

M E R I D I A N

C R O S S I N G A E S T H E T I C S

FOR LOVE OF THE FATHER

A  
PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY  
OF  
RELIGIOUS TERRORISM

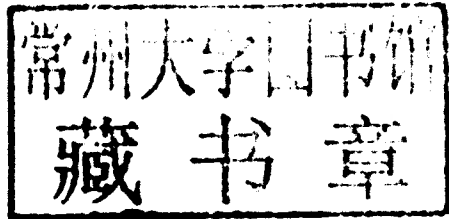
*Ruth Stein*

# FOR LOVE OF THE FATHER

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*A Psychoanalytic Study of  
Religious Terrorism*

Ruth Stein



Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

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While writing this book I was nourished by the love I feel and receive from my wonderful big family, parts of which live in the United States, and parts of which have stayed in Israel, a family whose diversity in matters religious and political manages to be contained within the space of our bond.

## Preface

On September 11, 2001, while my visual cortex was registering the endlessly replaying images of towers sliced by airplanes, then crumbling in orange-red fire and gray-black smoke against a white light and a blue sky, I also saw the shorn, wounded, vacuous horizon, and suddenly felt overwhelmed by the utter triumph and exhilarating power the planners must have been feeling at that very moment as they eyed the same landscape. Their jubilation and triumph, I imagined, must have been a milestone experience,<sup>1</sup> a sense of an obstacle removed, a limit erased. I imagined how, for them, the skies had now opened to heaven, clearing a direct path to God. I could feel the destroyer's gaze as it fastened on the mutilated skyline and I wondered whether my view was indeed a counterpart to the image that imprinted the dying terrorist's mind as he joyously became fire.

Even if my internal picture of the torn skyline is far from what went through the terrorists' brain in those unknowable moments of rushing toward death, this still could have been, I speculated, the terrorist's anticipatory fantasy before the event, or at the moment when he was assaulting the plane's passengers shouting *Allah-Hu-Akbar*, God is tremendous. That awesome moment brought home to me the vast proportions of a triumph, a joy, a sense of unbounded self-validation, a vindication, an otherworldly liberation, a feeling that the sky, far from being the limit, was the way to heaven. There was sense that this feeling was too dreadful to deal with; for a moment I had a sharp intuition that articulating this pleasurable emotion, this *jouissance*, was far worse than confronting the hatred that had led to these attacks. The feeling quickly vanished, but I realized that I had overstepped a boundary: I had entered for a moment

the realm of the megalomaniac terrorist—his boundless triumph—and I had identified with it.

Perhaps it was my personal history that allowed this plunge of the imagination. I have vivid memories of Shiite devotees marching on the day of the Ashura (the day of collective mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein ibn-Ali, Modhammed's grandson, at the Battle of Karbala) in ecstasies of self-flagellation in the streets of Tehran, where I lived in my teenage years. Rows of men, mostly young, were marching and chanting rhythmically, their naked upper bodies becoming more and more bloodied with each lashing of the iron chains they gave their chests and their backs, in a cascading frenzy, engulfed within this well-orchestrated orgiastic ritual. They were commemorating Hussein's martyrdom, entranced by his pain, merging with his ecstatic torture.<sup>2</sup> On such days, foreigners were told not to stand out,<sup>3</sup> in fact not be visible at all to the celebrating crowd, who, I was told, would not hesitate to assault and injure any non-Muslim person.

Still earlier years in my life were redolent with narratives that recounted the perennial Jewish longing to follow the historical martyrs' celebratory overcoming of the self, and devout girls chanting, "Rabbi Akiva said, I have been praying my whole life for this command to come my way so I can fulfill it—oh, my Lord, when will it come?" Rabbi Akiva is the arch-martyr in Jewish history whose flesh was shredded by Roman iron combs for refusing to desist from acknowledging his God. The suffering of this scholar-hero assumed fantastic proportions of joy in our vivid imaginations. Rabbi Akiva represented the epitome of self-realization and joy through self-sacrifice, the highest goal in life, "Oh, Lord, when will this command find me and I fulfill it?" Emotions are strongest when they deal specifically with mental pain. Emotions are also more poignant the more they reverse the feelings that precede them. Our imagination was electrified by the frisson that accompanied the triumphant conversion of scenes of capitulation into moments of victory. Was there an affinity between these events, the scenes recounted in my childhood in their Jewish context, and the humiliation of terrorists that is patiently nurtured into a meticulously planned reversal, a triumph proportionate to the insult? Most probably. After all, horrific religious acts can transform wretchedness into ecstasy; indeed, the victory of overcoming a sense of helplessness is enormously magnified when it is transposed into the service of an all-powerful God. Was there an affinity between the thinking of the group of

bright, accomplished Jewish fundamentalists I came to know in my young adulthood and the way militant Islamic fundamentalists think and reason? I admit that the similarities are staggering, encompassing reasoning; moral convictions; the sense of brotherhood; and the allocation of trust and distrust toward the government, society, moderate co-religionists, or those outside of the religion. Some of the phrases the religious terrorists put their ideas into sound chillingly familiar, as does the hope of a redeeming future in an apocalyptic restoration of a golden past, and in the enveloping, jubilant sense of rightness and devotion. With all the cultural differences, the psychological structures of the two groups are the same,<sup>4</sup> and so is their reliance on a God who benevolently takes the believer's enemies and makes them His own adversaries, whom He will eventually defeat in an apocalyptic denouement if the group of loyal believers just does the right things.

This study is impacted by the background mentioned above, a background that made itself painfully felt on that Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, in Manhattan, where I found myself just a few days after leaving Israel, a country torn by fundamentalism and terrorism. The reflection that began on that day became a constant accompaniment, almost an alternative world, to my predominantly clinical work, and commanded much of my emotional and intellectual energy for the following years. It took several years, including several hiatuses, to write this book, a much longer time than I had anticipated. During those years I read a great deal of material about Islam and Islamic theology and history (all the while resonating with many of the Arabic words whose affinity with Hebrew one's ear learns to gradually pick up). I read the Quran and the jihad manifestos, viewed innumerable video clips and longer videotapes of speeches and sermons of Islamic leaders to their congregations and to outsiders, as well as apologetic and propagandist productions designed for non-Muslim consumption. I also poured over various analyses of these phenomena that attempted to explain them from the most diverse perspectives. This gave me a more solid sense of how these developments came about, historically and politically, even as I hardly incorporated any references to those readings into this book, since I focus here on a specific vantage point, that of the emotional vicissitudes of the zealot seen through a psychoanalytic lens.

The good fortune in completing this book now, years after I had planned to, is that at present there are incomparably more translations

from the Arabic of messages and articles from Web sites (which is where globalist jihad publishes most of its communications), broadcast speeches, and compilations of sourcebooks. All these materials are now made accessible to non-Arabic speakers. They seem to largely support the intuition that the motives explicitly stated in the various projects, covenants, and plans of Islamic terrorist organizations are predominantly *theological*, and since fundamentalists and terrorists believe that there can be no political organization that is not religious, their plans and discourses are *theologico-political*. This spate of translations helps us to gradually come to terms with what we had difficulty recognizing earlier, namely, that suicidal terrorism and murderous killings and executions are specifically *religious* phenomena.

The writing in this book assumes various stances. The introduction is a more general, even if somewhat polemical, preparation for the more specific subsequent chapters. What follows the introduction is an analysis, interspersed with narratives, some of them clinical, some textual, of the phenomenon of religious terrorism in terms that are mostly taken from psychoanalytic discourse. The constitutive and to me perennially enigmatic relationship between father and son is at the heart of a network of ideas which I endeavored to make cohere.

The reflections in Chapters 1 through 4 are followed in the last chapter by an analysis of evil. Informed by philosophical notions on evil, this chapter seeks to articulate some psychoanalytic ideas that might clarify some of the complexities in this area. My fantasy and ardent wish is for readers to think with me and against me, and to continue the reflection, urgently needed, on a subject that does not leave us in peace.

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# Introduction

I began writing this book after I had read the letter found in Mohamed Atta's luggage on September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> What fascinated me was the letter's tone of calm serenity and its counterintuitive appeal. How could a statement inciting its receivers to kill, to destroy and be destroyed, I wondered, exude such solemn serenity? The utter strangeness of this document captivated me. If given attentive reading and decoding, I felt, it promised to open a window to a mind otherwise hermetically closed and enigmatic to us.

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

## Psychoanalytic Understanding

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