception, capturing a moment that can overcome the difficulties in thinking and imagining this topic.

Cultural Criticism

The difficulties in thinking are not only individual but also sociocultural. It seems to me that we have to rethink our cultural, critical, and action-oriented tools to encompass this kind of violence. A telling example of such a shift is the case of cultural critic Teresa de Lauretis.¹² Responding to a query about a possible end of critical theory, de Lauretis looks back on her involvement in the 1960s in "militantly critical"—that is, feminist, gender, and queer—theories, as well as her later contributions to the coming-to-voice of so-called "subjugated knowledge," in women's, African-American, ethnic, and postcolonial studies. She reminisces on the ways people in those days regarded the ideas produced in these fields of discourse as theorized practices of an armed struggle against a deceptive and disappointing liberal-democratic state and its apparatuses. These discursive practices no longer serve her (or us), she writes, since they constitute contemporary Western forms that are at present incommensurable with manifestations of terrorism such as those that struck the Twin Towers in New York and other monuments of Western power. The destructive violence that erupts throughout the political space reveals the world's stubborn "resistance to discursification . . . or negotiation," and creates "the enigma of the now" that is due to the fact that "our theories, discourses, and knowledges are incompatible with [the] . . . forms and means of expression [of this] destructive violence."¹³

The difficulty of thinking about suicidal terrorism is thus substantial, not only personally and psychoanalytically, but also on contemporary ethical and discursive levels. The realization of this difficulty puts one in

the problematic position of trying to understand phenomena of religious terrorism in terms that are not reducible to materialistic or even political (including multicultural or postcolonial) explanations. At the same time they need to resist the lure of romanticizing the spiritual or ethical positions adumbrated by violent fundamentalism. In other words, the attitude required in this situation is to resist *both* reductive materialistic *and* romanticizing, self-idealizing accounts. Political philosopher Roxanne Euben exemplifies this difficulty.¹⁴ Euben criticizes the ways Western liberals consider fundamentalist ideas as merely a function of economic or political frustrations, and finds similarities between fundamentalist ethics and Foucauldian and Saidian critiques of modernity that condemn Western rationalism for its exploitative reason and hypocritical wielding of power. I believe Euben may be right, though not in the way she intended. It is true that, in their critiques of Western culture, both Islamic fundamentalists and thinkers like Foucault or Said often indiscriminately vilify humanist accomplishments, holding them in scathing mistrust. Both Islamist theologians and certain extremist proponents of postmodernism overgeneralize the liabilities and faults of contemporary culture, rephrasing them as products of disciplinary, exploitative, or colonizing power operations.

But these partial similarities do not cancel the vast differences between the postmodern critiques of reifying, profit-driven, exploitative reason and the fanatically intolerant rejection of universal human affinity and human otherness that is a hallmark of violent fundamentalism. The two cannot be considered equivalent critiques of modernism. The postmodern articulation and support of the ubiquity and validity of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and difference is distinctly opposed to the fundamentalist proclamation of the exclusivity and unity of one's Truth. For Islamic fundamentalism amounts to a conviction that each particular human existence is homogeneous and subjected to a superior immutable will, while insisting, in diametrical opposition to postmodernism, on the sameness of the right way of life for every person. Most important, the postmodernist rejection of foundationalism, grand narratives, and metaphysical truth stands in stark contrast to the pronounced foundationalism and authoritarianism of fundamentalism. Postmodern and fundamentalist critiques of modernism are comparable and become somewhat similar only in those cases where postmodern thinking functions in a defensive, narcissistic mode that eventually becomes contemptuous of rationality, democracy, and the need for law and government.¹⁵

I have dwelt on the differences between postmodernism and fundamentalism so as to call attention to the risk of confounding the two, as well as the confusion among some postmodern thinkers regarding fundamentalism, such as their ignorance regarding the utter seriousness with which violent Islamic fundamentalists mean the bloody messages they transmit, and the consistency with which they intend to act on them.¹⁶ Against these tendencies, I propose we step up our efforts to understand forms of fundamentalist terrorism with the aid of variegated tools and conceptions. Some of these tools and conceptions reach beyond functional, utilitarian modes of commentary and critical thinking on sociocultural disenfranchisement; they go beyond the discourse of the racially underprivileged “wretched of the earth,”¹⁷ or the resistance of subversive groups to capitalist evil and state power.¹⁸ The latter critical practices deal with deterritorialized peoples who are disenfranchised;¹⁹ they hold discourses on madness,²⁰ and seek to provide a postmodern response to the demise of positivistic religion.²¹ But postmodern discourse on racial and ethnic oppression, on the individual’s subjection to the power of the state, or on positivistic epistemology and, relatedly, on capitalist values, valuable and important as such discourse is for us, cannot fill the lack of a much-needed critical discourse on *religious* fanaticism and *religious* suicidal terrorism. Using postmodern, post-Marxist, secular terminology to explain religious terrorism does not do justice to its specifically religious and spiritual aspects, and in particular, it does not fully contend with the unique power religious ideas and sentiments hold for contemporary fanatical groups,²² indeed, it minimizes the part religion plays in them.

The foregoing assertion needs to be qualified by the recognition that there are numerous contemporary, often postmodernist writings that deal specifically with the question of religion and God. This recognition is, however, tempered by the fact that these writings often, and increasingly, equate religion with an ethical stance *tout court*, and emphasize notions of ethics rather than cult and ritual. These writings are inspired by notions taken from what Slavoj Žižek cogently describes as the “neo-Jewish” thought of Emmanuel Lévinas or Jacques Derrida, a kind of thought that addresses post-theistic forms of religion, a direction which is obviously inappropriate to the phenomena addressed here.²³ These approaches ignore the powerful psychologically archaic and destructive nature of contemporary religious terrorism, and, since they address issues such as the idea of God in a post-Nietzschean world, their terminology is incommensurate

with the theistic and more archaic forms of fundamentalism, where God as a supreme being is considered the foundation of everything. Obviously, the archaic yet starkly present and contemporaneous forms of religion represented in militant coercive fundamentalism call for different ways of thinking. Cultural critic Terry Eagleton (who likewise believes that terrorism is not political in any conventional sense of the term) notes that the left “is at home with imperial power and guerrilla warfare, but embarrassed on the whole by the thought of death, evil, sacrifice, or the sublime.”²⁴

Indeed, death, evil, sacrifice, and the sublime are important elements in the desire of Islamic extremists to reinstate the Islamic caliphate of the seventh century abolished eighty years ago by Kemal Atatürk. Death, evil, sacrifice, and the sublime are also important elements in the worldviews and plans of fundamentalist fringe groups in Israel to rebuild the Third Temple, or the worldviews and plans of Hamas and Hezbollah members to Islamicize all of Israel,²⁵ and they feature in the desire of American Christian fundamentalists to accelerate the second coming of Jesus Christ as prophesized in the Book of Revelation. In the face of these phenomena, we need to enlarge and adapt our linguistic and conceptual tools to encompass *the archaically omnipotent, transgressive, and regressive dimensions* of contemporary religious extremism. In particular, we need to take into account the characteristic *concreteness and literalization* of sacralized discourses. Psychoanalytic thinking offers a rich vocabulary for the tensions between the archaic and the rational, and for processes whereby the symbolic dimension of human experience can become concretized and enacted while fueled by psychological motives that sponsor religious suicidal terrorism.

Psychoanalysis and Suicidal Terrorism

We have said that new conceptual and terminological tools need to be added to the various forms of understanding through which the phenomenon of contemporary Islamic extremism is presently being studied and interpreted. At this point I have in mind the irrational, or seemingly irrational, nonutilitarian dimension of religious suicidal thinking. Totalitarian mass movements, such as extremist Islamism, function according to Max Weber’s value rationality, which involves “commands” or “demands” that are binding, as well as the willingness to accept the inordinate risks

and costs that may be implicated in adhering to those values.²⁶ Fundamentalist movements are not utilitarian; their totalistic projects are rarely fought for the sake of material gains or to free people from oppressive regimes. They have no coherent economic project, and their political plans comprise vague, world-embracing visions such as fighting the West, or rather, the whole world until it is brought to its knees.²⁷ Their acts of random decimation of human beings do not focus on any immediate goals of instrumental gains and profits, but are rather committed for religious ends, seeking to actualize final redemptive scripts.²⁸

We know that these nonutilitarian, nonpragmatic policies and actions stem from the specific relationship between the political and the religious aspects of life, which have never been separated in Islam. As has often been noted, the political and the religious overlap in Islam to a great extent, and there cannot be any notion of political power that is not religious, since according to Islamic law (*shari'a*), all earthly sovereignty belongs to God alone and *shari'a* means the abolition of man-made laws.²⁹ This is what makes every political agenda infused with religious intentionality. In contrast to classical secular terrorist organizations that aim at overthrowing the nation-state, the goal of Islamic terrorism is to transform more and more secular governments into theocratic ones.³⁰ The means for attaining these ambitions pass through cultures of death, nurtured over centuries by theological writings.³¹ The militant version of Islam has always existed in its theological thinking but has come to occupy center stage again in the past eighty years or so.

It needs to be emphasized that in my analysis I do not include all of the Islamic faith or all Muslims, and it would be totally wrong to generalize from these extremist violent strands to all of religion and all the different creeds. I single out for study the most violent, jihadist, militant streak in this religion. At the same time, and this needs to be said as well, I am not sure whether Islam, and religion in general, are not very seriously implicated in surrounding and presaging such intentionality, particularly in their blend of submission to God and militantism on His behalf. The cults of death such as we are witnessing in Islamic jihadism involve the transcendence cum erasure of the individual, whose particularity is dismantled in the service of producing unified action.³² In working to reestablish theocracies, these movements aim to undo the painstaking work of centuries of civilization, whose accomplishments we are accustomed to take for granted.³³