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# **Liberal Cults, Suicide Bombers, and other Theological Dilemmas**

**Stewart Motha\***

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A conceit is afflicting the liberal left. The once reflexive adjustments of civilizational logics, suspicions about theories of universal progress, and the disposition to challenge the Washington consensus on social, economic, and political affairs is now undergoing a steady reversal. A universalist liberal ideology has been re-asserted. It is not only neo-con hawks or Blairite opportunists that now legitimise wars for democracy. Alarming, it is a generation of political thinkers who opposed the Nixonian logic of war (wars to show that a country can ‘credibly’ fight a war to protect its interests<sup>1</sup>), and those humbled by the anti-colonial struggles of liberation from previous incarnations of European superiority that are renewing spurious civilizational discourses. This ‘muscular liberalism’ has found its voice at the moment of a global political debate about the legality and effectiveness of ‘just wars’ – so called ‘wars for democracy’ or ‘humanitarian war’.

The new political alignment of the liberal left emerged in the context of discussions about the ‘use of force’ irrespective of UN Security Council endorsement or the sovereign state’s territorial integrity, such as in Kosovo – but gained rapid momentum in response to attacks in New York City and Washington on September 11, 2001. Parts of the liberal left have now aligned themselves with neoconservative foreign policies, and have joined what they believe is a new anti-totalitarian global struggle – the ‘war on terror’ or the battle against Islamist fundamentalism. One task of this essay, then, is to identify this new formation of the liberal left.

Much horror and suffering has been unleashed on the world in the name of the liberal society which must endure. However, when suicide bombing and state-terror are compared, the retort is that there is no moral equivalence between the two. Talal Asad in

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\* Senior Lecturer, Kent Law School, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NS, UK. E-Mail: s.motha@kent.ac.uk. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Faculty of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi, in January 2008. I benefitted enormously from questions and comments at that seminar. My special thanks to Deepak Mehta, Pratiksha Baxi, and Upendra Baxi for enriching that discussion. Brenna Bhandar, Peter Fitzpatrick, Ian Wollington, and Anastasia Vakulenko commented on earlier versions. The anonymous referees made extensive and generous suggestions for which I am very grateful. James Martel’s encouraging and incisive comments were invaluable. Any errors are mine.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York, Norton and Co, 2003) p. 4.

his evocative book, *On Suicide Bombing*, has probed the horror that is felt about suicide bombing in contrast to state violence and terror.<sup>2</sup> What *affective* associations are formed in the reaction to suicide bombing? What does horror about suicide bombing tell us about the constitution of inter-subjective relations? In this essay I begin to probe these questions about the relation between death, subjectivity, and politics. I want to excavate below the surface oppositions of good deaths and bad, justifiable killing and barbarism, which have been so central to left liberal arguments. As so much is riding on the difference between ‘our good war’ and ‘their cult of death’, it seems apt to examine and undo the opposition.

The muscular liberal left projects itself as embodying the values of the ‘West’, a geo-political convergence that is regularly opposed to the ‘East’, ‘Muslims’, or the ‘Islamic World’. I undo this opposition, arguing that *thanatopolitics*, a convergence of death, sacrifice, martyrdom and politics, is common to left liberal and Islamist political formations. How does death become *political* for left liberals and Islamist suicide bombers? In the case of the latter, what is most immediately apparent is how little is known about the politics and politicization of suicide bombers. Suicide bombers are represented as a near perfect contrast to the free, autonomous, self-legislating liberal subject – a person overdetermined by her backward culture, oppressive setting, and yet also empty of content, and whose death can have no temporal political purchase. The ‘suicide bomber’ tends to be treated by the liberal left as a trans-historical ‘figure’, usually represented as the ‘Islamofascist’ or the ‘irrational’ Muslim.<sup>3</sup> The causes of suicide bombing are often implicitly placed on Islam itself – a religion that is represented as devoid of ‘scepticism, doubt, or rebellion’ and thus seen as a favourable setting for totalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> The account of the suicide bomber as neo-fascist assassin supplements a lack – that is, that the association of suicide bombing with Islam explains very little. The suicide bomber is thus made completely familiar as totalitarian fascist, or wholly other as “[a] completely new kind of enemy, one for whom death is not death”.<sup>5</sup> So much that is written about the suicide bomber glosses over the unknown with political subjectivities, figures, and paradigms (such as fascism) which are familiar enough to be vociferously opposed. By drawing the suicide bomber into a familiar moral register of ‘evil’, political and historical relations

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<sup>2</sup> Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, some important exceptions. See the following important studies: Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004); Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999); Andrew Strathern (etal) (eds.) *Terror and Violence: Imagination and the Unimaginable* (Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 2006); Diego Gambetta (ed.) *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Amis, *The Second Plane* (London, Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 22.

between victim and perpetrator are erased.<sup>6</sup> In the place of ethnographically informed research the ‘theorist’ or ‘public intellectual’ erases the contingency of the suicide bomber and reduces her death to pure annihilation, or nothingness.

The discussion concludes by undoing the notion of the ‘West’, the very ground that the liberal left assert they stand for. The ‘West’ is no longer a viable representation of a geo-political convergence, if it ever was. Liberal discourse has regarded itself as the projection of the ‘West’ and *its* enlightenment. But this ignores important continuities between Islam, Christianity, and contemporary secular formations. The current ‘clash of monotheisms’, I argue after J-L Nancy, reveals a crisis of sense, authority, and meaning which is inherent to the monotheistic form. An increasingly globalised world is made up of political communities and juridical orders that have been ‘emptied’ of authority and certainty. This crisis of sense conditions the horror felt by the supposedly rational liberal in the face of Islamist terrorism. Horror at terrorism is then the affective bond that sustains a grouping that otherwise suffers the loss of a political project with a definite end.

The general objective of this essay is to challenge the unexamined assumptions about politics and death that circulate in liberal left denunciations of Islamic fascism. The horror and fascination with the figure of the suicide bomber reveals an unacknowledged affective bond that constitutes the muscular liberal left as a political formation. This relies on disavowing the sacrificial and theological underpinnings of political liberalism itself – and ignores the continuities between what is called the ‘West’ and the theologico-political enterprise of monotheism. Monotheism is not the preserve of something called the ‘West’, but rather an enterprise that is common to all three Religions of the Book. The article concludes by describing how the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy on monotheism offer liberal left thinkers insights for rethinking the crisis of value that resulted from the collapse of grand emancipatory enterprises as well as the fragmentation of politics resulting from a focus on political identification through difference.

## **I The Liberal Left**

I opened with a reference to the ‘liberal left’. Of course the ‘liberal left’ signifies a vast and varied range of political thinking and activism – so I must clarify how I am deploying this term. In this essay the terms ‘liberal left’ or ‘muscular liberal’ are used interchangeably. Paul Berman and Nick Cohen, whose writing I will shortly refer to, are exemplars of the new political alignment who self-identify as ‘democrats and progressives’, but whose writings feature bellicose assertions about the superiority of western models of

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<sup>6</sup> For an important exception, see Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism” *American Anthropologist* 104/3 (2002) pp. 766-775.

democracy, and universal human rights.<sup>7</sup> Among this liberal left, democracy and freedom become hemispheric and come to stand for the West.

More generally, now, the ‘liberal left’ can be distinguished from political movements and thinkers who draw inspiration from a Marxist tradition of thought with a socialist horizon. The liberal left I am referring to would view the Marxist tradition as undervaluing democratic freedoms and human rights. Left liberals also tend to dismiss the so called post-Marxist turn in European continental philosophy as ‘postmodern relativism’.<sup>8</sup> Post-Marxists confronted the problem of the ‘collective’ – addressing the problem of masses and classes as the universal category or agent of historical transformation. This was a necessary correction to all the disasters visited on the masses in the name of a universal working class. The liberal state exploited these divisions on the left. It is true that a left fragmented through identity politics or the politics of difference were reduced to group based claims on the state. However, liberal multiculturalism was critiqued by anti-racist and feminist thinkers as early as the 1970s for ignoring the structural problems of class or as yet another nation-building device. The new formation of the muscular liberal left have only just discovered the defects of multiculturalism. The dismissal of liberal multiculturalism is now code for ‘too much tolerance’ of ‘all that difference’. The liberal left, or muscular liberal, as I use these terms, *should not* be conflated with the way ‘liberal’ is generally used in North America to denote ‘progressive’, ‘pro-choice’, open to a multiplicity of forms of sexual expression, generally ‘tolerant’, or ‘left wing’ (meaning socialist).

It might be objected that it is not the liberal left, but ‘right wing crazies’ driven by Christian evangelical zeal combined with neo-liberal economic strategies that have usurped a post-9/11 crime and security agenda to mount a global hegemonic enterprise in the name of a ‘war on terror’. It might also be said that this is nothing new – global expansionist enterprises such as 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism mobilised religion, science, and theories of economic development to secure resources and justify extreme

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<sup>7</sup> By the ‘liberal left’ I have in mind a wide group of thinkers – but space prevents me from drawing on multiple examples. An attempt at unifying the muscular liberals or new formation of the liberal left can be found in the enterprise of the *Euston Manifesto* 2006 – see: <http://www.eustonmanifesto.org/> - last accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2007. Article 11 of the Manifesto gives a flavour of the confluence of forces and ideas that make up what I am calling the liberal left:

“Drawing the lesson of the disastrous history of left apologetics over the crimes of Stalinism and Maoism, as well as more recent exercises in the same vein (some of the reaction to the crimes of 9/11, the excuse-making for suicide-terrorism, the disgraceful alliances lately set up inside the “anti-war” movement with illiberal theocrats), we reject the notion that there are no opponents on the Left. We reject, similarly, the idea that there can be no opening to ideas and individuals to our right. Leftists who make common cause with, or excuses for, anti-democratic forces should be criticized in clear and forthright terms. Conversely, we pay attention to liberal and conservative voices and ideas if they contribute to strengthening democratic norms and practices and to the battle for human progress”.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Cohen, *What’s Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way* (Fourth Estate, London, 2007), Ch. 4.

violence where necessary. Global domination, it might be argued, has always been a *thanatopolitical* enterprise. So what's different now? What is crucial, now, is that the entire spectrum of liberalism, including the 'rational centre', is engaged in the kind of mindset whereby a destructive and deadly war is justified in the name of protecting or establishing democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. It might then be retorted that this 'rational centre' of liberalism have 'always' been oriented in this way. That is partly true, but it is worth recalling that the liberal left I have in mind is the generation that came of age with opposition to the war in Vietnam, other Indo-Chinese conflagrations, and the undoing of empire. This is a left that observed the Cold War conducted through various 'hot wars' in Africa, Central and Latin America, and South East Asia and thus at least hoped to build a 'new world order' of international law and multilateralism. This is a left that was resolved, by the 1970s, not to repeat the error of blindly following a scientific discourse that promised to produce a utopia – whether this was 'actually existing socialism' or the purity of 'blood and soil'. But now, a deadly politics, a thanatopolitics, is drawn out of a liberal horror and struggle against a monolithically drawn enemy called Islamic fundamentalism. What is new is that Islam has replaced communism/fascism as the new 'peril' against which the full spectrum of liberalism is mobilized.

Islamist terrorism and suicide bombers, a clash between an apparently Islamic 'cult of death' versus modern secular rationality has come to be a central preoccupation of the liberal left. In the process, as Talal Asad has eloquently pointed out, horror about terrorism has come to be revealed as one way in which liberal subjectivity and its relation to political community can be interrogated and understood.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the potential for liberal principles to be deployed in the service of legitimating a doctrine of pre-emption as the 'new internationalism' is significant. The first and second Gulf Wars, according to the liberal left, are then not wars to secure control over the supply of oil, or regional and global hegemony, as others on the left might argue, but anti-fascist, anti-totalitarian wars of liberation fought in the name of 'democracy'. Backing 'progressive wars' for 'freedom and democracy', those who self-identify as a left which is reasserting liberal democratic principles start by asking questions such as: "Are western freedoms only for westerners?".<sup>10</sup> In the process, freedom *becomes* 'western', and its enemy an amorphous legion behind an unidentifiable line between 'west' and the rest (the 'Muslim world'). The 'war for democracy' waged against 'Islamist terrorism' and Muslim fundamentalism is the crucible on which the new alignment of the liberal left is forged.

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<sup>9</sup> Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 6.

For Paul Berman liberalism as it had developed in Europe and North America between the Napoleonic wars and the First World War was a formation that provided humanity with a steady and predictable model of progress. Divine sources of authority had been undermined, and the strength of liberalism was that multiple spheres of activity such as science, politics, religion, and private life were treated as independent of each other.<sup>11</sup> The North Atlantic model of progress, like something akin to the ‘white man’s burden’, was exported around the world through colonialism. As Berman puts it, several empires “postulated progress as its goal”.<sup>12</sup> According to Berman, except for those colonized peoples under the yoke of the ‘insane’ Belgians, “a good many people among the colonized populations approved of those imperial goals, too”.<sup>13</sup> The colonized world apparently held out the “keen and touching hope” that history’s promise was not just for Europeans and North Americans, but that everyone would “progress into freedom, wealth, science and stability”.<sup>14</sup> Everyone else, then, was just waiting to catch up with Europe and North America. The version of liberalism projected by Berman posits a modernity readily at odds, it seems, with anything that might be associated with Islamism. It is precisely this distinction between Islamism and modernity that I will break down in the following section of this essay.

What crushed the hope of this march of liberal progress, according Berman, was the emergence of two forms of cultish behaviour in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – communism and fascism. Adopting Lenin’s phrase about social movements of a “new type”, asserting continuities and parallels between Bolshevism and various national formations of fascism – Italian, Spanish and German – Berman draws an uneasy parallel between the deathly totalitarianisms of the 1930s and 1940s, and the emergence of movements in the Middle East which adopt ideologies of purity, pledge allegiance to a Leader, and adopt the powerful myth of a ‘people of God under attack’ (which, for Berman, seems as fitting when describing the ‘Russian masses’, as Mussolini’s ‘children of the Roman wolf’<sup>15</sup>). All that is needed, then, is an Islamist figure to add to Berman’s line-up of Supermen: Lenin, Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler – and now, Sayyid Qutb of the Islamic Brotherhood.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 42-51.

<sup>16</sup> Sayyid Qutb is the figure central to the narrative in Berman’s *Terror and Liberalism*, see pp. 60-102; and a caricature is predictably derided by Martin Amis, “Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind” in M. Amis *The Second Plane* (London, Jonathan Cape, 2008), pp. 47-93.

It might be objected that I am misusing the term ‘liberal left’ when I include Berman as one of their number. The objection comes from a desire, indeed and anxiety, that the conjunction of liberal and left should not be surrendered to the likes of Berman. But surely that’s a symptom of the narrowing of what left politics could potentially mean. There is a specifically North American tendency to preserve the ‘liberal left’ as a tag for ‘as radical as one can be’. In France one can still ‘respectably’ be a socialist; in India or Italy one can be a Communist and still be ‘mainstream’, and not dismissed as part of the ‘lunatic fringe’. In North America, ‘liberal left’ has signified being progressive, identifying with the poor and marginalised, feminist, pro-choice, LGBT-friendly, and backing state intervention in the management and regulation of the economy. What happens when this political positioning has to confront its ‘enemy’ - precisely the question that Carl Schmitt alerted us to in his *Concept of the Political*? If being of the liberal left involves embracing the values that mobilised the Euro-American revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the anti-colonial struggles for self-determination, then what is the liberal stance on a unilateral superpower such as the U.S overthrowing the Taliban in Afghanistan or a tyrannical dictator in Iraq? This kind of question is a symptom of a wider political crisis in Europe and North America. With no emancipatory project of transformation, the ‘superpower citizen’ is reduced to being a spectator whose ‘determination’ is praised because the Stock Market was steady as the bombing commenced.<sup>17</sup>

Nick Cohen’s *What’s Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way* is one example of the tendency to adopt a muscular approach to liberalism in order to legitimate wars for democracy. Cohen argues that the left have abandoned their liberal democratic principles in the face of a tyrannical dictator because they could not stomach US unilateralism, Bush’s pushing of the boundaries on what constitutes torture, Guantánamo Bay, and the privatization of Iraq’s oil industry.<sup>18</sup> Led astray by postmodernist relativists, liberals, according to Cohen, were unable to take the “only moral option” of “supporting Iraqis as they struggled to establish democracy”.<sup>19</sup> The war had a “degree of legitimacy” that liberals should have readily accepted because it involved the “overthrow of Saddam Hussein”.<sup>20</sup> This argument appears to be saying, ‘work out who your friends and enemies are’, and then stand with your friends. You can criticise what is done in your name, but do not shy away from recognising that a tyrannical dictator has been overthrown. That seems to be a

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<sup>17</sup> See Sheldon S. Wolin, “Brave New World” 5: 4 *Theory and Event* (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, *What’s Left?* Ch. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, *What’s Left?*, p. 314.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *What’s Left?*, p. 315.



quintessentially liberal problem – but one that Schmitt recognised far more rigorously than Cohen, and he was no liberal.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century provides the liberal left with its archetypal adversaries – fascist and communist totalitarianism. Indeed, despite the claim that the difference is self-evident, much ink is spilt on distinguishing the excesses of democracy from totalitarianism. The foundational purchase of totalitarianism for the liberal left cannot be underplayed. Nazi Germany and Soviet communists are the twin ‘evils’ readily wheeled out in order to distinguish the ‘limit-conditions’ of modern western liberal democracies from those erstwhile ideological foes. The recent excesses of liberal democratic orders are now numerous and familiar: draconian anti-terror measures, Guantánamo Bay, Belmarsh Prison, detention camps in Port Headland and Woomera, Australia, atrocities in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq, and the ongoing legacies of colonial dispossession and enrichment. Whatever its deficiencies, the liberal left tell us, the liberal state is not totalitarian. Democracy and the rule of law are now universally embraced modes of governing, they claim – despite the horrors committed in the name of liberal state-building and modern progress, including those authorised by domestic and international law.

Liberalism’s new adversary, we are told, is Islamic or Muslim fundamentalism – a new totalitarian formation. According to the liberal left, no insurgency in contemporary Iraq or Afghanistan could be a resistance to outside rule. When the ‘home of democracy’ comes calling to lend a helping hand, nothing short of a twisted desire for totalitarian absolutism, or *jihadi* cultism, could motivate acts of resistance. Any attempt to explain that tyrannical abuses of power are not particular to a non-western people, religion, or ‘culture’ – by suggesting, for instance, that the USA, UK, France and the former USSR played some significant part in installing, arming, and sustaining dictators such as Saddam Hussein or Augusto Pinochet tends to be dismissed as an apology for tyranny and totalitarianism. To object to high altitude aerial bombing as a means of emancipating Afghan women is to attract the charge that the universal equality of women is being disregarded in the name of ‘cultural relativism’. ‘Wife burning’ and ‘female genital mutilation’ are other favourite calling cards of muscular liberals (a repeat of the bygone obsession with the ‘sex practices of the natives’). These are the ‘signs’ of barbarism – and a ‘people’ and ‘culture’, no less, are indicted on mass for sustaining these practices. The multitude of different forms of ‘veiling’ among Muslim women is another ‘frontline’ for muscular liberals. To explain that religious piety, or a complex range of negotiations among men/women, parents/children, within and between communities, is at stake is to

attract the charge of ‘epistemological relativism’.<sup>21</sup> The panacea for all these different vectors of political and cultural conflict, we are asked to believe, is universal truth, rationality and science, all mediated through democratic institutions and human rights sourced in an indefinite place called the ‘West’.

The relationship between death, politics, and subjectivity appear central to many discussions which compare violence in the name of liberal democratic political formations with those apparently driven by Islam. It thus seems apt to interrogate how liberal subjectivity, human finitude, and politics cohere at the site of ‘collective immortality’<sup>22</sup> (a notion of the public, nation, or political community). In the following section, then, I focus on the death-politics nexus in some influential studies.<sup>23</sup>

## **II Death and Politics**

Berman draws a “universal mission” for the United States from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address – and places emphasis on the defence of freedom as a work of death. According to Berman, Lincoln did not “avert his eyes from death”.<sup>24</sup> For Lincoln, reflecting on the sacrifice of Union soldiers during the Civil War, death is the measure of commitment to liberty, equality, and self-government: “the last full measure of devotion”.<sup>25</sup> The cultish register is at a fevered pitch as Berman, inspired by Lincoln, draws the nexus between liberalism and war: “a liberal society must be, when challenged, a warlike society, or it will not endure”.<sup>26</sup> Much horror and suffering has been unleashed on the world in the name of the liberal society which must endure. ‘Moral equivalence’ is the fuzzy concept deployed if the difference between our ‘good war’ and their senseless cult of death is questioned. It is the thanatopolitical formations common to liberalism and Islamism that this section will explore.

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<sup>21</sup> See my discussion of the various approaches to subjectivity and subjection in the context of legal limits on ‘veiling’, and the unstable distinction between religion and secularism, in S. Motha, “Veiled Women and the *affect* of Religion in Democracy”, in S. Motha (ed.), *Democracy’s Empire: Sovereignty, Law, and Violence* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2007), pp. 139-62.

<sup>22</sup> Asad, *Suicide Bombing*, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> I have elected to focus here on liberalism, terrorism, and the death-politics nexus. An equally important trajectory, but one that is beyond the scope of this essay, is the manner in which secularism is ‘civilising and disciplinary’ rather than directly opposed to religion. This argument is developed by Saba Mahmood who examines the “shared approach to scriptural hermeneutics” in the current religiosity of the US Government and ‘liberal Muslims’ who together are attempting to refashion an Islamic reformation. This analysis goes a long way towards breaking down the opposition between secularism and religion: see Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation” (2006) 18:2 *Public Culture* 323-347 at 329-30.

<sup>24</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 170.

<sup>26</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, p. 170.

One does not need to go to great lengths to demonstrate the close links between the preservation of a liberal political order and a politics of death. At its most extreme, the International Court of Justice found that the use of nuclear weapons is potentially lawful. There is no ‘universal prohibition’ of the use of nuclear weapons in international law if the life of a state is threatened.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, violence in the name of liberal democracy has been widespread and has served to terrorise civilian populations: recall the numerous genocidal wars of colonial conquest, the bombing of German and Japanese civilians during WWII, or the use of nuclear armaments against the Japanese in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The pornography of killing and the ‘erotic involvement with death’ has been well documented by psychiatrists working with Vietnam veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorders – and doubtless many more of these accounts will emerge out of the current occupation of Iraq. Talal Asad discusses these accounts of killing and violence in the context of exploring the horror associated with different modes of violence and death, including suicide bombing.<sup>28</sup> As Asad points out, the violence of the warriors of the secular modern state is not dissected in the same way as the suicide bomber. Asad suggests that many of the discussions about suicide bombing reveal much more about liberal assumptions about religious subjectivity and political violence than what is ostensibly being explained. Below I explore how the ideologies that inform suicide bombing have far more in common with liberal imaginings of human subjectivity than with the pre-liberal, ‘traditional’, cultish throwback now being associated with Islam and denounced by the liberal left.

For the liberal left war has become a legitimate means of bringing about political transformation. Even after the post-invasion catastrophe in Iraq, Berman and others have argued that the invasion and occupation should be recognised as “anti-totalitarian revolutions”, the Baathists having contributed to the “atmosphere” that led to 9/11.<sup>29</sup> The hundreds of thousands of dead civilians are then part of a revolutionary shift to defeat a totalitarian dictator and establish democracy, the rule of law and equality for women. The means/end relationship between violence/death and political goals is explicit. No such instrumentalization of death for political and temporal ends is extended to suicide bombers. Even in accounts that are relatively “sympathetic” to the political conditions (though not the means) that produce death and killing by suicide bombing, suicide is often

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<sup>27</sup> *Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* (8<sup>th</sup> July, 1996) (International Court of Justice), *I.C.J. Reports 1996*, 226.

<sup>28</sup> Asad, *Suicide Bombing*, pp. 71-2. See the discussion there of Theodore Nadelson, *Trained to Kill: Soldiers at War* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Berman, “Will the Opposition Lead?” *New York Times*, April 15, 2004 - available at <http://query.nytimes.com>, last accessed on 28 February, 2008.

treated as the 'end' rather than the means of violence. Let us turn to consider some such accounts.

One approach is to understand death and sacrifice in the register of oppression and freedom. In his much discussed essay, "Necropolitics", Achille Mbembe treats suicide bombing in the context of a discussion about the centrality of death in modern calculations of power.<sup>30</sup> He compares and contrasts a range of necropolitical instances such as the Holocaust of European Jews, slavery, colonialism, and apartheid South Africa. Israel/Palestine, a contemporary formation where death, terror, and freedom are in co-circulation, is framed by Mbembe through two logics – the 'logic of survival' and the 'logic of martyrdom'. In Hegelian terms the 'survivor' is a being whose existence is characterised entirely as a victory over the other, his enemy.<sup>31</sup> The suicide bomber does not conform to this logic as he does not survive the violent attack to gloat over his dead victim.

How does martyrdom fit in a paradigm of oppression and freedom? Mbembe explains martyrdom only by distinguishing it from the sacrificial deaths of a state's uniformed regulars. The inscription of this difference says a great deal about how the political theorist has normalised state violence and terror. Why is the death of the soldier also not an act of martyrdom? According to Mbembe what separates the suicide bomber from the state's various killing machines is the form – indeed, the uniform of the killer. This, along with the 'justness' of war, legally authorises the state to deal out death. The logic of martyrdom, Mbembe says, needs to confront this distinction between form (uniformed regular or terrorist) and matter (the dealing out of death). But for Mbembe, martyrdom collapses form/matter as the suicide bomber's body becomes the uniform of the destructive device – the body is the weapon, and is thus removed from a field of power. This is tantamount to the denial of a political-death that has a *temporal* purchase. Commenting on the body of the suicide bomber, Mbembe says:

The body in itself has neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as labouring under the sign of the future. In other words, in death the future is collapsed into the present.<sup>32</sup>

This is a common reduction of the suicide bomber to one who seeks another-worldly immortality – an account I will return to below. On this account, the materiality of the present is overcome through a mystical association with a transcendental future. The

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<sup>30</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", Trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003), pp. 11–40.

<sup>31</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics", p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics", p. 37.

motivation for pain, suffering, planning and implementing one's own violent death and that of others, is given an *otherworldly* (and largely theological) explanation. 'Desire for eternity' is offered as the explanation for why the body is turned into a malleable thing:

The matter of the body, or again the matter which is the body, is invested with properties that cannot be deduced from its character as a thing, but from a transcendental *nomos* outside it. The besieged body becomes a piece of metal whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being. The body duplicates itself and, in death, literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation.<sup>33</sup>

Death, suicide, the site of self-negation is also, then, a space of a freedom to come. It is an escape from the pain of occupation or other forms of suffering. Death mediates the journey to another world of redemption. The 'body in pain' is quite central to Mbembe's account of terror, death, and freedom. While this account may offer some insights into Palestinian suicide bombers in the context of occupation, it adopts the view that the logic of suicide bombing can be derived from some 'authentic' sense of the possibility of being/existence beyond worldly life. The political, temporal implications of this death are not theorised. If death is politics, it is as a politically unassimilable road to another form of being.

Are there other ways in which the 'body in pain' can be placed in relation with a community or political formation? Why abstract the body out of its setting through the ideas and ideologies deployed to recruit, plan, and execute violent acts? The suicide bomber is then, despite the attention to the conditions of her suffering, removed from being in a political and historical relationship with her victim. And what are the implications of recognising release from pain through self-sacrifice as a political strategy or technique of resistance? We can explore the implications and limits of Mbembe's approach by considering other accounts which study the 'worldly' and 'other worldly' dimensions of martyrdom and sacrifice.

Another influential approach views suicide bombing as motivated by religion. This approach seeks a sociological and theological explanation beyond the individual psychological one. The Christian sense of sacrifice is adopted to understand suicide bombing as the making-holy or becoming 'sacred' of the sacrificiant. Asad argues that this involves taking the Christian "concept of Christ's supreme gift of himself as the model for sacrifice in general".<sup>34</sup> Suicide bombing or martyrdom is then seen as a sacrificial gift made to the 'Palestinian nation', for instance, without interrogating the kind of religious subjectivity that is invoked here. The act becomes at once social, motivated by religion,

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<sup>33</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics", p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Asad, *Suicide Bombing*, p. 44.

and constitutive of a relation between violence, nation, and religion. The nuanced hermeneutic differences between appellations such as ‘sacrifice, gift, martyrdom’ tend to be ignored by commentators that want the narrative to be an assimilation of the act of the suicide bomber to the regular ‘national’ narratives such as the way in which we saw Berman invoke Lincoln above.

As Asad points out, the Arabic word for ‘gift’, *hadiyya*, is never used to describe sacrifice, and *qurbān*, the Arabic word for sacrifice is more commonly used by Arabic speaking Christians to describe communion, than by Arabic speaking Muslims to describe animal sacrifice.<sup>35</sup> The reason the religious motivation of suicide bombing is favoured, as Asad explains, is that it combines a psychological element familiar to a criminal process, and a “cultural sign” that can distinguish ‘them’ from ‘us’. This feeds the civilizational discourse where ‘we’ are committed to life, and ‘they’ are committed to death.<sup>36</sup> The suicide bomber is then, at once, the ‘same’ and thus cognisable (possessing the ‘last full measure of devotion’) and absolutely different (pre-modern, unquestioning, not doubting religion). A key difference here is the purchase of the comparison between the *secular* ends of liberal democracy with the violence, sacrifice, or martyrdom of Islamist terrorists. It is to the undoing of that difference that I will now turn.

To put the issue bluntly, what do *jihādīs* have in common with those who commit violence in the name of liberal democracy? To explore this question recall the opposition posed by left liberals between Islamic fundamentalism as a revival of pre-modern tribalism and stasis in contrast to western wars for democracy which stand for enlightenment values, rationality and freedom. Recall, also, the absence of ‘moral equivalence’ between ‘our good war’ and ‘their cult of death’. According to Roxanne Euben *jihad* has a rich and varied set of meanings in Islam: “Derived from the verb *jahada* which means “to exert,” “to struggle,” or “to strive”, *jihad* literally means “exerting one’s utmost power, efforts, endeavours, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation” or striving toward a worthy goal.<sup>37</sup> As Euben explains “When qualified by the phrase “in the path of God” (*fi Sabil Allah*), *jihad* refers to struggling or striving in the path of God, yet the form and means of such struggle are quite varied in the Islamic sources”.<sup>38</sup> Euben then makes two important arguments that help to dissolve the opposition between *jihādīs* and deathly democrats. First, the contemporary and largely postcolonial reworking of *jihad* must not be seen as the revival of an unadulterated Islamic tradition. When Islamist writers like

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<sup>35</sup> Asad, *Suicide Bombing*, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> Asad, *Suicide Bombing*, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Roxanne Euben, “Killing (for) Politics: Jihad, Martyrdom, Political Action”, 30 *Political Theory* (2002), 4-35, at p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> Euben, “Killing (for) Politics”, p. 12.

Qutb insist on the revival of a 'tradition', they engage in a modern discourse of authenticity, as well as sovereignty, socialism, nationality, and rationality in order to advance their arguments in a terrain of contestation in which no 'pure' position is available.<sup>39</sup> This is not unlike the 'last full measure of devotion' in the sacrifice of soldiers in the name of liberty, nation, or democracy. Second, the assertion of a universalist and social logic is the better interpretation of contemporary theorists of *jihad*, rather than the reading of radical Islam as a 'particularism' to be contrasted to the 'universalist' West (modern, enlightened and so on). As Euben points out: "action in the name of *jihad* has always been, at least since the Medinan period, in the service of a universalist and universalizing political and social order".<sup>40</sup> While this is not a justification of killings in the name of *jihad*, it displaces the sense that suicide bombing is a return to 'primitive tradition' or the pursuit of an 'other worldly' immortality. What is clear from this discussion are the continuities rather than differences between Islamic and so-called Western discourses in relation to *death* and *politics*. Only the western universal, refusing to recognize Islam as an alternative universal, renders it into an otherworldly quest.

It is unhelpful to orient the discussion of death and politics through apparent differences between west/east, Islamic and Christian legacies, or pre-modern and modern social and political imaginings. Euben insists that the relationship between death and worldly politics is an intimate one, and it is not only the preserve of Islamists who are read as revivers of 'pre-modern' tribalism. Christianity produces its own legion of deadly saints. Consider the following incisive passage from Walzer, discussed by Euben:

The puritan response produced revolutionaries, that is, saints, godly magistrates, men already disciplined (before the revolution begins) for the strenuous work of transforming all society and all men in the image of their own salvation. Such men, narrow, fanatical, enthusiastic, committed to their "work," have little to contribute to the development of either liberalism or capitalism ... . Their great achievement is what is known in the sociology of revolution as the *terror*, the effort to create a Holy Commonwealth and to force men to be Godly. ... Their extraordinary self-confidence ... makes them capable finally of killing the king. ..the saints are entrepreneurs indeed, but in politics rather than in economics. They ruthlessly (and anxiously) pursue not wealth or even individual power. . . but *collective control* of themselves, of each other, of all England.<sup>41</sup>

Death, terror, and politics are a worldly pursuit of power and control. The unification of a polity under One law, the governance of a territory under One authority, the 'affective

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<sup>39</sup> Euben, "Killing (for) Politics", p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Euben, "Killing (for) Politics", p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Walzer, "Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology," in S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.) *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization: A Comparative View* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 129 – cited in Euben, "Killing (for) Politics", p. 25.

binding' of the human body to the text of the law, are as common to Christianity as they are to Islam.<sup>42</sup>

Without wishing to underestimate the differences between Christianity and Islam, Marinos Diamantides has explained how they both share a common reception of Greek texts, similar roles for scholars who engage in scriptural interpretation – and above all a tendency towards *legalism*.<sup>43</sup> It is then a common 'dogmatism' rather than an insuperable difference that marks their conflicts. Diamantides explains how 'law' becomes the primary expression of Islam "in a manner structurally similar to Christianity".<sup>44</sup> In Islam there is an attempt at Canonization – but one that ultimately fails, or at least fails to manifest itself in the form of Papal or other sovereign form which transcends local, communal, consensual interpretations of texts. What then accounts for the dis/similarities between Islam and Christianity? At the heart of this, for Diamantides, is the divergent fate of *legalism* in Islam and Christianity – the reception of Roman Canon law is "still born" in Islam, whereas Christianity successfully establishes "exclusive interpretative authority" at the centre of an imperial capital.<sup>45</sup> Christianity evolves into the figure of what in later modernity becomes a 'sovereign authority', along with a form of subjectivization which involves "'autonomy', 'solidarity', 'reciprocity'".<sup>46</sup> Later this matures into a principle whereby the 'truth-seeking' autonomous individual subject is at the heart of 'Western political rationality'.<sup>47</sup> In Islam, in contrast, the equivalent principle is the "local community as 'collective subject'" speaking through multiple, "revered interpreters of religious law".<sup>48</sup> These similarities and contingent differences result in anxieties that are related to the secularization of both monotheisms. Current Islamic politics should then be viewed, Diamantides argues, as a "secular politics with a religious cloak" – just as "western liberalism is a secular cloak for religious politics".<sup>49</sup> While the potential symmetry of this formulation requires further elaboration beyond the scope of this essay, it does undo the claim that the West is the only source of a secular and worldly politics. The repression of the religious as the condition of modern

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Goodrich, Lior Barshack, Anton Schütz, "Introduction" in Peter Goodrich, Lior Barshack, Anton Schütz (eds.) *Law, Text, Terror* (London, Routledge-Cavendish, 2006), p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Marinos Diamantides, "Towards a Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism" in Peter Goodrich, Lior Barshack, Anton Schütz (eds.) *Law, Text, Terror* (London, Routledge-Cavendish, 2006), pp. 95-118.

<sup>44</sup> Diamantides, "Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism", p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> Diamantides, "Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism", p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Diamantides, "Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism", p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> Diamantides, "Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism", p. 97.

<sup>48</sup> Diamantides, "Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism", p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> Diamantides, "Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism", p. 114.



politics reveals itself to be an unfinished enterprise threatened by the eternal return of religion.

What is primarily at stake, at least for my purposes, in this ‘Western-Islamic Conception of Legalism’ as Diamantides has explained it is the displacement of the very conception of the ‘West’ as distinct from ‘Islamic tradition’. As Jean-Luc Nancy has cogently expressed it: “The West can no longer call itself the West from the moment it witnesses the spread, across the entire world, of the form that could once have seemed to constitute its distinguishing features”.<sup>50</sup> The full implications of this claim for an interrogation of globalization, and indeed the ‘global war on terror’ is beyond the immediate scope of this essay. But what it directs us to is the urgent need to contest and question categories such as the ‘West’, or indeed ‘Europe’ – two signs of apparent presence, or finitude, which are not now, if they ever were, capable of being given any consistent substance. And yet so much is loaded on to the ‘West’/‘Europe’ and its reason, enlightenment, humanity, autonomy, secularism and so on. These are treated as if they are a continuous progression from the one source, now contained within the one place (the West), and attacked by a unified tribe of barbarians amassed against it. Diamantides explains why this dis/continuous trajectory of the West is not just Western-Christian, but also Western-Islamic. And Nancy explains how the ‘West’ is neither a *place* nor a *destination* as the West itself has become globalised through processes of colonialism and the spread of a techno-scientific rationality.

### **III Concluding Remarks: No Place Like the ‘West’**

The events of September 11, 2001 start with a collision that is the symbol and symptom of a clash of monotheisms.<sup>51</sup> There was a correspondence between all that is symbolised through the ‘World Trade Centre’, God as the dollar, or in fact the God mentioned in the dollar, and Islamist terrorists who sort a worldly immortality in the name of another monotheistic God.<sup>52</sup> In either case an instrumentalised God is presented as a source of absolute value. The reaction that took the name ‘war on terror’ became the site for a liberal deployment of yet more absolutes – civilizational divisions, secular pretensions, and extraordinary renditions. But this post 9/11 world, as it has come to be called, seems to reiterate a formulation that no longer seems possible precisely because the world has become global. Is there not a ‘third world’ in the ‘first’, or elements in the global south that

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<sup>50</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Deconstruction of Monotheism” *Postcolonial Studies*, 6:1, (2003) pp. 37–46, at p. 37

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalisation* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2007) p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> Nancy, *Creation of the World*, p. 39.

can be the author of their own destruction? Secularism, rationality, science, democracy, poverty, raced and gendered oppressions – none of these phenomena can be sourced in the West given their global proliferation. To that extent the new alignments of the liberal left with which I began this discussion are out of time, and out of place in this new global world. If I may lower the tone for a moment to remind ourselves, consider the following conception of religion in the world from Martin Amis:

Today, in the West, there are no good excuses for religious belief - unless we think ignorance, reaction and sentimentality are good excuses. This is of course not so in the East, where, we acknowledge, almost every living citizen in many huge and populous countries is intimately defined by religious belief.<sup>53</sup>

This claim is patently absurd when considered in relation to the United States. And no one passed this news on to the British Government which steadfastly retains a far from secular constitutional order in the UK. For instance, a recent White Paper on constitutional reform had this to say about the centrality of the Church of England: “The Church of England is by law established as the Church in England and the Monarch is its Supreme Governor. The Government remains committed to this position”.<sup>54</sup> Our time, then, is out of joint. At once secular in outlook, but committed to Christian institutions, political and juridical formations throughout the so called ‘West’ reproduce the structures and formations of monotheism.

‘Clash of civilization’ discourses are obsessed with the ‘West’ as the sign that delivers all meaning and value. The message is that the West has resolved the problem of authority through liberal constitutionalism. The liberal left project their stance on the war as the epitome of rationality, opposed to the myth and traditional stasis of the East. But this rationalism has produced the most vociferous support for deadly and destructive violence unleashed by the one remaining superpower and its allies. Is this *affective* response to terrorism as far from rationalism that one can imagine – or, indeed, is it a symptom of rationality’s loss of value?<sup>55</sup> There is a global crisis of ‘value’ – as Nancy has put it.<sup>56</sup> The liberal left response to this should have involved an urgent rethinking of the substitutes for transcendent value, national sovereignty, for instance, which has been such a corrupting ground for internationalism. Ethno-national community as the basis for

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Amis, *Second Plane*, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> *The Governance of Britain* (2007) – presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, Jack Straw MP, July 2007. Para. 25.

<sup>55</sup> For an incisive treatment of *affect* in politics and religion, see Jean-Luc Nancy, “Church, State, Resistance” in S. Motha (ed.) *Democracy’s Empire: Sovereignty, Law, and Violence* (London: Blackwell, 2007) 3-13.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “The War of Monotheism” *Postcolonial Studies*, 6:1, (2003) pp. 51–53; and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey Librett (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

sovereign self-determination is another problem that required urgent attention. Instead the most fervent secular hopes have been deployed in the service of aggressive calls for war and destructive violence. What does this tell us about the monotheistic inheritance of secular formations?

Imagining the world as a ‘secularization’ of the Christian ‘created world’, or ‘fallen world’ is no longer adequate. The identification of an *immanent* principle or end – that is, a cause or *telos* for this world *from* this world - has been the site of many disasters. The question of the ‘world’ was mainly approached as a question of ‘value’ – that is, whether God, humanity, property, labour, nation will be the source of value. The modern problem has been to cope with the dissipation of an available source of sense outside the world – to explain the *immanent* sense of the world. Whether this was to be from humanity, the use or exchange value of labour, the political theologies of ‘blood and soil’, nation or people, have been symptomatic of the struggle for sense. What Nancy has suggested is that the problem of ‘world’ must now be confronted beyond the traditions of monotheism, including secularised onto-theological forms. As value becomes *immanent* to the world, the ‘creation’ of the world is displaced into the “without-reason” of the world: “and this displacement is not a transposition, a ‘secularization’ of the onto-theological or metaphysical-Christian scheme: it is, rather, its deconstruction and emptying out, and it opens onto another space – of place and of risk – which we have just begun to enter”.<sup>57</sup> Permit me to explain this further – though only as a preliminary opening to future engagements and elaborations.

Recourse to the ‘West’, ‘Europe’, ‘enlightenment values’, without further exploration of their discontinuous trajectories reveals that there is a break-down of meaning – an inability to make sense of contemporary events other than by reaching for an old ‘certainty’ that was never present to itself. Nancy has explained that this breakdown of meaning must be understood within the tradition of ‘monotheism’ itself. *Monotheism is anti-religious* – and that fate haunts all peoples drawing their traditions from the three Religions of the Book. What is meant by ‘monotheism is anti-religious’? At stake in the ‘mono-’ of monotheism is not only a distinction with ‘polytheism’, but also the potential *abandonment* that might be wrought by a jealous God whose ‘people’ cannot be certain of their fate. There is no guarantee that through means of sacrifice, or by calling on ‘Him’ to be good to ‘His people’, that this all powerful God will bestow goodwill. As Nancy explains:

Monotheism, in its first principles, undoes theism, that is to say the presence of a power that assembles the world and guarantees its meaning. It thus makes the name of ‘god’ absolutely problematic — it makes it nonsignificant — and above all it takes away from it all

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<sup>57</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalisation* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2007) p. 51.

power to guarantee. The Christian guarantee can only take place at the price of a category that is completely opposed to that of religious belief: the category of 'faith', which is loyalty to an absence and the certainty of this loyalty in the absence of any guarantee".<sup>58</sup>

The absence of a power that can guarantee meaning – that is our present condition. But this absence also marks the auto-deconstructive potential of monotheism. In this condition, Man is placed at the centre of deciphering the meaning of the essence of God – that is, monotheism becomes *demythologised*, and thus less religious. Christianity in particular becomes auto-interpretative: "a symbolic order deciphered in the human condition (man's reason, his freedom, his dignity, his relations with others ...)".<sup>59</sup> Religious markers of sacredness are effaced "in favour of what Kant called a 'religion within the limits of plain reason', or again what Feuerbach articulated in saying that 'the belief in God is *man's belief in the infinity and the truth of his own essence*".<sup>60</sup> Recourse to the 'West', rationality, 'enlightenment values' are only various supplements to this absolute loneliness of being without a power that will guarantee meaning – of being so utterly free. The liberal left have run aground in the face of this immense task, clinging as they have to mundane and ill-thought distinctions between our good wars and their bad meaningless deaths. What Nancy helps us to see is the "dark side" of monotheism now showing itself in the rationalist liberal left. Despite all the efforts to establish an absolute divide between the West and the rest, between Christianity (its secularism) and Islam, the liberal left (and all liberals and Christians) are facing the same dilemmas as radical Muslims. A loss of a transcendent and determinant source of authority is producing an anxious and violent response. The urgent question now is whether a thought apt for the challenges of this time can be attended to in the work that is currently under way to reground and re-launch a universal among many political philosophers of the left.<sup>61</sup> The monotheistic attachments of such discourses carry many dangers. But exploring and critically interrogating them is an urgent task that follows from this discussion.

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<sup>58</sup> Nancy, "Deconstruction of Monotheism", p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> Nancy, "Deconstruction of Monotheism", p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy, "Deconstruction of Monotheism", p. 43 (original emphasis).

<sup>61</sup> Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London, Verso, 2000); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, University of California Press, 2003); Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For?* (London, Verso, 2001); Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (London, MIT Press, 2003).