Martyrdom

â”€

Martyrdom

Todd Lawson
published in Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World: Oxford Islamic Studies Online

2008?

Islam accords a special status to those who sacrifice their lives in the service of their religion. This is clear from the earliest sources (Qur?an and hadith [traditions]) and the auxiliary sources (sirah [biography of Muhammad], maghazi [accounts of military campaigns], ?ilm al-rijal [biographies of narrators], and tafsir [exegesis]). All of these sources agree on shahid (witness) as the word for "martyr." The meaning of shahid, which appears no less than fifty-six times in singular, plural, and adverbial forms in the Qur?an, is "eyewitness" or "witness" in a legal sense. A. J. Wensinck's pioneering study (1941) observed a close relationship between Islam and Christianity that centered on this meaning; the Christian technical term "martyr" also means "witness." This correspondence led Wensinck to conclude that the two traditions share a similar development involving ancient Semitic and Hellenistic religious motifs. Whatever led to the choice of the word "witness" for a believer who has made the ultimate gesture, it is clear that the idea of martyrdom in Islam was thoroughly at home in the early religion.

The Qur?an does not use the word shahid unambiguously, at least in the singular form, although there is one instance of the use of the plural which has readily lent itself to the martyrdom interpretation. But apart from the direct reference to the plural shuhada?, the Qur?anic valorization of sabr (endurance in times of difficulty) and the related theme of the suffering of all the prophets at the hands of persecutors, to name only two motifs, supports admiration of martyrdom, long suffering, self-sacrifice, and patience. This theme reaches its apotheosis in the poetic expressions of the mystics of Islam who saw as their starting point in this regard such hadith qudsi (holy hadith) as:

“Who My beauty kills, I am his blood-money,” or Hallaj's “Happiness is from Him, but suffering is He Himself” (Chelkowski, p. 217).

Sacred Texts on Martyrdom.

Ayoub (1978) has pointed out that even in the earliest portion of the Qur?an, that is, in those revelations that came even before the duty of jihad was made incumbent on Muslims, there is a divine confirmation of the ideal of martyrdom, namely, Qur?an 85:3–8, which many commentators say refers to the famous Christian martyrs of Najran. But regardless of the actual identities of the persons and events being alluded to, the reference to martyrdom is unambiguous.

The most important verse dealing with martyrdom is one in which the word shuhada? (witnesses) is interpreted by many exegetes to mean “martyrs.” Qur?an 4:69 says “Whosoever obeys God, and the Messenger—they are with those whom God has blessed. Prophets, just men, martyrs [shuhada?], the righteous; good companions they!” (A. J. Arberry's translation). Arberry (d. 1969), faithful to the exegetical tradition, unhesitatingly uses “martyrs” to translate shuhada?, whereas other translators, such as Yusuf ?Ali (d. 1953), more cautiously use the English word “witnesses” instead. This verse is the locus classicus for later exegetical and theological discussions about the hierarchy of the inhabitants of Paradise. About the rank of “witness” (shahid), Yusuf ?Ali offers the following comment: “[These] are the noble army of Witnesses, who testify to the truth. The testimony may be by martyrdom, as in the case of the Imams Hasan and Husayn. Or it may be by the tongue of the true Preacher or the pen of the devoted scholar, or the life of a man devoted to service.” Thus shahadah, while translated as “martyrdom” in some contexts, strictly encompasses much more than the sacrificing of life in the path of God (fi sabil Allah); indeed it is also the word for the act of confessing adherence to Islam by uttering, “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Nonetheless, shahadah as martyrdom is regarded as highly praiseworthy.

The Qur?an has many passages which indicate an authentic appreciation for and inchoate theory of martyrdom: “Say not of those who die in the path of God that they are dead. Nay rather they live” (2:154); “Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided, rejoicing in the bounty God has given them, and joyful in those who remain behind and have not joined them, because no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow, joyful in blessing and bounty from God, and that God leaves not to waste the wage of the believers” (3:169–171; see also9:20–22, 47:4, 61:11, and 3:157–158). These few verses illustrate that even though the word “martyr” may not be found explicitly in the Qur?an and martyrdom

is represented through circumlocutions, nonetheless the virtue is emphatically and dramatically taught in the verses of the Holy Book. The Islamic ideal of martyrdom can be considered the logical adjunct to the overall Qur?anic view of death as illusory. This view is perhaps nowhere more succinctly represented in the Qur?an than at 62:6–7: “Say: ‘You of Jewry, if you assert that you are the friends of God, apart from other men, then do you long for death, if you speak truly.’ ”

The doctrine of the Hereafter (al-akhirah) caused Muhammad much trouble with his early audiences, who stubbornly refused to accept the idea of life beyond the grave. In Islam, death is paradoxical—as in the famous statement of the Prophet: “Die before you die”—and that paradox supplies the energy for the strong belief in the spiritual station of martyrs. Islam thus deemed as “vainglory” the pre-Islamic Arab literary and cultural motif of fakhr (honor or pride in prowess on the field of tribal warfare) and replaced it with a glorification of the pious dedication to the struggle for the promotion of the Word of God. In the hadith collection of the ninth-century Persian compiler Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj we find the following statement by the prophet Muhammad: “Whosoever partakes of the battle from desire of glory or in order to show his courage, is no martyr; a martyr is only he who fights in order that Allah's Word may be prevalent” (Wensinck, p. 95). Even though it remains to be seen whether or not the pre-Islamic phenomenon does not have a more positive relationship with the Islamic ideal of martyrdom, the change in ethos indicated here between the period of Jahiliyah and the Islamic era is quite analogous to the change Christianity wrought in the pagan world (Lane Fox, 1989, p. 336).

Thus, as Wensinck has pointed out, martyrdom in Islam is intimately connected with the rewards of Paradise. This is clear in the hadith literature, which served as a basis for the final elaboration of the doctrine of martyrdom by the fuqaha? (legal scholars) of Islam. Indeed, the hadith literature is vastly more supportive of and unambiguous about martyrdom than is the Qur?an. There are countless explicit statements attributed to the Prophet which make it clear that those who die for Islam enjoy a special rank.

As a result, Muslims esteem martyrdom highly. Islamic respect for martyrdom can be ritualistic or devotional, as in the case of the ta?ziyah (consolation) commemorations in Shiism, or historical, as in the manner in which all Muslims idealize the formative struggle of the early band of Muslims under the leadership of Muhammad. It can also be existential: that is, Muslims may seek to become martyrs. All three responses to the ideal have existed throughout Islamic history (Cook). The ideal of martyrdom can be read into the very name of the

religion: Islam means submission to the will of God. And the primary—not to say archetypal—act of submission is, according to the Islamic tradition, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, and, presumably, his son's willingness to comply, thereby rendering that son (unidentified in the Qur?an) a martyr, or more accurately, one who was willing to become a martyr.

In its veneration of the individual act of self-sacrifice for a higher moral, ethical, spiritual idea or cause, Islam is no different from any of the other great religious traditions of the world (Pannewicke). But Islam as a whole is distinguished from other traditions that have theologized away the challenging blade of the martyrdom ideal through metaphor and other abstractions. This fact accounts for the simultaneous feelings of unease and admiration which occur to the non-Muslim observer of the contemporary scene and its examples of shahadah “martyrdom, testimony.”

There have been times even within the Islamic community when the ideal of martyrdom was “socialized.” Within the larger Sunni tradition, the personal ethos and ideal of martyrdom became quiescent as a religious motif. Even though Sunni theologians recognized the power of the idea and even perpetuated the veneration of the early martyrs of Islam—such as Hamza ibn ?Abd al-Muttallib, the original sayyid al-shuhada? (Prince of Martyrs, a title now most familiarly attached to the hero par excellence of the Shi?i, Husayn ibn ?Ali)—and the veneration of the sacrifices made by the early community as acts of martyrdom, they nonetheless rigorously opposed the cultivation of a contemporary cult of martyrdom in their respective societies by emphasizing the illegality of suicide and equating the seeking of a martyr's death with it. This was no doubt at least partly in response to the activities of rebellious groups such as the Khawarij (Kharijites) who were disruptive to the greater unity of Muslims, the ahl al-sunnat wa-al-jama?at (the people of the [Prophet Muhammad's] tradition and the greater Muslim community, what may be called “catholic Islam”).
The same theologians elevated the accomplishment of moral and ethical challenges as equal or even preferable to death: fasting, regularity in prayer, reading the Qur?an, filial devotion, and rectitude in the collection of taxes. The rank of martyr could thus be sought in the normal acts of worship: the ritual perfection and purity of motive with which these were performed then determined how close a believer might come to being granted the prize of martyrdom.

In addition, books of hadith list categories of believers whose deaths occur in such a violent or painful way that they are counted as martyrs. According to Wensinck, such a death can be of five, seven, or eight types. The most explicit list is from the Muwatta? of Malik ibn Anas (d. 795):

The martyrs are seven, apart from death in Allah's way. He that dies as a victim of an epidemic is a martyr; he that dies by being drowned is a martyr; he that dies from pleurisy is a martyr; he that dies from diarrhea is a martyr; he that dies by fire is a martyr; he that dies by being struck by a wall falling into ruins is a martyr; the woman who dies in childbed is a martyr.

Such scriptural raw material would eventually produce doctrine like the following statement from the preeminent Sunni theologian, Muhammad Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111):

Every one who gives himself wholly to God [tajarrada illahi] in the war against his own desires [sg. nafs], is a martyr when he meets death going forward without turning back. So the holy warrior is he who makes war against his own desires, as it has been explained by the apostle of God. And the “greater war” is the war against one's own desires, as the Companions said: We have returned from the lesser war unto the greater one, meaning thereby the war against their own desires. (Wensinck, p. 95.)

It is indicative of this transition that none of the “Rightly Guided” Caliphs, the first four caliphs of Sunni tradition, is typically given the rank or title of martyr. This is interesting because Abu Bakr, the first caliph, is the only one of the four not to have been killed in an open act of violence. In keeping with Islam's communal ethos, martyrdom is treated by the fuqaha? as not necessarily or most importantly a means for achieving individual salvation or felicity in the next world. Rather, it has the pragmatic value of ensuring the continued existence of the group through communal defense (Klausner).

Shi?i Islam, however, is often identified by the way in which the ideal of martyrdom has been kept a vital element of belief. The potency of the ideal here can be seen by referring to the only Islamic movement of the modern period to have acquired a universally recognized distinct or non-Islamic identity—the Baha?i faith. In this religion, which began in a Shi?i milieu, the ideal of martyrdom is retained as an important element of contemporary religious belief (Bethel). Shiism, especially since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty at the beginning of the sixteenth century, elaborated the motif of cultivated martyrdom as a religious and cultural ideal to an unprecedented degree. The Twelver Shi?i list of martyrs begins with Abel (Qabil) and continues through history to include the prophet Muhammad and eleven of the twelve imams, the exception being the still-expected Twelfth Imam. Within Shiism the visiting of the graves of the martyrs—preeminently but not exclusively the imams—has special religious significance, as do

weeping for them (or even pretending to weep), and suffering distresses similar to those of Husayn and his companions, such as thirst. Indeed, according to some contemporary Shi?i authorities, the true meaning of the mystical term fana? (annihilation, selflessness) is none other than the sacrifice of the physical life in the path of Islam (as related in a speech by Ayatollah SayyidMahmud Taleqani [d. 1979], p. 68).

The theme of martyrdom is also very important in Sufism. The Islamic world is adorned with thousands of shrines (sg., mashhad) to pious Muslims who have been regarded as martyrs (Björkman, Patton, and Arnold), though not all places known as mashhad claim to hold the remains of a bona fide martyr. (In Turkish, for example, meshed is a word for “cemetery” in general.) These tombs are the objects of special veneration and pilgrimage, the practice of which is traced to the Prophet himself, who is said to have visited the graves of the martyrs of the Battle of Uhud interred in al-Baqi? cemetery in Mecca to pay special homage to them. In Sufism, however, martyrdom acquires many of the same features associated with the type of the martyr-hero exemplified by Jesus in the Gospel accounts of the Passion, the most important example here being that of Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj—whose act of martyrdom is frequently conflated with that of Husayn ibn ?Ali (Chelkowski, p. 21)—who was crucified in Baghdad in the early tenth century and has been “kept alive” as an ideal of piety and spiritual valor not only in the Sufi tradition but in aspects of wider Islamic culture as well (Massignon). But there have been many others, including his son Mansur ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, Suhrawardial-Maqtul of Aleppo (d. 1191), ?Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani, ?Imad al-Di Nesîmî in Turkey, ?Abd al-Haqq Ibn Sab?in in Spain, and Sarmad in Mughal India, to name only a few of the most famous. Even at the time of Hallaj's crucifixion, visitation to the tombs of martyrs was such a firmly established practice that Hallaj's remains were cremated and the ashes scattered on the Euphrates so that no tomb to him could be erected which might then become the object of a cult. The recent study of the fourteenth-century Indian Sufi martyr Mas?ud Beg (Ernst) shows the literary process involved in the acknowledgment of a saint as also a martyr.

Martyrdom Today.

Islam is based on bearing witness to the truth of God's most recent revelation through his final prophet Muhammad. Insofar as the most dramatic—and according to some the most meaningful—form of bearing witness has to do so with one's nafs (self, soul, life), then Islam is also based on martyrdom. But, as we have seen, the act of bearing witness is accomplished in Islam in a number of ways, ranging from the uttering of the words “la ilaha illa Allah wa Muhammad rasul Allah” (there is no god but God,

and Muhammad is the messenger of God) to the ultimate act of witnessing, the sacrificing of one's own life for the establishment or defense of Islamic ideals. Between these two possibilities are a number of other acts and gestures that have been recognized by fuqaha? as constituting shahadah under the Islamic holy law, shari?ah. These other acts include dying during pilgrimage, dying from various particularly virulent and painful diseases, for women dying during childbirth, and so forth.

Today, Islam is distinguished among the world religions by the intensity with which the motif or ideal of martyrdom, in the sense of relinquishing one's life for faith, is consciously kept alive and cultivated. The motif within Sunni Islam has been seen to reside—obviously quite erroneously, especially in light of recent history—chiefly in the veneration of the struggles of the early Islamic community with the Meccan Arabs and their jahili culture. With the severe dislocations experienced by a large part of the Muslim world since the eighteenth century, a new era of the understanding of martyrdom has arrived. In some ways, the importance of the theme in the contemporary world transcends the divisions of Sunni, Shi?i, and Sufi (Arif; Shuhada? thawrat1919 [Martyrs of the 1919 Insurrection]; Cook; Pannewicke).

Martyrdom was a prominent theme in the recent Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988); both sides relied heavily on the ideal to motivate military troops. Since 1994 the theme has achieved even more prominence with the rise of terrorist groups describing themselves as Islamic. The most prominent and dramatic example has been the destruction of the World Trade Center. There can be no doubt that the ethos motivating those responsible for September 11 was deeply connected to the power and endurance of some interpretation of an Islamic view of martyrdom. But the prize of martyrdom continues to inspire those involved in the Palestinian opposition to Israel and the American-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A clear result of these historical developments suggests that scholars must readjust their assessment that martyrdom in Islam is chiefly a feature of Shiism.

In sum, while martyrdom does not figure prominently in the Qur?an, tradition holds that one who has died in the service of Islam is distinguished from other Muslims in the life after death in a number of ways: 1. a martyr is spared the postmortem interrogation by the two angels Munkar and Nakir; 2. a martyr bypasses purgatory (barzakh) and on death proceeds directly to the highest station in Paradise, those locations nearest the divine throne; 3. this station is called in a hadith the most beautiful abode and the dar al-shuhada? (abode of martyrs); 4. martyrs’ wounds will glow red and smell of musk on the Day of Judgment; 5. of all the inhabitants

of Paradise, only the martyrs wish for, and are theoretically allowed, a return to earth for the purpose of suffering martyrdom (again); 6. through meritorious acts, a martyr is rendered free of sin and therefore does not require the Prophet's intercession (shafa?ah); 7. some traditions even portray notable martyrs as intercessors for others; 8. as a result of their purity, martyrs are buried in the clothes in which they died and are not washed before burial; 9. according to Ghazali, a martyr enjoys the third highest position in the afterlife, just below the prophets and the ?ulama? (religious scholars); according to an earlier authority (Abu Talib al-Makki, d. 996), the martyrs rank second as intercessors after the prophets. These traditions appear to gain popularity during times of extreme sociopolitical turmoil.

Bibliography

Aghaie, Kamran Scot. The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi?i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004.

Aghaie, Kamran Scot, ed.The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi?i Islam. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Allen, Lori. “There Are Many Reasons Why: Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine.”Middle East Report223 (2002): 34–37.

Alserat: The Imam Husayn Conference12 (Spring–Summer 1986). Contains a number of articles, many from a Shi?i perspective, on the significance of the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn.

?Arif, ?Arif. Sijill al-khulud: asma? al-shuhada? alladhina istashhadu fi ma?arik Filastin (The Scroll of Immortality: Names of the Martyrs Who Bore Witness with Their Lives in the Battles for Palestine). 1947–1952; Sidon, Lebanon: 1962.

Arnold, Thomas W.“Saints and Martyrs (Muhammadan in India).” In Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. 11, pp. 68–73. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1911/1958.

Ayoub, Mahmoud M.“Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam.” In Religious Resurgence: Contemporary Cases in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, edited by Richard Antoun and Mary Elaine Hegland, pp. 67–77. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987.

Ayoub, Mahmoud M.Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ?Ashura? in Twelver Shi?ism. The Hague: Mouton, 1978. The first major Western study on the subject, shedding light on the martyrdom motif in both Sunni and Shi?i Islam.

Bethel, Fereshteh Taheri. “A Psychological Theory of Martyrdom.” World Order 20.3–4 (Spring–Summer 1986): 5–25. Study of the martyrdom motif in

the
Baha?i faith, based on the events following the 1978–1979 Iranian
Revolution.

Björkman, W.“Shahid.” In Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, edited by H. A.
R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, pp. 517–518. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953.

Chelkowski, Peter, ed.Ta?ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran. New York: New York
University Press, 1979. Classic study highlighting the importance of the
martyrdom motif for the rise and development of ta?ziyah, which has
been called the only authentic Islamic drama.

Cook, David. Martyrdom in Islam. Cambridge, U.K.: Cam-bridge University Press,
2007.

Dorraj, Manochehr. “Symbolic and Utilitarian Political Value of a Tradition:
Martyrdom in the Iranian Political Culture.”The Review of Politics59, no. 3
(1997): 489–521.

Ernst, Carl W. “From Hagiography to Martyrology: Conflicting Testimonies to a
Sufi Martyr of the Delhi Sultanate.”History of Religions24 (1985): 308–327.
A primarily literary study of martyrdom, describing the transformation from
saint to martyr.

Firestone, Reuven. “Merit, Mimesis, and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shi?ite
Meta-Historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian,
and Sunni Muslim Tradition.”Journal of the American Academy of Religion66,
no. 1 (1998): 93–116.

Klausner, Samuel Z.“Martyrdom.” In The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 9,
pp. 230–238. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

Lane Fox, Robin. Pagans and Christians. New York: Knopf, 1987 and 1989.

Massignon, Louis. The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam.
Translated from the French by Herbert Mason. 4 vols. Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1982. Classic study of the life, milieu, and works of Islam's
most famous martyr.

Pannewicke, Friedericke, ed.Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and
Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to
Modernity.Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004. This is a remarkable collection of
essays that should be consulted by anyone interested in the topic. On the
Islamic
tradition see the important articles by Pannewicke, Jacobi, Leder, Sharma,
Neuwirth, Klemm, and Mejcher-Atassi.

Patton, Walter M.“Saints and Martyrs (Muhammadan).” In Encyclopaedia of
Religion and Ethics, vol. 11, pp. 63–68. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark,
1911/1958.

Sachedina, Abdulaziz Abdulhussein. Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Madhi
in Twelver Shi?ism. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981.

Pioneering study of the subject, demonstrating the importance of martyrdom in Shiism.

Shuhada? thawrat 1919 (Martyrs of the 1919 Insurrection). Cairo: al-Hay?ah al-Misriyah al-?Ammah lil-Kitab, 1984.

Taleqani, Mahmud, Murtaza Mutahhari, and ?Ali Shari?ati. Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam. Edited by Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen. Houston: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986. Very useful collection, especially for a Shi?i perspective.

Wensinck, A. J.“The Oriental Doctrine of the Martyrs.” In Semietische Studien uit de Nalatenschap, pp. 91–113. Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1941. The first important Western study of the problem, by one of the greatest Islamicists in that tradition.

Zarandi, Muhammad Nabil. The Dawn-Breakers. Translated and edited by Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, Ill., 1974. Persian edition published in 1932. Describes in graphic detail the ordeal of the early Babi community in Iran and the way in which the ideal of martyrdom has remained important to Baha?is.

Essays
Etc
Excerpts
Fiction
Glossaries
Guardian
Histories
Introductory
Letters
Maps
Music
Newspapers
NSA-documents
NSA-letters
Personal
Pilgrims
Poetry
Presentations
Resources
Reviews
Scripts
Software
Statistics
Study
Talks
Theses
Transcripts
Translations
UHJ-documents
UHJ-letters
Video
Visual
Writings

home

sitemap

series

chronology

search:
author

title

date

tags

— Martyrdom (Used by permission of the curator)