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Samson Terroristes: A Theological Reflection on Suicidal Terrorism

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Herbert McCabe OP, the best theologian I have ever met, whose work will remain exemplary for all who aspire to think theologically in the twenty-first century.

George Bush's 'axis of evil' is presumably part of what this conference is about. Certainly, the intentional killing of the innocent, that is people who have done us no harm, must be one of the most blatant examples of evil anybody can think of. Dealing with this evil has, alas, become one of the pre-occupations of the present age. The last century saw enough of it, from Auschwitz and Hiroshima to Srebrenica and Omagh. But today we are confronted by what many see as a new form of this evil: namely *suicidal* terrorism. Yet even this is not so unambiguously evil that people cannot find religious justifications of it. Indeed the existence of a religious industry for justifying killing the innocent is, I take it, part of the evil that we are dealing with at this conference.

Many Muslims, and perhaps some Christians too, think of those who perpetrate suicidal murders as martyrs for the faith, specially blessed by the Almighty with a vocation to kill. Some even find arguments for it in the Qu'ran or in Islamic law[1], or in the Old Testament. But before we rush in to condemn their arguments, we must remember some precedents. The most obvious is that of Samson.

I

On the face of it, as we read the story in Judges 13-16, Samson appears simply as a suicidal terrorist hitman. Yet the narrator in Judges regards him as a specially blessed instrument of the divine purpose. So does the writer

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of the *Letter to the Hebrews* (Chapter 11: 32-4). So too do St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. In order to deal adequately with the ambiguities of what may appear to be a peculiarly modern and prevalent evil, therefore, it is appropriate to consider the Samson example in more detail, and to examine how it has come down to us through the changing patterns of Western history. This is what I propose to do in this paper. You can then draw your own conclusions for the theme of our 2002 conference.

I shall try, very schematically, to put some traditional interpretations of the tale into their historical/cultural contexts, in order to consider how we should think about suicidal terrorism today. I shall concentrate on four main versions: firstly the tale as told in *Judges*; secondly as told by John Milton in his tragedy *Samson Agonistes* (1671); thirdly as told by George Frederick Handel in his oratorio *Samson* (1743); fourthly as told by Saint Saens in his opera *Samson and Delilah* (1877). I hope to finish by reflecting on some aspects of the Samson story that seem especially relevant to our concern with evil today.[2]

Let us briefly recall the essentials of the Samson story from the Book of Judges. The birth of Samson is prefaced by an angelic 'annunciation'. Samson's mother is told to refrain from strong drink and any unclean food during pregnancy, and to ensure that no razor ever touches her son's head. When he grows up Samson himself must live by the same rule, for he is a 'Nazirite', that is, a person vowed to Yahweh's service for life. His prodigious strength is Yahweh's gift. Each of his exploits is attributed to the Spirit of Yahweh that seizes him at the key moment.

We hear nothing of Samson's childhood. The story begins with Samson fancying a girl from Timnah, a Philistine town. The Philistines were the occupying power in (roughly) the Gaza strip. So the point is that Samson is trying to marry into the enemy clan. The narrator excuses this treachery by explaining that Yahweh is seeking an occasion to quarrel with the Philistines. On the way to see his girl friend, Samson tears to pieces with his bare hands a rather irritating young lion which happens to be passing by. A little later he eats some of the honey which has collected in the lion's carcase. At his subsequent wedding feast, Samson bets thirty of his new wife's male 'protectors' that they can't answer a riddle he puts to them about this eating of unclean food. Angry at being unable to answer the riddle, they threaten to burn down the house of Samson's in-laws unless his wife lures Samson into giving her the answer to it. After a week of persistence she succeeds, and so they win the bet. Samson, however, refuses to be beaten, and in order to repay his debt he massacres thirty other Philistines, from another settlement, Askelon, and steals their clothes. With these he settles the debt and goes back home to his father's house.

Meanwhile Samson's father-in-law has given his daughter, Samson's

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wife, to Samson's best man, so he tries to fob Samson off with a younger sister who happens to be available. But Samson won't accept second-best, and decides on revenge. So he torches the Philistines' harvest, using the flaming tails of three hundred foxes tied together. In retaliation the Philistines burn Samson's wife and her family to death. Not surprisingly, Samson retaliates with further havoc to the Philistines, the nature of which is not specified, before going off to a cave in the Rock of Etam, presumably to work out what to do next.

The Philistines now mount an incursion, with the purpose of seizing Samson and doing to him what he has done to them. He agrees to be bound with ropes and taken to them. But of course as soon as he arrives, the ropes on his arms melt away like wax. He promptly seizes the nearest jawbone of an ass and clubs a thousand Philistines to death with it.

But of course this is not the end of the violence. After dallying for a short time with a prostitute in Gaza whom he fancies, and carting off the town gates where some of the Philistine men are hiding to waylay him, Samson starts courting another Philistine girl, Dalila. This seems to his enemies to be their best chance. They bribe Dalila to betray to them the secret of Samson's strength. Eventually Samson collapses in exhaustion at her persistence, and tells her the truth. Dalila promptly lulls him to sleep, and invites her Philistine friends to cut off his hair, put out his eyes, and haul him off to slavery in a mill. At last, they think, they have him beaten. But inevitably his hair grows again. Stupidly, they now summon the blinded Samson to entertain them by taking part in the pagan games in honour of their god Dagon. Samson obliges with various feats of strength, and then asks to be led to the pillars of the stadium to rest. Once there, he prays to Yahweh to 'give me strength again this once, and let me be revenged on the Philistines at one blow for my two eyes'. Then he pulls the whole building down, killing everyone, including himself. The narrator tells us, with apparent satisfaction, that the number he kills in this last episode exceeds all those he had killed up to now. They include a crowd of innocent spectators who were watching from the roof.

It seems amazing in this day and age that anybody should have supposed that this saga was anything but a collection of tall, and pretty nasty stories bound together by a thirst for endless violence. Yet scholars from St. Augustine to Milton took it at face value. To them an historical person, Samson, was blessed by God with a power with which to further the divine plan of salvation. The Letter to the Hebrews says as much.[3] This is why St Augustine seriously discusses Samson's status as a martyr. But first he has to find a way round the difficulty of Samson's suicide, which is contrary to the commandment 'thou shalt not kill'.[4] The same problem confronts Aquinas, who raises the Samson problem in his

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discussion of homicide: can it ever be licit for somebody to kill himself? he asks; and if the answer is no, what are we to make of Samson?[5] Milton, four centuries later, is still haunted by the same problem, and is forced to come up with much the same answer: Samson is a martyr whose crimes and suicide are excused by the fact that God has ordered them. Who are we to question the Omnipotent?[6]

Such questions can only arise if we take the Samson story to be *true* in some sense. I am not quite sure how Augustine or Aquinas or Milton thought of it, but it certainly bothered them enough to find it necessary to explain away Samson's suicide. Whereas to us Samson just appears like a cross between Beowulf and Batman. His story is a rattling good yarn: but surely no more? In his book *The Living World of the Old Testament* Bernhard Anderson writes: 'it is unnecessary to go into the details of these lusty stories, which have as their theme the discomfiture of the Philistines by an Israelite Tarzan whose fatal weakness was women. The Samson stories are more legendary than any other material preserved in the book of Judges...These stories deal with the marvellous exploits of an individual and are more designed to tickle the fancy than to record history'. But even Anderson cannot allow the Samson yarn to be merely a good set of tall stories in the Beowulf or Batman mould. He goes on: 'viewed theologically, the story of Samson's tragic demise portrays what happens to a person filled with *charisma* who disregards the guidance of Yahweh in a time of crisis to pursue personal whims of the moment'.[7]

But this won't quite do either, because the narrator/editor of Judges doesn't see Samson's death as *tragic* at all, because he cannot envisage any *end* to the cycle of violence and reprisal which lies at the heart of Israel's history at this time. Revenge is natural, only to be expected. Like football hooliganism, heroic history is nothing more than a gigantic soap-opera played out for real. It has no resolution, no finale. It goes on as long as the participants, or the market, want it to. On the other hand, Augustine, Aquinas and Milton all see Samson's story as *ending* with the triumph of God's power over evil, despite the betrayal of vows. But the Book of Judges is untroubled by this betrayal.[8] Samson shows no remorse for pursuing women from the enemy camp. And the story fails to recognise the futility of endless vengeance, presumably because it belongs to an 'heroic' age in which fate, or what Milton calls 'the fold of dire necessity',[9] is taken for granted. Samson, like Eliot's Rum Tum Tugger, will do as he do do, and there is no doing anything about it.

The Samson story 'is one of the most artfully composed tales in the Bible...there is an exuberance of wordplay, including etiologies...riddling couplets...and ring compositions...and clever inversions from episode to episode'.[10] These features in themselves suggest that we are here dealing

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with a self-consciously constructed work of heroic folk art, comparable (say) to *Beowulf*. Of course, Samson's is not an *epic* story. But it comes from an anonymous folk-tradition, even if we feel (perhaps wrongly) that it has half of its tongue in its cheek. It is the kind of thing from which epic poetry or classical tragedy can be built. But between the Book of Judges and Milton comes the Christian gospel and Christian theology. The key point here is that in the story of Christ's Passion, the single-handed hero, faced with the implacable hostility of the occupying powers, i.e. the Romans, and of the traitors in his own camp, abjures revenge in favour of self-sacrifice. John Robinson put the key point this way, half a century ago: 'By His death Christ .. "died out on" the forces of evil without their being able to defeat or kill Him, thereby exhibiting their impotence and gaining victory over them. The only way evil ever wins victories is by making a man retort by evil, reflect it, pay it back, and thus afford it a new lease of life. Over one who persistently absorbs it and refuses to give it out, it is powerless. It is in this way that St Paul sees Christ dealing with the forces of evil—going on and on and on, triumphantly absorbing their attack by untiring obedience, till eventually there is nothing more they can do. Or rather there is one thing more—and that is to kill Him. This they do. But in the very act they confess their own defeat'.[11] Part of the 'untiring obedience' of Jesus (unlike the persistent disobedience of Samson) is observance of the Jewish commandment not to kill.

But, you might say, it was easy for Jews, including the early Christian converts, to refrain from killing. After all the Romans had the monopoly of violence. But once the empire became Christian, it had to take over the responsibilities of government, including the protection of citizens from outside attack. Hence, for St. Augustine, God's commandment against killing raises two immediate difficulties: military defence of citizens and suicidal martyrdom. The former he permits on certain strict conditions, most notably that it be done for the common good by a legitimate public authority. But, as Samson shows, suicide is more problematic. It can only be excused by the fact (and Augustine assumes it *is* a fact) that God's spirit within Samson 'wrought miracles by him (and) did prompt him unto this act'. Without this Samson's suicide would be simple self-murder.[12]

Aquinas follows St. Augustine. In his discussion of whether it is ever licit to commit suicide, Samson is again excused by God's command.[13] But Samson as a martyr is as problematic for Aquinas as he was for Augustine. Dying for the faith is valueless unless it is done out of love: and Samson certainly does not die out of love, whether of his enemies or his mistresses. In his discussion of martyrdom Aquinas aptly quotes St. Paul to the Corinthians: 'If I deliver my body for burning, but have not charity, it avails me nothing'.[14] Tactfully, therefore, he does not raise the

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Samson question in his discussion of martyrdom. For, despite the precedent set by the Letter to the Hebrews, Aquinas must have seen that the last thing the original Samson had on his mind was love. Unlike the Christ of St. Paul, but just like any football hooligan (not to mention any Palestinian or Israeli thug), Samson seeks to win by violence and revenge. Like George W.Bush or Ariel Sharon, Samson's response to terror is to 'wage a war' on it. How could he possibly be an exponent of Christian martyrdom? This question brings us to Milton's problem with Samson.

II

To misquote William Blake, Milton was of Samson's party without knowing it.[15] The poet's unconscious identification with his hero is very revealing. For Milton was a heterodox Christian torn between opposing forces within himself: on the one hand, love of pleasure, self-display and free-thinking libertinism; and on the other of austerity, rationality and self-discipline.[16] His lush early poems, such as *L'Allegro* and *Comus,* and some of the bawdy writings of his youth, display his delight in the life of the senses. He finds music very seductive. And he loved showing off his learning. His 'Grand Tour' to France and Italy, undertaken in 1638-39 at the age of thirty, reveals much of his zest for luxury, including being wined and dined by fellow scholars who lionised the youthful prodigy from England.[17] Perhaps Milton's Samson is remembering this time:

> Great in hopes
> With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts
> Of birth from Heaven foretold and high exploits,
> Full of divine instinct, after some proof
> Of acts indeed heroic, far beyond
> The sons of Anac, famous now and blaz'd,
> Fearless of danger, like a petty God
> I walked about admir'd of all, and dreaded
> On hostile ground, none daring my affront'.[18]

Yet Milton's private life, especially after his first marriage, was one of relentless system and self-discipline. Dr. Johnson tells us how his days were spent: 'when he first rose (around four or five in the morning) he heard a chapter in the Hebrew Bible, and then studied till twelve; then took some exercise for an hour, then dined; then plaid on the organ, and sung or heard another sing; then studied to six; then entertained his visitors till eight; then supped, and, after a pipe of tobacco and a glass of water, went to bed'.[19]

In public affairs Milton expended enormous physical and spiritual energy, ruining his eyesight in the service of the Protestant republican

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revolution. Milton's hatred of popery and of what he called 'prelacy' knew almost no bounds. He was regarded as a 'libertine', that is an independent libertarian, who loudly asserted personal freedom not only from the authority of kings and bishops, but from the tyranny of censorship and the divorce laws.[20] Christopher Hill even hints that after the restoration Milton narrowly escaped being hanged, drawn and quartered for sedition.[21] Yet at home with his wife and daughters this libertarian saw himself as the absolute monarch of all he could survey. As Dr. Johnson observed, 'they who most loudly clamour for liberty do not most generally grant it. What we know of Milton's character, in domestick relations, is, that he was severe and arbitrary. His family consisted of females; and there appears in his books something like a Turkish contempt of females as subordinate and inferiour beings....He thought woman made only for obedience, and man only for rebellion'.

This, in brief, is the psychology which underpins Milton's *Samson Agonistes,* published in 1671, a decade after the restoration of the monarchy. For Milton, the Restoration was a defeat and a tragic humiliation, and the Biblical Samson-story was almost a prophesy of it.[22] England, and especially the people in charge of it, had betrayed their faith and their liberty. They had fallen for the idolatry of kings and bishops. Furthermore, they had betrayed Milton himself, the heroic embodiment of these values. Having given his 'spirit', and the eyesight which symbolised it, to the cause of liberty, Milton now found himself well equipped to understand, with a deep psychological perceptiveness, the predicament of the humiliated, blinded Samson under the Philistine yoke. He sees Samson as a model of heroic rebelliousness rather than of Christian martyrdom. The poem is about the failure of the revolution, of the millennium that has not come. It asks how good men should live in a world dominated by the powers of evil.[23] The answer, if any, is that the millennium will come about through the heroic actions of men who are inspired by God. This is why Samson is so close to being a modern suicidal terrorist. But it is also why Shakespeare's soldier Williams, just before the battle of Agincourt, expresses exactly the point we need to notice about Milton's Samson: 'I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle; for how could they *charitably* dispose of anything when blood is in their argument?'[24]

Milton's version of the Samson story is among other things a psychological study: of a man eaten up by remorse, shame, humiliation, frustration, and the thirst for revenge. In this it is practically a textbook for would-be suicidal martyrs, and puts their case all too persuasively. Samson's suicide comes out of his shame, hopelessness and desperation. He thirsts for revenge out of remorse (but not contrition) for his weakness in yielding to the traitress Dalila, and for his breaches of the Nazirite vows

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which had undergirded his physical prowess and his self-assurance. The poem is driven by Milton's own urge to get his own back against the enemies who have undone all that he was striving to achieve in his public life. He does it in the only way he can: by the pen. Writing *Samson Agonistes* was a terrorist act.

Yet such insights were made possible only by the addition, to the old heroic values, of Christianity, with its drama of sin versus redemption, violence versus self-sacrifice, reason versus temptation, wickedness versus forgiveness. These values, quite foreign to the heroic age, are at work in Milton's reworking of the old legend. For one thing, Milton finds it morally necessary to alter the otherwise sacrosanct text with which he is working when he notices that, in committing suicide, Samson also kills a crowd of innocent spectators. In just one line, he promptly rescues them, contradicting the sacred text of Judges: 'The vulgar only scap'd who stood without' he assures us.[25] For another, turning the heroic yarn into a classical tragedy suggests a resolution of the cycle of violence, because, as Aristotle says, tragedy has to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Even classical pagan tragedy understood this: the *Oresteia* ends with the *Eumenides.* But a *Christian* tragedy should go further, providing not just an end but a resolution of the violence. For the death of Jesus is all about refusing to repay violence in its own coin. But Milton cannot fully admit this. True, there are repudiations of war in Milton, for example in *Paradise Lost,* and in *Paradise Regained.*[26] But another side of Milton cannot go along with the promise of a resolution through obedience to God's non-violence in Christ. He saw the restoration of the monarchy not as a peace-settlement but a betrayal fraught with violence: a latter-day renewal of the infidelity to which the Israel of the Book of Judges had succumbed. This is why *Samson Agonistes* ends, not with a life-affirming victory over evil, but, like *Lycidas,* with a funeral dirge.[27] We may contrast Milton here with his royalist near-contemporary Dryden, who reworked Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* into the neo-classic tragedy *All for Love* (1678).[28] Dryden's drama ends with a resolution of the conflict in the hereafter:

> 'I go [his Cleopatra says] 'with such a will to find my lord,
> 'That we shall quickly meet.'

and the play ends with a definitive affirmation of everlasting love: 'She went to charm him in another world'. There is nothing like this awaiting Milton's Samson. The most Samson's father can say is that

> 'Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> 'Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> 'Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair.
> 'And what may quiet us in a death so noble'.

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and all Samson is promised is a monument

'with shade of
'Laurel ever green, and branching Palm,
'With all his Trophies hung, and Acts enrolled
'In copious legend, or sweet lyric song'.[29]

III

Handel's oratorio *Samson,* dating from 1743, is a free adaptation of Milton's play, following its outline, and even at times quoting verbatim. But Handel's Samson is not a hero of violent revolution. Far from composing a suicidal terrorist tract, Handel pushes Samson out of harm's way, into a comfortable baroque heaven equipped with trumpets and harps. For now a constitutional monarch is firmly on the throne. Robert Walpole has only just stopped being prime minister, and Jacobite rebellion is in abeyance. Wesleyan Methodism represents the religious spirit of the age. The sexual ambiguities of Richardson and the rumbustious humanism of Fielding, rather than the psychological self-torture of Bunyan or the rebellious heterodoxy of Milton, shape the literature of the period. The peaceable formalities of the German Baroque, in the hands of Bach, Handel and Telemann, dominate the musical landscape, while Dr. Johnson's wit and commonsense inhabit *The Gentleman's Magazine.* 'God's in his Heaven and all's right with the world'.[30]

Samson was one of Handel's greatest successes, through its fusion of "the Solemnity of Church-Musick" with "the most pleasing Airs of the Stage". This fusion was indeed key to the very idea of the Handelian oratorio: a solemn religious drama without visible actions, usually performed in a theatre.[31] *Samson Agonistes*, a dramatic poem never conceived for stage performance, perhaps seemed an ideal model for an Handelian oratorio; always provided that Milton's inner conflicts, not to mention his theology and politics, could be left out. True, Samson at the end of part 1 has a recitative replying to his father, borrowing phrases from Milton, which expresses his remorse and even despair:

'Why should I live?
'Soon shall these orbs to double darkness yield.
'My genial spirits droop, my hopes are fled
'Nature in me seems weary of herself;
'My race of glory run, my race of shame,
'Death, invocated oft, shall end my pains,
'And lay me gently down with them that rest'.

But this mood of depression is soon overtaken by a baroque Israelite chorus:

'Then round about the starry throne
'Of Him who ever rules alone

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'Your heavenly guided soul shall climb;
'Of all this earthly grossness quit
'With glory crown'd for ever sit
'And triumph over death, and thee, O time'.

Equally significant is the small place given by Handel to the role of Dalila. All she gets is a recitative in Part 2 explaining why she has come to see Samson ('conjugal affection led me on Prevailing over fear and timorous doubt') and a short air to express her apparent sincerity ('My faith, and truth, O Samson, prove; But hear me, hear the voice of love'). But she does not stay around for long. In her place comes the Philistine pugilist Harapha (a character borrowed from Milton) who spends far more time and energy challenging Samson to a duel than Dalila spends on trying for reconciliation. In Part 3 Harapha summons Samson to the games. After some hesitation, Samson admits 'to feel some secret impulse, which doth bid me go'—and so he goes. A dialogue involving an attempt by Samson's father to get his son released (another incident borrowed from Milton) suddenly breaks off: 'What noise of joy was that? It tore the sky!' The sky is torn by a 'symphony of horror and confusion' in the shape of twelve Presto bars, played Fortissimo by the orchestra. A Messenger soon comes to describe what has happened, and how everybody died. Micah (Samson's confidant) sings:

'Ye sons of Israel now lament
'Your spear is broke, your bow unbent.
'Your glory's fled;
'Amongst the dead
'Great Samson lies;
'For ever, ever closed his eyes'.

And for practical purposes you might think that is that. But not a bit of it: for at the very end[32] we have Samson's heavenly triumph, in which 'the Cherubic host, in tuneful choirs, Touch their immortal harps with golden wires' while singing 'Let the Bright Seraphim!' Handel is no more troubled than the Book of Judges about Samson's treacheries, and even his crimes. God's in his heaven and all's right with the baroque world!

IV

Handel's *Samson* is a triumph of self-satisfaction. Saint Saens' opera of 1876 is a romantic debacle of love versus duty. The Franco-Prussian War of 1871 was still a vivid memory, with the Paris Commune not long swept away. These events had turned the pro-Wagnerite Saint-Saens into a nationalist musical patriot whose *Société Nationale de Musique* had begun a renaissance of French orchestral music, with works by Franck, Duparc,

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Lalo, Bizet and Saint-Saens himself.

Before the war Saint-Saens had been working on the Samson legend, contemplating it as an oratorio. The opera reveals traces of this origin: for example, much of the action takes place off-stage. But a friend urged Saint-Saens to turn the story into an opera, despite the widespread feeling that Biblical subjects were not suitable for the theatre.[33] Anyhow, although Saint-Saens was an atheist, the subject clearly fascinated him, and he had already composed the music for Act 2 before 1871. This is significant: for it means that the romantic Samson and Delilah encounter, which occupies almost the whole of Act 2, was always to be the core of the work. The opera was not finished until 1876, when peace between France and Prussia had been established, enabling Liszt to organise its first performance, in German, at Weimar, in 1877.

The opera begins with Samson exhorting the Hebrew chorus, who are utterly dejected under their Philistine masters, to keep faith with their God. Soon he has to confront a Philistine challenger, now called Abimelech (but reminiscent of Milton's and Handel's fictitious pugilist Harapha) but he quickly polishes Abimelech off in a sword-fight. The High Priest of the Philistines then curses the Hebrews and hints that their leader will be overcome by a treacherous companion.

Delilah now appears, 'to celebrate the victory of the one who reigns in my heart'. She implies (and this is a new idea for the Samson story) that she and Samson are old flames:

> My heart, filled with love
> Bewailing the faithless one,
> Awaits his return.
> Living in hope
> My grieving heart
> Cherishes the memory
> Of past happiness!

In the face of all this, Samson fears for his own weakness. But a dance of voluptuous Philistine girls tempts him to glance repeatedly at his enchantress. She invites him into her dwelling-place. He seems helpless under her spell.

In Act 2 the Philistine High Priest suggests to Delilah that while Samson has now forgotten their past love, he could be trapped again. Delilah knows Samson is still a slave to her charms. She rejects all thought of accepting a bribe for the treachery; all she wants (or so she says) is revenge. She proposes to conquer Samson by using his love for her to satisfy her own hate. Samson now enters, drawn to her despite himself. He cannot control his sexual desire. Flashes of lightning theatrically underscore his inner conflict, as Delilah unsheaths her

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unbeatable weapon: the song 'Softly awakes my heart'. As she sings, Samson succumbs with 'Delilah, I love you!' and a great love-duet ensues. But as Philistine soldiers rush in, Samson is about to lose his hair and his strength. Lightning, thunder and curtain.

Act 3 reveals Samson 'eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves'. In remorse for his fall, he offers his life in sacrifice. The Philistine games begin, with the dancing of an oriental bacchanal by Philistine maidens (a sine qua non for any self-respecting opera of the period). Delilah, in a distorted version of her great Act 2 aria, now confesses to Samson that all along she had meant to betray him. Samson is then led to the central pillars of the hall. He calls on God for vengeance and pulls down the whole building on his enemies and himself. Final curtain.

What has Saint-Saens done to the original story? Well, he has replaced the uncomplicated youthful lust with which the Biblical Samson satisfies himself on numerous women, by a single-minded fascination with a long-lost lover. Samson in essentials is an eager middle-class bachelor. The earlier 'affairs' of the original tale are sublimated by Saint-Saens into the faint memory of one great past passion, the flames of which Delilah rekindles by her hypocritical love-song. This motif is quite foreign to all of the preceding versions of the story. The key is a conflict between love and duty conducted within the soul of each participant. The heroic saga of the Book of Judges has been finally transformed, notwithstanding occasional Wagnerian overtones, into an insoluble domestic drama that can only end in disaster. The motive forces of the operatic action lie deep within the characters, and the music underlines them with 'motifs' used in a Wagnerian fashion to tell us what is happening in the depths of their souls.[34] These lovers have no roots, no family, no social ties. For Samson there is no room for his father's wisdom, and for Delilah there is no web of tribal loyalties with friends and relations all too eager to use or destroy her.

It is not easy for us, or perhaps even for them, quite to know how far their love is genuine and how far it is a sham. The psychological ambiguity of the music is part of its romantic meaning. Its seductiveness perhaps betrays the apparent motivations of the characters. Delilah *says* she hates Samson, and wants revenge: but is she deceiving herself as well as him, in her great song of love? Do we believe her? Samson is equally torn: is his duty to God and the Hebrew cause, or to the woman he once loved, and perhaps loves still? Typically the opera fails to answer them, by collapsing everything, Götterdämmerung-like, into an orgy of fire and destruction.[35]

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V

After all this, you may well ask, where is the theology?

Well, let us remind ourselves of the questions which the various versions of the Samson story have to answer in one way or another. They concern:

a) Suicide.
b) Promises to God.
c) Endless Violence.
d) Killing the Innocent
e) Martyrdom (with heaven as a reward).

How do our various versions deal with these?

1. The book of Judges The story in Judges has an easy way with all these issues: as theological or moral problems, they simply don't arise. Of its very nature, there is no end to violence. Samson will do as he do do, and there is no doing anything about it. Samson's heavenly reward as a martyr is not even hinted at.

2. The Theologians: The Letter to the Hebrews, Augustine, Aquinas I lump these three together, as each depends on its predecessor. **Hebrews** (11.32ff) takes Samson into the early Christian era, placing him alongside other Israelite precursors. Each of these did what is right and 'earned the promises'. They were, in short, martyrs. But they could not receive the promised heavenly reward until the resurrection of Jesus had opened the way.[36] So Hebrews addresses my fifth point, but isn't worried about the rest. However, **Augustine**, as a professional philosopher and theologian, *is* worried about Samson's suicide.[37] He explains it away as a mystery of God's omnipotent will which cannot, and must not be denied, even if it appears to contradict its own commands. Augustine seems to imply that Samson is a martyr who gains a heavenly reward, but he does not say so. He is fully aware of the rights of the innocent in his discussion of war, but not when he discusses Samson, presumably because Samson was not a war leader, just a prize-fighter. **Aquinas** follows Augustine closely. I suppose he too regards Samson as a martyr. But he should have been worried that Samson's motivation was not love, but revenge. How then could Samson earn the heavenly reward? Perhaps the answer was that Hebrews said so, and this settled the matter. But we expect a better case to be made than that.

3. Milton and *Samson Agonistes* As a professional Christian intellectual, Milton feels a need to excuse Samson's *suicide,* and does so along Augustinian lines. But as a seventeenth century puritan Milton agonises over Samson's breaking of his solemn vows, or vocation. His Samson is wracked with remorse for his sins, including falling for the wiles of women. But as to massacring the innocent, Samson needn't worry; Milton gets him off this hook by allowing the innocent spectators

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to escape, contrary to what the Book of Judges says.[38]. In any case, because he sees the story as a tragedy, that is a story with an ending, he implies that Samson's suicidal act of mass-destruction resolves the spiral of vengeance (another departure from his Biblical source). Yet, *pace* Hebrews, Samson attains no heavenly reward. Milton did not believe in personal immortality.

4. Handel's *Samson* In a watered-down way, some of Milton's worries are carried over into Handel's version; but so too are Dryden's certainties about happiness and glory in the hereafter. Samson is ashamed of his past, including his breach of his vow and his falling for Dalila. But his love for her is not part of the motivation for his suicide, which is simply the path to his apotheosis. There is no hint of the endless violence of which Samson's behaviour is only a small part. Nor is Samson's killing of the innocent a worry: it is simply erased. The main focus for Handel is on Samson's paradise hereafter, promising 'rest eternal, sweet repose'. Milton's grim refusal to consider any final reward is replaced by the certainty of the martyr's ultimate bliss, in a 'celestial concert...ever to sound His praise in endless morn of light'.

5. Saint-Saens's *Samson and Delilah* If Milton had at the back of his mind the seemingly endless violence of seventeenth-century Europe, and thought to have it resolved by turning it into a tragedy, **Saint-Saens** was doubtless thinking of the short-lived but vicious duel between France and Prussia in the 1870s. This was the first modern European war, using the full panoply of steam engines, railways, rifled ordnance, machine-guns and heavy artillery. In that context Samson's suicide becomes an heroic wartime sacrifice of self in the line of duty. Yet Samson is also a tortured soul, guilt-ridden over his irresistible love for Delilah, a beautiful, treacherous spy from the enemy side. This urge has overwhelmed him, and death is his punishment, his only reward. For Samson is his nation's war-leader, and his God is a God of battles. His calling is to win God's war against the infidel. As a tragic hero he could be placed in a pantheon alongside Mark Anthony (with Cleopatra), or even Nelson (with Lady Hamilton). The final conflagration ends everything: in an act of suicidal despair, in which everybody involved is destroyed. In this version of Samson, there is no martyrdom as a passport to paradise: modern war is too terrible, and sexual love too overpowering for that. Of course, it required a peace-settlement to make the opera stageable: but a full-scale war had to be fought to make it feasible.

VI

If we look at the Samson story through the ages, as I have tried to do, I think we can see its relevance today. We are now almost back at the beginning, with the Book of Judges. Today, we live in a jungle of self-

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righteous collective personalities—nation-states[39], non-state actors, liberation movements, terrorist networks, business conglomerates—that behave like drunken hooligans locked into a playground of endless, irresolvable violence. Each is willing to commit suicide in order to bring destruction on the others, whether by committing publicity-seeking atrocities against innocent spectators, or by sparking off counter-productive military expeditions that will simply perpetuate the cycle of violence. From one point of view George W. Bush's America is today's Samson,[40] throwing his weight about all over the place, with Osama bin Laden and his ilk cast as his Philistine challengers. Interventions to remove Saddam and co. are like Samson's carrying-off of the gates of Gaza on his shoulders. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan are involved in a sideshow of drunken brawling, like Samson's first wife's protectors, who cannot see any way out except by mutual suicide.[41] Alternatively we can see Al Qu'aida as the modern Samson, the suicidal terrorist aiming to topple the regime of a Philistine superpower by inviting it to engage in an endless violent struggle for control which it can never win.[42] Or again, we can recognise Samson in Ariel Sharon, a strongman fighting for a small community against the might of the Philistine Arab world. All are motivated by hatred of the enemy, by *hubris* and thirst for revenge. None feels guilty about any of it. They are all caught in the 'fold of dire necessity' and think they can do as they do do, and there is no doing anything about it.[43]

Milton's vision of Samson as a tortured political victim, Handel's vision of Samson as the happy victor in an other-worldly paradise, Saint-Saens' fascination with a Samson sentenced to die for forbidden love, can now be recognised as distracting episodes in a larger history of violence. The kinds of battles these visions fed on are dead and gone. Milton's war for freedom from tyranny, eighteenth-century wars between professionals in far-away places, Saint-Saens' war between nations in arms: these have been replaced by a new kind of conflict: the pseudo 'war' of naked terror. We are now almost back in the ancient, pre-moral world of endless, unwinnable conflict between protagonists crazily devoted to their tribal gods. The new Samson in the shape of George W. Bush seems ready to take on all comers: but the Al Qu'aidas and Hamas's of this world have manifestly robbed him of any seemingly irresistible strength. As participants in the new Samson's coalitions, other states are drawn into becoming terrorists too, ready and willing, like Samson, to bring the house down.

Can terrorists also be martyrs? We have to think about this question in the light of the fact that Jesus's life and death is the model and source of martyrdom: and he did not commit suicide. Rather the sort of life he led, the model of humanity he revealed to us, resulted inevitably in his being

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killed, as St. Mark makes clear: 'He began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death'. (Mark 8:31) The trouble, as Herbert McCabe said, is that mostly 'we settle for the person that we have achieved or constructed; we settle for our own self-image because we are afraid of being made in the image of God'. We can overcome this fear only at the risk of being killed, for all human societies reject 'the love that casts out fear'.[44] The genuine martyr is one who confronts that fear. He or she dies because the world cannot face its own sin, its refusal of love; so it kills the person whose existence dramatises it. In being killed the martyr shows up the mess we have made of the world. And this is why suicide is an obstacle to martyrdom. For while the suicidal terrorist seeks to show up the sin of the world, he has decided to abort the process of fully becoming the person he is called to be. Consider the following from a Hamas leader:

> 'We believe that our lifetime is always predicted and that our death has been determined by God, and this cannot change. There are many different reasons that could lead to the end of a person's life—a car accident, cancer, a heart attack—so I'm not saying I am making a choice to shorten my life. But the preferred way of ending my life would be martyrdom'[45]

A preference for martyrdom is difficult to square with Aquinas's thesis that martyrdom is a *gift*, a kind of baptism.[46] The terrorist kills himself because he cannot wait to let the world kill him instead. And in the process he kills a lot of other people whose opportunity to become human, to become images of God, is also lost. In doing this he simply perpetuates the cycle of violence and revenge which is the most obvious manifestation of the 'sin of the world'. And of course, we have to remember also that suicidal terrorism is not a prerogative of 'non-state actors' like Al Qu'aida: the practice of nuclear deterrence by the great powers of this world (including new players on the block, like India and Pakistan) was, and still is, a readiness for suicidal terrorism on a grand scale—so grand indeed that we mostly fail to see what it really consists of. The mind-set behind 'mutual assured destruction' is that of a suicide pact between parties who seek to get their own way by being willing to commit hara-kiri, thus perpetuating the cycle of terror that is implicit in 'deterrence'.

Another way of putting this is that all would-be martyr-terrorists are guilty of presumption, which is a distortion of hope.[47] But this means that Samson, the proto-suicidal terrorist, and indeed all other would-be martyrs, cannot be any such thing. We can only deal with the suicidal martyr by confining him to the old heroic world of Beowulf, or to the modern dream of Batman. We don't have to take Samson seriously, as the Letter to the Hebrews did.

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Yet in another way, we do have to take the Samson legend seriously. I have in mind the problem of those innocent civilians on the roof of the Philistine stadium. The narrator in Judges is untroubled by their slaughter. But, with the coming of Christianity and Jesus's way of overcoming the sin of the world, it is impossible not to be troubled by it. Milton certainly was, as we have noticed. But each of our other 'Christian' tellers of the tale, like every national leader today, simply evades the problem. Here all I can say is that the next time somebody tries to re-tell the Samson legend he or she had better put the rights of the Philistine crowd, who are out for a jolly day in the sunshine, at the centre of the action. Otherwise the endless revenge will continue, and the evil of Adam's sin will not be overcome.

1 In *The Guardian* for 17th July 2002 Paul Eedle refers to a website run by the Centre for Islamic Studies and Research (an Al Qu'aida front organisation) as follows: 'One statement on the subject of "the legality of the operations in Washington and New York" laid out seven grounds in Islamic law on which it is permissible to kill 'sacrosanct infidels'—essentially civilians—and six grounds on which it is permissible to kill Muslims'.

2 Apart from the Judges story, these are all Christian interpretations. After I had written this paper I came across Linda Grant's essay *Defenders of the Faith* (see *The Guardian Review* for July 6 2002), which includes a fascinating modern Jewish angle on the story. In this the strongman Samson figures as 'the Golem', a mediaeval progenitor of Frankenstein (built by a Rabbi to fight anti-Semitism). However, in many respects Grant's way of viewing Samson is close to my own. Yet it is significant that she herself initially remembered the tale only for the Delilah episode. This shows how strong has been the romantic way of remembering the myth.

3 *Hebrews*, 11.:32

4 *The City of God* Book I Chap. 20

5 *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, Q. 64, Art. 5 ad 4

6 *Samson Agonistes* ll. 307ff

7 *The Living World of the Old Testament* (London, Longman, 1975) pp.200-01

8 It is possible that Samson's Nazirite status was not original to the Samson story. If so, this would help to resolve the difficulties faced by Augustine and his successors. See: Mary Joan Winn Leith in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* ed.by Metzger and Coogan (NY and Oxford, OUP, 1993) p. 673

9 *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1665-66

10 see note vii above

11 John A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1952) p. 40

12 see above, note iv. With this pronouncement Augustine practically put paid to the argument of the Donatists of his day in favour of suicidal martyrdom. On this, see G.W .Bowerstock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge University Press 1995) and Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London, Faber and Faber, 1967) Chapter 19

13 *Sum. Theol.* IIaIIae, Q. 64

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14 *Sum. Theol.* IIaIIae Q. 124, Art 2
15 William Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* in *The Poems of William Blake*, Ed. W.H.Stevenson (London, Longman, 1971) p. 107. Cf. Coleridge, *Table Talk* in *Selected Poetry and Prose* (Holt Reinhart and Winston, 1951) p. 469: 'In every one of his poems it is Milton himself whom you see...the egotism of such a man is a revelation of spirit'.
16 on Milton's personality, see Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, Faber and Faber, 1977) Part I, Chapter 5, ii; Part 5, Chapter 20; and Part 7 Chapter 32.
17 C.Hill, op.cit. Part I, 5, i. During this tour Milton met Hugo Grotius in Paris, and in Italy he was able to talk to Galileo.
18 *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 523-31
19 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* in *Dr.Johnson: Prose and Poetry* selected by M. Davies (London, Rupert Hart Davis, 1950) p. 827
20 On the first, see the *Areopagitica* (1644) and on the second *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643-4). Milton's writings were however always constrained by the censorship, leading him to speak in round-about ways to avoid trouble, especially after the Restoration: see C.Hill, op.cit., pp. 64-66, 405-09
21 C.Hill, op.cit. p. 235
22 C.Hill points out that references to Samson as a politically significant figure in the context of seventeenth century England were numerous in the 1640s and 1650s. Milton himself had been toying with a Samson poem since the early 1640s. Op.cit.Part VI Chapter 31, pp. 428-32.
23 C.Hill, op. cit. p. 362
24 *Henry V*, iv, 1
25 *Samson Agonistes* l. 1659
26 e.g. *Paradise Lost* Book XI, ll. 691-97; *Paradise Regained* Book III, ll. 387ff.
27 According to Christopher Hill, Milton was a 'mortalist' who did not believe in the immortality of soul. His is a predominantly this-worldly religion, which precludes such popish notions as purgatory or praying to the saints. Hill, op. cit., p. 52 and Part 5, Ch. 25 passim
28 I am assuming that *Samson Agonistes* was written after the Restoration, and was probably his last major poetic work. It was first published in 1671.
29 *Samson Agonistes* ll. 1721-37
30 Robert Browning, *Pippa Passes,* Part I, l. 222
31 cf. Newburgh Hamilton's Preface to his Word-Book of 'Samson' (18th February 1743), in *Handel: A documentary Biography* by Otto Erich Deutsch (London, A&C Black, 1955) p. 559. The emergence of the Handelian dramatic oratorio was partly the result of two factors: the decline of public interest in the formalities of Italian *Opera Seria*, of which Handel had long been an exponent; and a ban on staging Biblical stories in the theatre due to Puritanical objections by, among others, the Bishop of London. See *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* by Winton Dean (Oxford University Press 1959) Chapter 7 passim.
32 Handel had completed the work in a concise form by 1741, only a few weeks after *The Messiah:* but he expanded it somewhat after the return from Ireland in 1742, adding the final triumphant *Let the Bright Seraphim.*
33 This was a feeling inherited from the previous century. See note xxxi.
34 For example, by the distorted version of the great Act 2 aria which Saint-

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Saens gives to Delilah in Act 3, when she confesses she did everything out of hate.

35 The first performance of *Götterdämmerung* also took place in 1876

36 *Hebrews* 11:32-40 and note i in the Jerusalem Bible.

37 I limit myself here to what Augustine says in Book I Chapter 20 of the *City of God*.

38 Perhaps Milton was thinking of the appalling atrocities against civilians during the seemingly endless Thirty Years war of his youth: atrocities made familiar to modern sensibility by Brecht's epic drama *Mother Courage*. It is also possible that Milton's meeting with Grotius, in Paris in 1838, had some effect here. Grotius was one of the first writers on international law to insist on the immunity of non-combatants from attack, especially during sieges. His *De Jure Belli et Pacis* had been published in 1625. See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (London, Penguin Books, 1980) p. 168.

39 I have not been able here to consider the views of Philip Bobbit, in whose monumental study of modern politics, *The Shield of Achilles,* the theory is put forward that the modern world is becoming a society of 'market-states': but I doubt if Bobbit's theories undermine my central thesis.

40 However, Linda Grant's Jewish interpretation sees Ariel Sharon as the modern Samson, the strongman defending Israel. After his supervision of the Sabra and Shatilla massacres Sharon was temporarily shorn of his powers by an Israeli investigative committee, Grant points out, but is now back as a prime minister fuelled by hunger for vengeance. Grant's interpretation and my own are not, however, incompatible: myths of this kind are capable of many mutually re-inforcing re-interpretations.

41 In a forthcoming book on the *Idea of a Just War* Barrie Paskins writes of war as a kind of drunken brawling, not as an orderly rational duel as understood by von Clausewitz and his followers.

42 'Responding to violence with more violence will more likely set in process a cycle of violence—in a sense it is the very currency the terrorist understands...a world-wide "war on terror", attacking any terrorist groups that are seen as a potential threat will be deeply counterproductive, leading to endless conflict'. *A Never-Ending War? Consequences of 11 September*, Briefing Paper, March 2002, by Paul Rogers and Scilla Elworthy (Oxford Research Group, 2002)

43 On this interpretation of the current world scene see Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge UK, W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), esp. Chapter III.

44 Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1987) pp. 93-94

45 Abdul-Aziz Rantissi,talking to Robert Fisk, *The Independent*, 28th April 2002

46 *Sum. Theol.*IIaIIae, Q. 124 Art 1 ad 1

47 *Sum. Theol.*IIaIIae Q. 21 Art.

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