

## Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam

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One of the most important marks of a person's faith or commitment to a religious ideology is his readiness to defend that faith with life itself if necessary. Examples of such heroic sacrifice or martyrdom abound in both ancient and contemporary society. In ancient times, the heroic indifference of such men as the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, to torture and death in the affirmation of a noble ideal earned them the honor of martyrs; their example and ideal of total indifference to passions and worldly life provided a model for early Christian martyrs. In our own time, such men as Che Guaverra and his legendary comrade Tanya have been regarded as martyrs and even saints by some Catholic leftist priests. Martyrdom has been one of the most powerful instruments in the establishment and propagation of a faith or ideology, and hence of a new social order.

In this essay we shall examine the philosophy of martyrdom and the role of martyrs in Christianity and Islam. We shall first consider this phenomenon in each of the two traditions separately, and then briefly discuss similarities and differences of concept and attitude towards the martyr in the two communities. Our aim is essentially to appreciate the contribution which this phenomenon has made to the religio-political situation of today's world.

The term *martyr* as used in the New Testament means "witness." A martyr is a witness not to an idea but to an event, to the faith in the crucified and risen Christ. Thus the author of I John writes, "... that which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands . . . we proclaim also to you. . . ." The first Christian martyr, Stephen, is reported to have seen the heavens open and the Son of God seated on the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Neither in the Old nor the New Testament, however, do we see any significant development of the concept beyond an almost juridical meaning of *witness*.

In biblical and post-biblical Judaism, martyrdom was considered to be an individual work of piety and resistance to evil. The cases of the woman and her seven sons in IV Maccabees (8:3ff) and the three young men in Daniel (ch. 3) have survived as powerful symbols in the liturgy and hagiography of

the Church. The aim of martyrdom in Judaism was essentially to perfect the victim and edify the people. Since martyrdom, as a religious and moral concept, can best develop within an eschatological framework, it is significant that in Judaism this concept appears only in late Biblical and apocryphal writings in an eschatological context. The early Church fell heir to both Jewish eschatology and its moral implications.

In Acts 22:20, St. Paul acknowledges his role in the martyrdom of early Christians, "when the blood of Thy servant Stephen was shed."<sup>3</sup> The book of Revelation, the apocalypse of the early Church, presents a vivid image of the martyrs: "I saw the woman drunk with the blood . . . of the martyrs."<sup>4</sup>

During the apostolic age, the concept of martyrdom took on new meaning as the number of martyrs increased and their memory lived on. Yet the two elements of witnessing to one's faith and stoic indifference to pain continued to dominate the thinking of the early Church. Thus we read in I Clement 5:4-7 (written about A.D. 96):

Peter, who because of unrighteous jealousy suffered not one or two but many trials, and having thus given his testimony went to the glorious place which was his due. Through jealousy and strife Paul showed the way to the prize of endurance; seven times he was in bonds, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a herald both in the East and in the West, he gained the noble fame of his faith, he taught righteousness to all the world, and when he had reached the limits of the West he gave his testimony before the rulers, and thus passed from the world and was taken up into the Holy Place—the greatest example of endurance.<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest and most eager martyrs of the Church was Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who died in A.D. 108. For Ignatius, the martyr was "he who imitated Christ in His sufferings."<sup>6</sup> He therefore used the term *disciple* rather than *witness*. His view was fully theological, and he insisted on bodily suffering as a proof that Christ, the crucified Son of God, was clothed in a real body. Ignatius wished his own body to be crushed between the teeth of wild beasts, to become a perfect loaf for Christ, whose own body is represented in the bread and wine of the Eucharist—regarded by Ignatius as "the medicine of immortality."<sup>7</sup>

In the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, written about A.D. 155, witnessing faith to the humanity and suffering of the Son of God was fully developed as a concept.<sup>8</sup> In the Leonine letters of about A.D. 170 the term *martyr* signified persecution leading to the shedding of blood for Christ. Here, the example of Stephen, who saw (witnessed) the glori-

fied Christ before his death, was used as a proof case. The letters vehemently protest the use of the epithet *martyrs* for confessors who endured persecution but did not seal their testimony with their blood.<sup>9</sup> In *The Shepherd* of Hermas, this imitator of Christ through martyrdom earns the martyr's salvation and a share in the glory of Christ. "Those who suffered for the name of the Son of God are glorious. All their sins have been taken away."<sup>10</sup> The martyrs are also pictured as sitting on thrones with crowns on their heads, with Christ engaged in judging the world.<sup>11</sup> Such glory belongs only to those who have suffered stripes, imprisonment, crucifixion, and wild beasts for Christ's name, insists the author of *The Shepherd*.

A rich and elaborate cultus evolved out of this great regard for martyrdom and the veneration accorded martyrs. We can discuss only the beginnings of this cultus, and some of its salient features. Apparently, the authorities responsible for the execution by burning of Polycarp sought to prevent the Christians from gathering his remains which, they feared, would be venerated more than Christ. The faithful protested this accusation vehemently, arguing that the veneration accorded to martyrs for their sacrifice is not the same as worship which belongs to God alone. The classic difference here stated and greatly elaborated in the Eastern Church is between honor or veneration and worship. The parishioners of the bishop did gather the bones of the saint for burial, considering them "to be more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold. . . . [They] laid them in a suitable place. There the Lord will permit us [they said] . . . to gather together in joy and gladness and to celebrate the day of his martyrdom as a birthday, in memory of those athletes who have gone before. . . ."<sup>12</sup> The "birthday of the martyr" as an annual memorial was a Christian adaptation of pagan custom that played a crucial role in the growth of the cult of martyrs.<sup>13</sup>

Others among the early Church fathers advocated great veneration for martyrs whom they considered to be the treasures of the Church. Martyrdom was considered to be a second baptism, the baptism of blood, granting the martyr immediate remission of sin and entry into Paradise. Martyrs who were imprisoned awaiting death, their families, and even the towns in which they resided were held in high honor. Those who remained steadfast through imprisonment and torture (although escaping death) gained positions among the elite of society. This honor gave them the privilege of episcopal office.<sup>14</sup>

From an early period, martyrs who were imprisoned were asked to pray for the health, well-being, and salvation of the pious. It was a natural development that such requests for prayers came to be renewed after the martyr's death. This controversial point no doubt led to an even greater tension between worship of the dead—a common practice in pre-Christian pagan society—and the veneration of martyrs. The cult of martyrs with its relics and shrines

became the object of scorn to the Protestant Reformation; as a result the Catholic Church was forced to define its theology of martyrdom again and again. In the words of the Council of Trent, which met in part to answer the criticisms of the Reformation: "The holy bodies of holy martyrs, and of others now living with Christ—which bodies were the living members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Ghost (I Corinthians 3:16), and which are by Him to be raised unto eternal life, and to be glorified—are to be venerated by the faithful through which bodies many benefits are bestowed by God on men."<sup>15</sup>

While in Christianity a rich cultus arose around the shrines and relics of the martyrs, in Islam this phenomenon remained limited to Shi'i Islam, and even there took a different form and meaning. The "friend of God" or saint in Islam, whose shrine became a place of pilgrimage for the pious, was not required to be a martyr. In fact, the Prophet recommended that, whenever possible, martyrs should be buried at the spot where they fell in battle.<sup>16</sup> To my knowledge, there are no shrines in the Muslim world except those of the Shi'ah imams in Iraq and Iran; specifically erected as memorials for martyrs. Yet even here the imam's role is far greater than simply that of martyr.

The word *shahid* ("witness"), with its derivatives, occurs over fifty times in the Quran. In most of these references, the emphasis is on its linguistic meaning and usage as witness here on earth to the oneness of God, the apostleship of Muhammad, and the truth of the faith. Witnesses are not in a category by themselves but are classed with the prophets, the righteous, and the truthful—that is, with those who have found favor with God.<sup>17</sup>

The first question of concern to us is: Who is a martyr? The answer, as we shall see, is in the end legally determined. A man, we are told, said to the Prophet: "A man may fight in quest of booty. Another may fight for fame and still another for a show of status. Who among these would be fighting in the way of God?" The Prophet answered, "Whoever fights in order that the word of God be uppermost, would be fighting in the way of God."<sup>18</sup>

The famous traditionist, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, comments on this *hadith* ("Tradition of the Prophet"): "One may fight for one of five reasons: booty; a show of bravery; or a show before others; in defense of wealth, family, or land; and out of anger. Any one of these could in itself be praiseworthy or the opposite. So long as the main purpose remains that the 'word of God be uppermost' (which is here defined as defending the cause of Islam), it matters not what other reasons may exist as secondary causes."<sup>19</sup>

In yet another tradition, the Prophet was asked whether a man fighting for material rewards would also have a reward with God on the day of resurrection. The Prophet answered, "Nothing." He continued, "God would not

accept a deed unless it is done sincerely for Him and that the doer seek by this only His (God's) face."<sup>20</sup>

At least in early Islam, the application of the term *martyr* was not limited to the person who is killed in the way of God on the battlefield. Martyrdom is an act of *jihad* (striving) in the way of God. *Jihad*, however, contrary to the common view held in the West, is not simply militance; more basic is the *jihad* against the evil in one's own soul and in society. It is this inner purity resulting from the *jihad* of the soul that creates the right intention of serving the cause of truth in whatever way possible. In addition to dying in defense of one's faith, property, or life, therefore, the act of falling off one's mount, dying of snakebite, or drowning is also regarded as martyrdom. Likewise, he who dies from a stray arrow or bullet, or from his house collapsing down upon him, is considered a martyr. Even those who die of the plague or a stomach ailment, or a woman who dies in childbirth, are considered martyrs. The famous traditionist, Ibn Abbas, is said to have declared: "A man dies in his bed in the way of God, yet he is a martyr."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of all this, the true martyr is he who is slain in the way of God.

Early traditionists may have used the term *martyr* very broadly and with caution because they feared the rise of a special cult of martyrs. Thus, in relationship to the authority of Abu Hurayrah, the Prophet is said to have declared: "Whoever has faith in God and in His apostle, observes regular prayers and fasts the month of Ramadan, it shall be incumbent upon God to make him enter Paradise, whether he fights in the way of God or remains in the land of his birth." Yet when the people asked if they should convey this glad tidings to others, the Prophet did not answer directly. Instead, he described the high station of the martyrs in Paradise.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps for this reason it was the jurist rather than the orator or theologian who determined the principle according to which a man or woman may be considered to be a martyr.

We cannot enter in detail into this technical topic of the qualifications of a martyr; a few general remarks must suffice. Three categories of martyrs may be distinguished: martyr of this world, martyr of this and the world to come, and martyr of the world to come only. The first is he who dies for a worldly cause other than that of faith. The second is he who is slain for no other reason but that "the word of God be uppermost." Such a martyr is to be buried in his clothes, without washing or shrouding—ordinarily, necessary rites for the dead. The martyr of this world is likewise buried in his clothes, since in the end his motives are known only to God, who will reward each person according to his acts and intentions. Umar Ibn al-Khattab and Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the second and fourth of the four rightly guided caliphs who were stabbed and died later of their wounds, were given regular burial. While

both were considered martyrs in the way of God, such burial indicates that they were not, technically speaking, martyrs. The third caliph, Uthman, who was slain in his house, was also not washed or shrouded.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the Quran counsels Muslims to make peace among themselves. Yet if one group transgresses against another, that group must be fought until it returns to the right path.<sup>24</sup> Thus, we are told, after the battle of Nahrawan against the Kharijites (A.D. 659), Ali had the dead on his side buried as martyrs. This principle has continued to be observed (and often abused) to the present day.

As in Christianity, the blood of the martyr in Islam washes away his or her sins. It is important to observe that even though women are exempted from actual fighting for religious and juristic reasons, the first martyr in Islam was a woman—Sumayya, the mother of Ammar Ibn Yasir, who was tortured to death with her husband and son by the Meccan Arabs before the conquest of the city. The injunction to let the blood of the martyrs be their purification is said to have been given by the Prophet regarding those slain in the battle of Uhud.<sup>25</sup> He said: "Shroud them in their blood and do not wash them. For no man who is injured in the way of God but that he shall come on the day of resurrection with his blood gushing out of his veins. The color shall be that of blood and the odor that of musk."<sup>26</sup>

The martyrs—"those who are slain in the way of God"—the Quran tells us "are not to be reckoned as dead; rather, they are alive with their Lord sustained."<sup>27</sup> Islamic eschatology has always been expressed in the language and the social framework of this life. Hence, tradition very early displayed great imagination in depicting the great pleasures of the martyrs in Paradise.<sup>28</sup> Yet the true martyr for God retains his desire for martyrdom even in Paradise. Malik Ibn Anas related that the Prophet said: "No one who enters Paradise would wish to return to this world, even if he were to possess all that is in it, except the martyr. He would desire to return to the world to be killed ten times because of the great honor [with God] which he sees in this act."<sup>29</sup> "The door of Paradise," we are told in another tradition, "is under the glittering swords."<sup>30</sup>

Tradition records numerous examples of martyrs who sensed the odor of Paradise on the battlefield and thus gladly met their death. One such example is that of a man called Abdallah Ibn Jahsh who prayed on the morning of the battle of Uhud, saying: "O God, let me today meet a strong and brave knight who will kill me and cut off my nose and two ears. Thus when I shall meet you tomorrow, you will say, 'My servant, for what were your nose and ears cut off?' I will then answer, 'It was in You [for your sake], my Lord, and in your apostle.'"<sup>31</sup>

Shiah Muslims have made the ethos of martyrdom and suffering a basic

principle of their faith and piety. Every year during the first ten days of Muharram (the first month of the Muslim calendar), they relive the experience of Husayn Ibn Ali, the third imam, who through his death at Karbala provided for all Muslims the supreme example of self-sacrifice in the way of God. In the tragedy of Karbala in A.D. 680, the ideal of martyrdom took on new theological and pietistic significance. Thus Husayn, "the Prince of Martyrs" and "Master of the Youths of the People of Paradise," was said to have been destined for this sacrifice from the beginning of creation. History was read backward from him to Adam, and beyond and forward to the end of the world. Before him, history was a long prelude to the drama of suffering and death of which he, his friends, and immediate relatives were the central characters. After him, history is a period of intense hope in the anticipation of the return of the Mahdi (his ninth descendant and twelfth imam of the Shiah community) to avenge the death of Husayn and vindicate the faithful for their actual and vicarious sharing in the sufferings of the holy family of the Prophet Muhammad. Yet Husayn himself was said to have been told by the Prophet in a dream that "he has an exalted station with God which he cannot attain except through martyrdom."<sup>32</sup>

The death of Husayn, moreover, became for Shiah Muslims a source of redemption and healing. According to a well-known tradition, just before his death the Prophet said: "I am leaving with you [the Muslim community] the two weights onto which if you hold fast, you shall never go astray; the Book of God and my family, the people of my household. They shall never be separated until they come to me at the spring."<sup>33</sup> This paradisiacal spring shall be given to the Prophet on the day of judgment to quench the thirst of the pious "on the day of the great thirst."<sup>34</sup> Both the Quran and the family of Muhammad will judge and intercede before God and his Prophet for those of the Muslims who honored the two weights or neglected and mistreated them. Husayn will also stand before God on the day of resurrection as a headless body to contend with his murderers and intercede for his followers.<sup>35</sup> For Shiah piety it is Fatmah, the daughter of Muhammad and mother of Husayn, who has in this world embodied the suffering of her descendants and who continues to shed tears of anguish even in Paradise.<sup>36</sup>

This ethos of suffering stands in sharp contrast to the quick and spectacular success of the early generations of Muslims. Yet it is itself the product of that military and economic success, coming as it does out of the conviction that political justice must, in the end, reflect divine justice. God Himself, in Shiah theology, is bound only by His own justice. Hence, Shiites repeat daily in their worship the prayer: "O God, we desire of You an honorable state in which You honor Islam and its people, and humiliate hypocrisy and its people. [We pray] that in it you render us among those who call [others]

to obedience to you, and that you make us leaders to your way." This ideal order will come only when human justice will approximate divine justice most closely, which can only be achieved under the leadership of an imam protected by God from error. In this hope—or rather, humanly unrealized goal—political idealism and theology meet.

It is noteworthy that Shiites, more than the Sunni majority of Muslims, have risked life and Muslim unity in this quest. They have, moreover, maintained a long and recognizable list of martyrs. The list begins with Abel (Qabil) and includes the Prophet Muhammad and all the imams but one. The twelfth imam, the Hidden Imam, will return to close this long chapter of wrongdoing and martyrdom, and establish justice in the earth. Thus the Prophet is said to have declared: "Even if there remains [only] one day of the life of the world, God will prolong that day until a man of my progeny shall appear, whose name is my name and whose agnomen is my agnomen. He shall fill the earth with equity and justice as it has been filled with inequity and injustice."<sup>37</sup> This tradition, with minor variations, is accepted by both Shiah and Sunni traditionists. Thus the ideal it expresses has gained official acceptance among Muslims of both groups.

This ideal of great justice was realized for a brief time only by the Prophet, Muhammad, in Medina. The Quran refers to the realization of the ideal of a good society in a statement coming shortly before the Prophet's death and after all the obligations of Islam had been instituted: "Today have I perfected your religion for you; I have completed my favor towards you and have accepted Islam as a religion for you."<sup>38</sup> Martyrs throughout Islamic history have been an affirmation of this hope, and a recognition that this hope remains an ideal unfulfilled because of human folly. Hence, the challenge remains as powerful today in Iran, Afghanistan, the Arabian peninsula, and even here in the New World as it was when it was first uttered.

"Surely God has exchanged with the people of faith their lives and wealth so that they shall have Paradise: they fight in the way of God, they kill and are killed. . . ."<sup>39</sup> This verse continues, "It is a promise incumbent upon Him in truth, in the Torah and the Gospel." Thus Islam has from the beginning recognized the place and value of martyrdom in the major scriptures revealed before it. In an earlier surah of the Quran, revealed before the principle of *jihad* was established for the Muslim community, the Quran alludes to the famous Christian martyrs of Najran<sup>40</sup> who became the subject of much exegetical and *hadith* scholarship. It is therefore important to ask, in conclusion, about the similarities and differences in the view of and attitude toward martyrs in the two religious traditions.

Perhaps the most obvious and important historical difference is that while

in Christianity martyrdom was a glorious struggle before Christendom became a world power under Constantine, in Islam the *jihad* or struggle of the martyrs was instituted *after* Islam became a religious, social, and political order. Thus, when the symbol of supreme martyrdom, the cross, became the banner under which political wars were waged, the significance of the principle altogether became subject to question and doubt. The most intense protest against this "distortion" may be seen in the radical Reformation and the rich and moving martyrologies that Mennonites and Anabaptists have left as their legacy for posterity. The ideal martyr in Christianity was therefore he "who suffered stripes, imprisonment, crucifixion and wild beasts . . ." Is it because of this loss of the original meaning of this ideal that even among committed fundamentalist Christians martyrdom is no longer the impetus it was for the early Church?

In Islam, the ideal martyr is he who strives in the way of God "with his hand, with his tongue, and with his heart." Yet striving only with the heart is considered to be "the weakest of faith."<sup>41</sup> This emphasis on outward struggle does not imply wild and uncontrolled warfare, however; rather, it advocates a regulated struggle for the good and against evil. (At any rate, such is enjoined in the Quran and *hadith* tradition.) This struggle has definite priorities of concern: "If affliction befalls you," advised Abdallah Ibn Jundub, the son of a well-known Companion, "ransom your souls by your wealth. But if affliction increases, put your souls before your faith. For a truly deprived man is he whose religion is taken away from him. This is because there is no poverty after Paradise, nor is there any wealth after the Fire."<sup>42</sup>

In spite of this important difference, however, both Islam and Christianity agree on the basic concept of martyrdom as witness to the truth. The true martyr, the two religions also agree, is he who is free from any other motive but that witness. While the ideal martyr in Islam is the one who falls on the battlefield, actual fighting is not an absolute requirement for martyrdom. Islam, moreover, has its martyrs who silently and bravely endure torture and death. Finally, both traditions are in agreement regarding the exalted station of the martyr with God and the belief that the martyr will carry the marks of his sacrifice with him to be displayed even in heaven.<sup>43</sup>

In more recent Christian developments, the two ideals may yet have more in common than ever before. Liberation theology—the product of poverty, piety, and political awareness—may yet prove to be the most important phenomenon in modern Christian history. As a Muslim, I believe that piety without political involvement is at best all theory and no practice. It shall be those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and defend the wronged in prison who will inherit the kingdom of God.

## Notes

1. I John 1:1. (All Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.)
2. Acts 7:55-56.
3. See also Acts 1:8, Luke 21:13, John 15:27 and Matt. 10:28, where the term *martyr* is also used in the sense of witness.
4. Rev. 17:6. See also Rev. 6:9-11, 20:4.
5. Cyril C. Richardson et al., eds., *Early Christian Fathers*, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1933), vol. 1, p. 46.
6. See Rom. 6:3, and the entire epistle that revolves around this concept.
7. See Eph. 20:2.
8. See Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, pp. 149ff.
9. *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 11, 1967, p. 312.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 156.
13. On the development of the cult of the martyrs and its relationships to Graeco-Roman antecedents, see James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), vol. 9, pp. 52ff.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
16. Hasan Khalid, *al-Shahid fi al-Islam*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm lil-malayin, 1971), p. 75.
17. See Quran 4:69, 57:19.
18. Alimad ibn Ali bin Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fath al-bari fi sharh sahih al-bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-marifah, n.d.) vol. 6, p. 28.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Khalid, *al-Shahid fi al-Islam*, p. 57. See also pp. 55-57.
22. Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-bari fi sharh sahih al-bukhari*, p. 11.
23. See Khalid, *al-Shahid fi al-Islam*, pp. 69-72.
24. See Quran 49:9.
25. See Khalid, *al-Shahid fi al-Islam*, p. 70.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Quran 3:169.
28. See Imad al-Din Abi al-Fida Ismail Bin Kathir, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Azim*, 2d ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1389/1970), vol. 2, pp. 153-60.
29. Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-bari fi sharh sahih al-bukhari*, p. 31.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Khalid, *al-Shahid fi al-Islam*, p. 138.
32. Akhtab al-Muwaffaq al-Khawarizmi, *Maqatal al-Husayn* (Najaf: Muhammad al-Samawi, 1367/1947), vol. 1, p. 187.
33. Abu Jafar al-Saduq Ibn Bahawayh al-Qummi, *Iktamal al-Din* (Najaf: al-Marhaah al-Haydariyyah, 1389/1970), p. 62.
34. Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering In Islam* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), pp. 205ff.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
38. Quran 5:3.
39. Quran 9:111.
40. Quran 85:4-8.
41. Abu Isa Muhammad bin Isa bin Sawrah al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Abdul Rahman Muhammad Uthman, 3d ed., (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1398/1978) vol. 3, p. 318.
42. Khalid, *al-Shahid fi al-Islam*, p. 138.
43. I have already cited Muslim tradition in support of this idea. For the Christian tradition, see Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, pp. 199, 282 (n.7).