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Boko Haram and the Politics of Martyrdom and Sacrifice

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Abstract

Since its inroad into Nigerian soil, the name 'Boko Haram' has been conceptualized in several ways to the extent that the concept is but a mixed bag of confusion in the scheme of things. Hence a learned exploration is needed to extricate the inadequacy for better naming and understanding of its acts. Indeed, many people have characteristically condemned the act as horrendous with little or no religious motif but just a misguided demonstration of frustration with the socio-political and economic system in the country. The perpetrators, on the other hand, supposedly consider their acts as religious and communal acts of sacrifice and martyrdom far from mere 'utilitarian militant tactics,' but acts fulfilling the will of Allah (Strenski, 2003:1). Using such concepts plays into the new horizon of modern terrorism and complicates the misunderstandings and contradictions their claims and acts impose on traditional norms of martyrdom and sacrifice, especially in their religious context. Though it is true that dying for the faith has a long and honored tradition in most religions, it is not a synonym for suicide or homicide. These acts expand, challenge, and change the common held notion of martyrdom and sacrifice, so that these words have a wide range of meaning in today's world, and a much wider application to various people and contexts. The realities these words signify now range from obedient suffering to militancy, from nonviolence to violence, from passive sacrifice to active participation.

1. Introduction

In 2001 in Northeastern Nigeria, an extremist and jihadist Islamic sect was born, called *Jamā'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lādda'awatih wal-Jihad* or People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad. It

is popularly known as *Boko Haram* or Western civilization is forbidden. This sect, describing itself as strongly opposed to human laws personified by the state, westernization and its corruption of Islam, is committed to Islamizing the whole country and possible replacement of the nation's various levels of government with an orthodox Muslim leadership. Since 2009, following a federal government attack on its nest, Boko Haram has embraced violence for achieving its cause. It is responsible for widespread havoc, for thousands of human deaths, for billions of dollars of property destruction and for the precarious and dangerous state in which it has left Nigeria.

As Stern (2003: xiii) advised in the words of Kathleen Norris,

> "Any creative encounter with evil requires that we do not distance ourselves from it by simply demonizing those who commit evil acts. In order to write about evil, a writer has to try to comprehend it, from the inside out; to understand the perpetrators and not necessarily sympathize with them. Somehow, we believe that an attempt to inform ourselves about what leads to evil is an attempt to explain it away."

This work therefore focuses on the Nigerian Boko Haram experience so as to study the phenomenon of modern terrorism in its complexities and its impact on the conversation on religions' interplay with violence and even their interface. Based on the perpetrators' description of their action in such religiously laden words and symbols as martyrdom and sacrifice, this article seeks to untangle meanings that are in tension with one another and thus distinguishes variation in the sacrificial rites, rituals and martyrdom as total annihilation. The goal of our inquiry is to determine whether or not religion is responsible for the claims of the terrorists.

The design of our project begins with naming the act, especially from the perspective of perpetrators. It goes on to understanding the concepts and practices of martyrdom and sacrifice in the three Abrahamic faiths and exploring the politics of martyrdom and sacrifice. It concludes by suggesting that instead of the situation presented by the Boko Haram becoming an impasse, it rather offers an opportunity for an alternative paradigm of inter-religious dialogue which would be more effective in the Nigerian situation.

2. Boko Haram in Context: Naming the Act

We may name the violent act in question from at least two points of view. We may take the point of view of the sponsors and other unseen factors behind the act. We may also take the point of view of the perpetrators, who in most cases die executing the act. Our concern here is with the latter rather than the former. How, from the point of view of the perpetrators, can we name these acts? This is very intriguing for, as Raphael Israeli observes, in the discussion of violence, use of terminology is "not a matter of mere semantics, but of great importance in order to discern the notions, mindsets and their significance" (Israeli, 1997:96). This leaves the violence discourse in a battle of language where suicide, homicide, sacrifice, martyrdom are not neutral designations but words burdened with meanings and subject to endless evaluations (Strenski, 2003).

How should one describe the current maiming and destruction in human lives and properties by Boko Haram and the peculiar manner of its execution? A similar question was raised in the case of September 11, 2001 (9/11) and other subsequent and similar attacks and attackers. "Should we call them, hijackers, and murderers, suicides and fanatics, or martyrs, saints and sacrifice?" (Strenski, 2003:1). Either as a piece of news or a topic of academic discussion, people refer to the act and the actors as suicide bombings and bombers. But in Mark Juergensmeyer's interview with Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, the political leader of Hamas, it is evident the perpetrators do not see their acts as suicide bombings. Dr. Rantisi prefers to think of his young colleagues in Hamas who chose to blow themselves up in acts of violence against Israel as *self-chosen martyrs,* soldiers in a great war who diligently and reverently gave up their lives for the sake of their community and religion (Juergensmeyer,2003: 174). The leadership of Boko Haram in one of their public video statements referred to and celebrated the violent act and death of their member Habibu Bama, as martyrdom and sacrifice. "We are happy to express our happiness and joy because of the gallantry Almighty Allah granted our brother Habibu Bama, we are hoping Allah accepts this act of martyrdom and his sacrifice to Jihad, dying in the field of war is a pride and most cherished last pride of a real Muslim" (Nairaland.com). It becomes deeply painful, as Jessica Stern writes, that "our enemies, whom we see as evil, view themselves as saints and martyrs" (Stern, xxviii).

The perpetrators see their deeds as *sacred explosions,* and it could not have been otherwise because suicide is forbidden in Islam (Hassan, 2001:38). According to Ivan Strenski, naming a death a suicide or homicide, is "rhetorically a means of loading it with a certain dubious value while calling it a sacrifice or act of martyrdom is to raise it to transcendent heights – thereby, of course, to religious level of discourse and behavior. In calling death a sacrifice, it is typically ennobled, raised to a level above profane calculation of individual cost-benefit analysis – to the level of a so-called 'higher' good, whether that be of a nation or some transnational or transcendent reference, like a religion" (Strenski, 2003:4-5).

Some people think that the nature and dynamics of these terrorists' actions lack psychological, pathological and motivational profile of suicides as to qualify them as one. Nasra Hassan reveals that the bombers belonged to the age range between eighteen and thirty-eight. None of those interviewed were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded, or depressed. Many were middleclass and, unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs. Two were sons of millionaires; they seem to be entirely normal members of their families (Nasra Hassan, 38). Juergensmeyer holds the same opinion in the report of his interview with Mike Bray of the American Abortion Clinic Bombing. There is nothing sinister or intensely fanatical about Bray. He was a cheerful, charming, handsome man; hardly imagined as ignorant or narrow-minded fundamentalist; he remains today an affable and interesting man. (Juergensmeyer, 20-23).

Israeli sees them as *Human Bombing, Islamikaze* and compares them to the Japanese, *Kamikaze* (Israeli, 1997:96). Kamikaze is a "word of Japanese origin which usually refers to suicide attacks carried out by Imperial Japan's military aviators against Allied shipping towards the end of the Pacific campaign of World War II, by crushing their planes into warships" (Rikihei, 1958). The Japanese however don't see it that way. "In Japanese the exact term used for units carrying out these suicide attacks during World War II is *tokubetsuKogeki tai,* which literally means *special attack unit.* More specifically, suicide air squads that came from the Imperial Japanese Navy were officially called *shinputokubetsukogeki tai* meaning, *Divine wind special attack units."* These were flown by educated, mentally balanced and comfortable pilots who saw this as a great honor in service to their country and their families (Axell, 2002:40). From the Kamikaze theory, Israeli concludes,

"human bombers are dedicated to 'wreaking havoc on their enemies,' and not primarily to their own destruction. They are active ethnic militant jihadists, not just self-destructive retreat from a troubled world" (Israeli, 1997:99, 100).

Suicides, according to Maurice Halbwachs, are "all those cases of death resulting from action taken by the victim themselves, and with the intention or the prospect of killing oneself" (Halbwachs, 1930: 24). This is not sacrifice and therefore does not explain the case of human bombers. If suicide is personal and selfish, sacrifice and human bombing are relational with others, whether human or divine beings (Strenski, 2003:7, 8). Society plays a significant role in determining and differentiating sacrifice from suicide. For instance, Bin Laden, as Strenski writes, made it clear that the 9/11 hijackers belong intimately to the community and are duly celebrated; "The 19 brothers who sacrificed their lives in the sake of Allah were rewarded by this victory that we rejoice today" (Strenski, 2003:8). We hear the same each time Boko Haram claims responsibility of any of the bombings. These were not simply flaunting of their power but a justification and celebration of the perpetrators of these acts. From their standpoint therefore these cannot just be called suicide attacks; though they remain offensive, they also have high moral or religious purpose imputed to them (Strenski, 2003:8).

A startling discovery available from Nasra Hassan's interview with a Hamas leader and from other similar cases is the ardent desire in young men to enlist as bombers. They go on their knees practically begging, and are ready to do anything just to get an opportunity to be sent as attackers. The aspirants see this as an opportunity to embark on a noble journey (Hassan, 36, 37). This attitude mirrors the desire for martyrdom in early Christianity. As a prisoner on the way to Rome, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Roman community, "Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God! As long as an altar is available, do not spare me from becoming sacrificed like God." (Maier, 2005:141).

A common characteristic among the various Islamic - and perhaps Christian - militant groups is that until the act is completely executed, the perpetrator anticipates it as a form of religious worship. He recites his prayers, and reads the Qur'an. By doing this, he reminds himself that his is a cause for Allah against the infidels, and also that the

reward of paradise awaits him (Mneimneh & Makiya, 2002). As for their victims, they (the victims) are to be seen as an offering to Allah. The instruction given to the hijackers of United Airline flight 93 detailed what they should do with any resistance they may encounter. "If God grants one of you a slaughter, you should perform it as an offering on behalf of your father and mother, for they are owed by you" (Mneimneh & Makiya, 2002).

Returning again to the role of the society in these acts, the operation does not end with the explosion. The families and communities celebrate these men (or women) as heroes and models. Young ones grow praying and wishing to be like them, as the videos of these 'heroes' are made available and their posters adorn their street corners. Their families are held in high esteem because of the sacrifice of their children (Juergensmeyer, 169). Indeed, it is this family and the community reaction that completes and supports the self-sacrifice of these people. Confirming this, *Brigadier General 'Ali Fazli' writes: "Promoting the culture of sacrifice and martyrdom makes us and our Islamic society secure against the conspiracies of enemies" (Islam Today, 2011).*The greatest and only regret the perpetrators seem to have is the inability of others to comprehend their action. In a video posted on YouTube on January 11, 2012, the Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau regrets the lack of understanding about his group among many Nigerians. He denounces Nigerian President's and Christian leaders' description of his group as a disease or cancer to the country. His consolation is that Allah understands as he concludes "if people don't know us, God knows us." In another posting they vowed to fight all who spread wrong information about them or distort their message (Brock, 2011). These claims of the perpetrators necessitate revisiting the common understanding of these words.

3. Understanding Martyr and Martyrdom

As mentioned in the introduction, the words martyr and martyrdom have embraced new meanings. These include "passive" victims who cannot escape violence, and others who consciously choose martyrdom to oppose political, social, military or religious oppression. They go on to include guerillas, assassins, and human bombers who sacrifice their lives in the struggle against their proclaimed enemies (Maier, 139).

This fluidity in the meaning of martyrdom is evident in its earliest understandings both in Christianity and in other traditions. According to Judaism, martyrdom referred to "a work of individual piety and resistance to evil, perfecting the victim and serving as edification for the chosen people" (Murphy and Dicharry, 2003:227). Among the Stoics, it meant "the work of a philosopher who not only teaches by words, but confirms the truth of his message by deeds, particularly by showing indifference to the movements of passion, worldly experience, and even death" (Maier, 139).

Though Christianity like other religions of the children of Abraham recognizes blood witness for the faith, some scholars submit that Christianity seems most uncertain, often inconsistent from time to time and place to place about the application of the title of "martyr." The early church held contrasting opinions about martyr and martyrdom. It was with the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp that the words took the full significance of witnessing by both life and death to Christ. The church will later add witnessing to the truth and relevance of the Christian faith which will largely imply "church's teachings." Cowdrey (1985:46) shows that in some cases in which Christians have died in some connection with the interest of Christianity, such like in the crusades, people would expect ecclesiastical approval and none came. Though there were Christians who preferred to go to death than deny the faith when they were captured by the pagans, no one was ever canonized as martyr because s/he died even in the warfront of the Crusade battle (Nogent, 1997). Instead, "the church forbade Christians seeking martyrdom, and counseled a piety of prudence in its place" (Strenski, 11).

Emphasis was always on *witness* (the Greek equivalent of the word martyr) rather than on giving oneself to death. Nevertheless, at the early time, some writings such as the letters of the church of Lyons and Vienne, Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome and Cyprian of Carthage, explicitly used the term *martyr* to describe the shedding of blood in persecution as a witness to Christ. The term *confessor* was used for those witnesses who did not shed their blood on the other hand (Gilby, 2003:228). It is significant to note that some early Christians like Julian the Apostate, did not subscribe to the cult of martyrdom. They compared the veneration of martyrs with the cult of pagan gods and heroes. Augustine will repudiate this comparison and clarify the specifically Christian concept in relation to a defense of the Christian

faith and the value of Christian virtues, such as charity (Sermon. 281.2, 3; 282.2). Even so, he describes Perpetua as "chaste" in Sermon. 280.1.103.

While Christians seem to adhere to a more passive application of the title martyr, the "[Muslims] see all deaths suffered in active struggle on behalf of Islam as martyrdom" (Strenski, 10). Though Christians who died in the crusade were not officially canonized, all Muslims who suffered persecution or death were described and reverenced as martyrs. The consensus is that it is a communal regulated event, hence something Allah gives as a favor to "warriors" for their selflessness and devotion to the community's defense" (Mneimneh). From the Hadiths, the Muslim concludes, "martyrdom [death] suffered in holy war is a sacrificial death. It is being killed for Allah. It is the highest price a Muslim soldier can pay, and God will reward it" (Mneimneh). There is a connection between martyrdom and paradise as contained in this Hadith: "Through his service and his sacrificial death, the martyr is freed from his guilt, exempt from the purifying fire, and will be spared on the last day of judgment. He should merit the highest level of paradise and stand next to Allah's throne… His sacrifice has redemptive power" (Maier, 142). Modern jihadists have reverted to this tradition and have sharpened and radicalized it as we will see later. However, Muslim tradition does not consider martyrdom a mark of an individual warrior achieved as a private act of worship.

Directly seeking death is close to suicide abhorred by the three Abrahamic religions. Distinguishing martyrdom as radically free from subjective individualism, they do not allow martyrs to take laws into his/her hands, to simply seek the sacrifice of life, or surely to take others along to death (Maier, 142).

4. Understanding Sacrifice

Martyrdom links to sacrifice, a fundamental form of religiosity. Sacrifice, like prayer, is so essential that its suppression would destroy religion. Though not limited to this one interpretation, the term as we employ it here designates all cultic killing of human beings, including self-inflicted death, even the strictest sense of offering or sacrificing as full surrender of one's own life in view of a debt to be paid, or atonement to be made (De Places, 506). Even though we will not do an extensive study of the concept, it is pertinent to note that human

sacrifice was introduced in human history after killing as such became a cultic act in the early stage of the food-producing cultures. Primitive myth held that a human offering ensures a good planting season (De Places, 506). Rene Girard in his *mimetic theory of desire* undertakes a socio-anthropological study of sacrifice in its primitive from: the Hominidsin in the various places of the world at various times found themselves in an acquisitive imitation of one another that they came to the fatal point of trying to gain an object of desire by killing one another. They suddenly realized that killing or sacrificing a member of their community could end their rivalry. The victim becomes a *transcendental signifier,* the structural basis of meaning for the community (Girard, 1987:99-103).

Sacrifice is a rite of destruction found in virtually every religious tradition. Derived from its Latin, *sacrificium,* "what is made holy," the term suggests that the very process of destroying is spiritual. According to Juergensmeyer, "sacrifice is so riveting not just that it involves killing, but also that it is, in an ironic way, ennobling. The destruction is performed within a religious context that transforms the killing into something positive" (Juergensmeyer, 170).

Rites of sacrifice in Christianity date back to the time of Abraham. In its oldest generic term in the Old Testament, sacrifice, understood as *minah* - gift or tribute - includes both bloody and unbloody offerings (Homlish, 510). Hence, the earliest form of violence associated with the worship of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible is illustrated within the cult of sacrifice, *Ban,* or the Hebrew, *herem,* - the practice whereby the defeated enemy was destroyed as a sign of devotion (Collins, 2004:5). The traditions of the ancient Near East, especially from one of Israel's neighbors, Moab, show that destroying the enemy in what is called slaughter has a sacrificial character. Collins maintains that the bible in passages like 1Sam 15:3, shows an approval of this understanding and further suggests that the act was done at the deity's command: "Thus says the Lord of Hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

Ban, destruction as sacrifice is carried out in obedience to the command of God as in the case of the Amalekites shown above or as

vow made to God, as in the case of Jephthah offering his daughter (Judges 11:31**).** Ban is also practiced to win the favor of the deity (Homlish, 512). In this case one wins or loses the battle depending on the fulfillment or violation of the ban as we have in Achan and the conquest of Ai in Joshua 7-8. Sometimes this is performed as ethnic cleansing to protect the monotheism of Israel on one hand, and Israeli territory on the other hand (cf. Deut 7: 1-16) (Collins, 10).

Nevertheless some scholars argue that human sacrifice mentioned in the scripture, as in Ps 105/106:37-38, does not suggest that this practice was ever a part of orthodox Yahwism. On the contrary, it was vigorously condemned; cf. 2Kgs 16:3; 21:6; Jer 7:31; 32:35. These scholars therefore interpret Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac and Jephthah's actual sacrifice of his daughter as polemic stories aimed at stamping out the custom of human sacrifice. There is no connection with these two texts by which the issue of human sacrifice was discussed before or after, much less repudiated. These sacrifices were indeed either attempted (in the case of Abraham and Isaac) or actually accomplished (in the case of Jephthat and his daughter).

For many scholars, like Robert Daly, the New Testament redefines sacrifice as ethical, but the "inchoative" view of Christ's death as sacrificial begins to emerge in the ensuing centuries and becomes more common. In redefining sacrifice, the New Testament places emphasis more on reconciliation, obedience and acts of justice than on sacrifice (cf Mt 5: 23-24). This shift in theology of sacrifice leans significantly on the Old Testament imperatives in 1Sam 15:22 where Samuel said to Saul, it is obedience not sacrifice that the Lord needs. Also in Isaiah, the Lord suggests that the sacrifice that is pleasing to him is not fat rams and bulls but that of justice, (Isaiah 58). However, Williams (1997:222) relied on Bruce Chilton to suggest that Christian renunciation of sacrifice has more to do with the actual destruction of the Temple than with the doctrine or a normative vision. "It was replaced in principle because it was removed in practice."

This New Testament idea formed the Christian teaching on sacrifice since the patristic period, maintaining that sacrifice subsists not only in sacrifice of blood but the entire life of the faithful. Citing Augustine, Cooke (2003:516) explains that sacrifice entails, "every work that unites us in Holy Communion with God, every work that is directed to that final goal in which alone we find true beatitude." For "God," he

continues, "wants external sacrifice only as the sign of the inner disposition, since 'mercy is the true sacrifice."All divine precepts of sacrifice, Augustine says, refer to love of God and neighbor. Coming from this understanding, he concludes, "Every work of mercy towards others or ourselves, if it be directed to God, is a sacrifice. Every person consecrated to God" (Cooke, 2003:516). Building on this Augustinian theology, Aquinas makes a very remarkable differentiation which I consider very interesting in our discussion. He differentiates between the sacrifice of our external goods, which he refers to as "giving alms" and the sacrifice of our bodies when we expose them to suffering and death for God's sake (Van Nieuwenhove, 2005:293).We conclude with William (1997) that "Christianity can never completely detach itself from the language and practice of 'sacrifice' because to do so would be to detach itself from its own matrix, from the faith and the scriptures of Israel." "The problematic of sacrifice has to be retained, but sacrifice itself must be redefined on the basis of faith in a God of love who does not make a secret pact with his Son which calls for his murder in order to satisfy God's just wrath" (Williams, 1997:221).

Adha is one of the common words for sacrifice in Islam. It refers also to the great feast celebrating the end of Ramadan, *eid al adha,* and defines the roots of all sacrifices in Islam. Islamic tradition of ritual of sacrifice includes both Muslim readiness to give of themselves for Allah and *zakta,* the charitable giving counted as one of the pillars of Islam (Strenski, 2003:14). Islamic theology of sacrifice, like that of Christians, leans on the "complex nature of Abraham's obedience, his willingness to give to the utmost what Allah requires, and Allah's relaxation of the demand for Isaac's life" (Strenski, 2003:18). Abraham thus becomes a model for pious Muslims to emulate. Hence, in pilgrimage, Muslims offer sacrifice commemorating the test of faith imposed by God. The lamb they sacrifice is symbolic, representing Abraham's replacement of Ishmael with lamb, for Muslims believe it was Ishmael and not Isaac whom Abraham attempted to offer (Mneimneh).

In general, Islamic sacrifice could mean *giving of* which is considered as a moderate gift, the everyday, prudent sacrifice—a giving of a victim or a portion of one's treasure. It could also mean the total *giving up* – an extreme demand of offering oneself for the cause of Allah. To determine which kind of sacrifice is demanded of a devotee, it must be discerned whether the survival of the *umma,* the community is threatened. This consideration sometimes distinguishes between the

extremists and the moderate Muslims (Strenski, 2003:14). The extremists interpret this text of Qur'an, "imagine where we would be today without the heroic efforts, sacrifices, and patience of Muhammad and his devoted companions…;" to mean self-immolation. But given the Qur'anic value of human life, some humanists interpreters maintain that sacrifice as giving of one's treasure is highly valued and enjoined, while self or an inalienable subject (human person) is a total negation and thus highly questionable (Strenski, 2003:15-19).

Finally, Hubert and Mauss (1964), observe that "Muslims see sacrifice as a very peculiar kind of gift. But, sacrifice is also a peculiar kind of gift-giving in that the (victim) is destroyed in the process of giving it. Finally, in the course of this act of destruction and giving, the gift/victim is made holy or sacred – a *sacrificium*" We can however say, no matter the discrepancies in understanding, one is at liberty to conclude that sacrifice remains very central to the Islamic faith because it links the human to an incomprehensible divine. And in its language, Islamic sacrifice – *dhabaha* – like in other religions entails slaughtering (Hubert and Mauss).

The act of sacrifice has evolved considerably in its long history. It has expressed a number of attitudes and forms of behavior essential to every form of communal life. Within the various religio-social contexts, the practice of sacrifice involves an interaction between prohibition and ritual which mounts up to what may be described as the ethics of sacrifice. It is within this socially regulated attitude that any sacrificial act is judged and therefore either accepted or rejected (Girard, 235-6). Nevertheless, the manner and ways that sacrifice has been practiced in various traditions provoke some misinterpretations. Hence, as we will see in the next section, sacrifice is manipulated and politicized today by sponsors and perpetrators of violence.

5. Politics of Martyrdom and Sacrifice

Having historically considered martyrdom and sacrifice in various religious and secular contexts, it becomes obvious that extremists and perpetrators of religious violence have manipulated and imposed new meaning on these concepts. By their reference to martyrdom, these extremists have departed from the Abrahamic tradition. They would see martyrdom as a human response to Allah's call to sacrifice oneself

for Islam and to inflict loss on Allah's enemies. In the light of original, traditional understandings, it would be absurd to refer to human bombers as martyrs. These extremists seem to say that martyrdom now becomes a pure act of worship pleasing to Allah, regardless of Allah's specific command. Indeed, some scholars see this as a move into a new kind of nihilism (Mneimneh and Makiya). The many times that Islamic leaders of thought and worship have denounced as non-Islamic the horrors of Boko Haram exposes this sect as a deviation from, and a negation of, true Islamic tenets.

Martyrdom as an achievement of the individual warrior performed as his own private act of worship totally removes the community element central to traditional sacrifice and martyrdom of Islam and indeed of other religions as well. Mneimneh and Makiya observe that there was no stress on community or on any wrongs to be addressed by martyrdom in the manual for raid used by the 9/11 attackers. The community traditionally would assess the benefit at stake in any act of martyrdom, but that is not the case here (Mneimneh and Makiya)

Further, some researcher reports of the personal lives of 9/11 attackers raise serious concerns. One report notes that Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian hijacker piloting the first plane to hit the World Trade Center (WTC), was a near-alcoholic and actually had been drinking vodka before boarding the plane (Armstrong, 2000:vii). Since Islam forbids alcohol, it is bizarre that a devotee and about-to-be martyr would meet his God with alcohol on his breath. That would be an aspect of *jahiliyyah,* for which the ignorant and infidel are known. By their very attitude, the hijackers have seriously disobeyed basic laws of the religion they have vowed to defend. They have trampled upon the principles that traditionally motivate fundamentalists (Armstrong, 2000:vii). Thus their lifestyle challenges the whole concept of martyrdom, seen in most religious traditions not only as being killed for the faith but also by service (Maier, 142).

To some extent it must be admitted that the language and practice of sacrifice in various religions do provide an opening for extremist views. But effectively to confront their ideology - the extreme use of religious rituals to perpetrate violence - it is not enough merely to return to and explore the original core of religious traditions as we have attempted. Our situation calls for bold, imaginative thinking about that original core in order to offer social and political ideas that

religious people would find workable and persuasive (Mneimneh and Makiya). There is urgent demand for a new way of responding to the religious motivated violence of our time.

6. Toward a New Agenda of Overcoming Religious Motivated Violence

From the outset, we have to state the solution to the vexing issue is not "no religion" as some suggest. Such people say, betrayed by its long history of being coupled with violence that has left humanity with memories of war and rage around religious differences; the gods of religion have mainly terror on their minds. "In the name of God they came," writes Bill Moyers. "They came bent on murder and martyrdom. It was as if they rode to earth on the fierce breath of Allah himself, for the sacred scriptures that had nurtured these murderous young men are steeped in images of a violent and vengeful God who wills life for the faithful and horrific torment for unbelievers" (Moyer, 2006: 444).

Today, Juergensmeyer contends that violence has accompanied religion because of "the nature of religious imagination, which always has had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war" (Juergensmeyer, 148-152; Volf, 2002:32). Yet religion has inherent values in it for averting wars and violence and does not really need such thinking or values to be introduced from outside. At least as Mirolavic Volf concludes, "when it comes to Christianity, the cure against religiously induced or legitimized violence is not less religion, but, in a carefully qualified sense, more religion" (Volf). Arguing in this line R. Scott Appleby in his book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, thinking against widely held opinion in some academic and political circles, contends that religious people can play a positive role in the world of human conflicts. They contribute to peace not when they "moderate their religion or marginalize their deeply held, vividly symbolized and often highly particular beliefs" but rather "when they remain religious actors" (Appleby). In agreement, Karl Barth argues that, in the face of the undeniable misuse of religion to foster violence, we need an unflinching critique of religion and an authentic and imaginative retrieval of faith. We have maintained this from the beginning of our discussion because of our strong belief that all religions are intrinsically signs leading to God. Sidetracked by human frailty, religions have often and repeatedly caused violence.

Beginning a constructive critique of religious violence, we must first acknowledge and condemn murderous actions as evil, for indeed that is what they are. Second, we must also admit that though all religions aspire to peace, religion is truly a salient factor in present acts of terrorism and violence. The fact that most major religions have at one time or another sanctioned the use of violence to protect and promote their own sectarian interests allows religious terrorists today to claim moral justification for their actions. Therefore, it is not enough for religious leaders simply to disown the murderous actions of co-religionists or to denounce terrorists as misguided miscreants, as extremists groups who hijack religion for political purposes (McTernan, ix-xx). Third, we must accept that no one religion has a monopoly on holy violence, for history and sacred texts of various religions reflect some violent scenes. The Bible as well as the Qur'an is replete with descriptions of a violent God that indeed contradict and place in tension the collective weight of other passages that exhort ethical behavior or testify to a loving God (Moyer, 447). It is some of these passages that provide terrorists with moral justifications for their horrific acts. Khaled Abou El-Fadi, a Professor of Islamic Law, argues that all sacred scriptures display some ambivalence. Speaking specifically of the Qur'an, he says, "The meaning of the text is often as moral as its reader. If the reader is intolerant, hateful, or oppressive, so will be the interpretation of the text" (Omar, 2005: 78).

In the light of this new agenda, the language of the sacred scriptures of various religions poses a great challenge. Scripture scholars and theologians of both Christianity and Islam often claim that the problem with reading their scripture is not with the scripture itself but with interpretation. It is true that scriptures are often so coded in mythical languages that their interpretations, as the scholars claim, are not immediately obvious. Since they are used by the everyday adherents, who are neither scripture scholars nor trained theologians and may not have the opportunity of pertinent further study, how can they be guided against misinterpretations? On this point we agree with Pope Benedict XVI in his objection to the 2005 presentation of Harry Porter on the fear of language as a powerful and deceptive phenomenon. One should not use expressions that might be misconstrued and so misguide the common person. If the sacred scriptures were to be written today, would they still make use of violent language? Today people are very careful of what to say, where

to say it and how to say it. Even trained religious leaders employ trusted secretaries to edit their public speeches to eliminate any language that might sound inciting or provoking.

Discussions among religious groups must deal with the inherent exclusivism of various religions. Not only do these religions exhibit superiority traits that rank outsiders below their adherents, but they also worship a God to whom outsiders have limited access. Fellowship between humanity and the deity is often severely restricted by criteria of acceptability favoring adherents over others coming from beyond recognized, official boundaries. This situation will replay the Cain and Abel drama time and again (Chase and Allan, 2003:12, 13). A new mindset is needed to hold in check this prevailing attitude among various religious groups, confirming some as saints and demonizing others, setting up two distinct classes with the mantra "we are God's people and they are God's enemy" (Stern, xxvii-xxviii).

6.1 Religion not the only Actor

We also must realize that religion is not the only actor in the present day violence. As history has revealed, there has always been interplay of elements of nationalism, politics and economics in fueling violence. Responding to Boko Haram many claim that its links to political and other factors are prevalent. According to Wole Soyinka, "Those who unleashed Boko Haram on the nation are politicians. These are the ones behind Boko Haram" (Soyinka, 2012). In his article, "Boko Haram: Beyond Religious Fanaticism," Abeeb Olufemi Salaam contests dubbing the current insurgence as merely religious fanaticism. He sees this rather as a constellation of dynamics of risk factors among which are localized economic realities and aggravated national politics. Against the popular and contentious 'war against terrorism' approach to the situation, he proposes a protective mechanism that includes socio-political and economic reform (Salaam, 2012:147). Challenges of modern terrorism requires of all religions an interfaith global action campaign to address obvious issues that place the world on class levels of rich and poor; civilized and uncivilized; and incubate and hatch exploitation, marginalization on the national and international plane. This is all the more pertinent since such imbalances have mainly been transported on the vehicle of religion, especially in the Nigerian experience.

6.2 Overhauling of Interfaith

Focusing on the Nigerian context, what we recommend is working of interfaith dialogue to reflect all these issues. This demands setting a whole new agenda. Therefore, interfaith dialogue today should challenge attitudes of superiority rampant in spiritualities and theologies of various religions. It should undertake a process described by Omar as "from extrinsic to intrinsic motivations for dialogue" (Omar, 78-82). This would challenge assumptions of intentionality - why and for what purpose are we motivated for the encounter with the "other?" Interfaith dialogue should not be undertaken just to settle religious violence. Its aims should also include solidarity for dealing with difficult and challenging questions of evangelism, mission, myths, rituals, rites, language and social-economic issues as well. These difficult questions are primary. Unless they are faced clearly and with courage, we run the risk of having an outwardly agreeable dialogue that still does not dispose of mistrust and suspicion. Superficiality does not lead to peace building. From the viewpoint of our discussion, dealing honestly with interfaith dialogue demands knowing when terrorists and politicians exploit religious language and symbols for violence against others.

6.3 Language of Sacrifice

Some further observations can be made concerning the role of the language of sacrifice and martyrdom in linking religion to violence. The focus on struggles between good and evil and impulses to expand a religion to new populations not surprisingly render religious sacrifice a factor in wars and oppressions (Chase and Allan, 11). Tendencies to demonize and destroy others - even neighbors - are deeply imbedded in the mythical and ritual language of martyrdom and sacrifice as practiced in various religious traditions. Karl Barth rightly argues that "religion is not the solemn music that accompanies all the noblest human experiences…" We can see that "sin celebrates its triumph in religion…, Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion" (Volf). So no religion can point a guiltless finger at the speck in the eye of another, even of guilty perpetrators of religious motivated violence.

Ironically, the language of martyrdom and sacrifice prevails even in the war against terrorism. Religious adherents and all citizens are called upon to stand up against terrorism and to be prepared to sacrifice and die for their beliefs, their life's values and for their loved

ones. This call bears various meanings of sacrifice and martyrdom found in religious traditions as well as in the distorted notions among the extremists. Dr. Peter J. Riga observes that in this terrorist plague "What is revealed to us is a strong sense of solidarity that we are in this together for better for worse" (Riga, 2005:361). We so often forget solidarity in ordinary times as we go about our own cares and concerns. But during common threats of danger such as terrorism and other forms of violence, solidarity becomes acute and consoling as well. Since we deeply fear standing alone against danger and since our various religious traditions so instruct us, we are tightly bonded together in mutual interdependence.

7. Conclusion

Michael Ignatieff wisely observes that "It is the responses to terrorism, rather than terrorism itself, that does democracy the more harm." For, with John Muller concurring, when democracies, or religions as in our case, overreact to threats of terror, they inflict upon themselves the very damage that terrorist groups seek to inflict but in the last analysis are incapable of insecurity, fear, hysteria and the erosion of citizen and adherents confidence in democratic and religious structures and freedoms that a war on terror is supposed to protect. Terrorists will not win their war if we refuse to allow our actions and reactions to play into their hands. It is only a shaken faith in ourselves that can do us in. The 9/11 attack did not merely create a symbol of threatened humanity. It did not simply display America's proud self-sufficiency and confidence crumbling with the towers. From the fire and smoke of that horror came a vision of humanity, heroism, compassion and sacrifice flowing from the actions of people who would risk anything to save others in that worst of times (Obiezu, 2006).

We have observed irruption of this new form of solidarity, compassion, heroism, sacrifice and faith in humanity among Nigerian Christians and Muslims as they rally to protect each other from the onslaught of Boko Haram. The "Concerned Citizens of Kano State," an initiative of Muslim group led by Bashir Is'haq Bashir stations Muslims in Christian churches to protect the Christians while in worship. In similar manner, during the national civil protest against removal of fuel subsidy, a reporter observed a group of Christians form themselves into a protective human chain around a group of praying Muslims in Abuja. These acts not only douse the flame of

confusion Boko Haram has ignited, they are demonstrative of our capacity for love of and solidarity with each other (Cortina, 2012). These prophets demonstrate that solidarity is our only hope and trusted grenade in the battle on terrorism, and other threats to human flourishing. But it must be a solidarity recognizing the world as it is and without illusions, urging us to take responsibility for our citizens, our civilization and history, calling us to march towards the universe of humankind. It is with this solidarity, not in languages, strategies and policies that earn us more enemies, that we can win this battle.

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