

# MARTYRDOM IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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## I. Introduction

Are there ideas worth dying for? Do you have ideals, an ideology, a religion, or convictions worth it to you to make the ultimate sacrifice? Martin Luther King once said, "A man who won't die for something is not fit to live." Was he right? In our cynical age many would say no, but the insistent and dangerous reality of terrorism and the reality of death itself will not let cynicism have its way. Many in our world today believe there are ideas worth dying for. Many in our parents' and grandparents' generations thought ideas were worth dying for when they fought in WWII. Christianity and Islam, the two largest world religions, teach explicitly that they are worth dying for, and they both have martyrdom as core values which shape their practice and sense of identity.

Tonight, we are going to consider the idea of martyrdom as it figures in Islam and Christianity. The reason why only these two religions are going to be considered is that, more than for any of the other world religions, martyrdom has a central place in both Islam and Christianity. It featured significantly in the founding of both religions, and both of these faiths have developed strong views concerning martyrdom that have shaped them through the ages and still do today.

Islamic martyrdom operations, as suicide bombings are often called, are a common feature in our news and a constant threat our security services try to prevent. From another angle, there have been more Christian martyrs in the last century than in the prior nineteen centuries combined. And for those who are not Christians and Muslims, the phenomenon of martyrdom raises important questions concerning death and what really is worth living and dying for.

Tonight, I would like to give a brief overview of how martyrdom has come to feature prominently in Christianity and Islam. Second, I would like to compare some of the features of Christian and Islamic views of martyrdom. Third, I would like to mention some challenges that these issues bring to all of us.

## II. A Brief History of Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam

In both Islam and Christianity, the words used for martyr originally meant 'witness' or 'testify to' as in a court of law, and the words quickly became extended to those who by their deaths testified to, or witnessed to, their belief in their respective faiths.

### A. Christianity

The Christian view starts with Jesus Christ Himself. He is the prototype for all martyrs in Christianity. Though by all the evidence He could have fled or avoided death, even perhaps led a mass movement against the Romans, He allowed Himself to be arrested, tried illegally, and killed by them by crucifixion. Why did He voluntarily surrender? The testimony of the Gospels and the rest of the Bible was so that, as the Messiah and unique Servant of God, He could die to pay for the sins of mankind. The

prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Jesus, was given the prediction concerning the Messiah's mission:

"We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all....For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors."

From the earliest Christian martyr, Stephen, mentioned in the NT book of Acts to ones being killed in various countries today, Christian martyrs are dying for the same truths Jesus died for- that He is the Messiah and only Saviour of mankind. They see themselves, not as accomplishing the same thing in their deaths- dying to pay for the sins of others- but instead as witnesses to their belief that Jesus died for them, and that they are willing to bear unjust treatment from men just like Jesus did. You could say it is a passive view of martyrdom- a willingness to receive unjust violent treatment and persecution for the sake of a supreme truth; for them the truth of the Gospel message about Jesus.

This was the earliest view of Christian martyrdom and is the one found in the Bible. Within three centuries, however, the belief had grown in the church that martyrs received complete forgiveness for their sins, that they had automatic entry into heaven or paradise, and that they could be prayed to for intercession before God. Some parts of Christendom still believe this. But some parts don't, particularly those who base their beliefs more on the Bible than church tradition. For instance, the Bible teaches that anyone can have their sins forgiven and have the assurance of paradise by simply trusting that Jesus died for their sins on the cross. They don't have to be a martyr. Jesus said,

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, *that whoever believes in him* shall not perish but have eternal life.

Martyrs originally had no special spiritual privileges but were simply examples of faithfulness to Christ. Also, according to the Bible, only Jesus is to be approached for intercession on the basis of His unique death and resurrection from the dead which was just celebrated at Easter.

## B. Islam

Islam came into being in a situation where there were Jews and Christians with established views on martyrdom. The Christian views were the ones I have just mentioned as being based on tradition rather than just the Bible. In the early part of his career as a prophet in Mecca, Muhammad seems to have been a figure of courage who was willing to die for the message he was preaching. Later, the opportunity to go to Medina presented itself and while there, a new view of martyrdom emerged.

While in Medina, Islam took on the nature of both a religious and a political movement. Muhammad turned to using force of arms to extend the political power of this movement. During this period, the view clearly emerged that those who died in battle for Islam should be considered martyrs, not just those who were killed for refusing to give up their faith in Islam. Surah 61:11-12 says in translation,

That you believe in Allah and His Messenger, and that you strive hard and fight in the cause of Allah with your wealth and your lives, that will be better for you, if you but know! (If you do so) He will forgive you your sins, and admit you into Gardens under which rivers flow, and pleasant dwelling in Gardens of Eternity, that is indeed the great success.

Note that this is very similar to the view that had developed in Christianity, except that the benefits of forgiveness and paradise were now extended to those who died *fighting* for Islam. This can be called a more *active* view of martyrdom, and it is one that, except for a brief time during the Crusades, never became a lasting part of the Christian view. Also, with it the view is taught in the Traditions of Islam, the Hadith, that martyrs can intercede before Allah for up to 70 of their family members.

Two early Muslims, Hamza, Muhammad's father-in-law and Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, are held to be the greatest examples of Islamic martyrs by two different major groups in Islam. Hamza was killed in one of the early battles, and Husayn was killed in battle against insurmountable odds.

In later Islamic theology and teaching, after the time of the initial conquests, the status of martyr was greatly extended and included those who died from more ordinary violent or painful deaths- like from plague or drowning or women who died in childbirth. It was also extended to Muslims who were exceptionally faithful for life in the practices of fasting, prayer, and reciting the Qur'an. This kind of extension has only occurred in parts of Christianity concerning monasticism, where becoming a celibate monk or a nun is considered to be a form of martyrdom.

### III. Comparisons (What I think are the most significant ones)

#### A. Passive and Active Martyrdom

In both Christianity and Islam, martyrs play a special role of being the most respected and admired believers. In some branches of Christianity, veneration of martyrs developed where they would be approached for intercession. This is also true in Islam, where Islamic martyrs are thought to be given the privilege of interceding before Allah. In some branches of Islam, certain martyrs have an even extra-ordinary privilege of intercession- Husayn being one of them- who can intercede for much larger groups of people.

These martyrs are held up as being the best examples of how the respective faiths should be lived. But this brings us to the most important difference in their original views of martyrs- the example of enduring ill treatment, as with Christians, or of dying while engaged in battle, as with Muslims.

In Christianity, martyrs are emulated for how well they lived up to Christ's example of *not* retaliating against their enemies and captors. A Christian martyr is one who, when threatened with physical violence and death, refuses to give up his or her faith. In Christianity's first three centuries, it was an illegal religion according to Roman law. Many times, Christians were brought before the authorities and required to make an act of worship to the Emperor and the Roman gods. When they refused out of their desire to stay true to worshiping only God in Christ, they were often killed. When

Christianity was no longer illegal and even became the religion of the Empire, the view that Christian soldiers were martyrs from dying in battle only happened sporadically and much later during the Crusades, more than 400 years after the start of Islam. In other words, the view of martyrdom Islam had from its beginning was a view Christianity only embraced partially and much later than Islam. In fact, today, the dominant view of martyrdom in all branches of Christianity is that martyrs are those who are killed for refusing to give up their faith.

In Islam, the passive view was included in its view of martyrdom, but the more active view is the one that came to be emphasised. And the view even developed in Islamic law that a Muslim was not required to confess his faith in Islam if his life was threatened. A Muslim can lie about their faith according to Islamic law if their life is threatened and it is not considered a shameful departure from the truth. Cowardice in battle is considered shameful, and martyrdom in battle is held up as the epitome of faithfulness for a Muslim.

This brings us to just a word about suicide bombing as martyrdom. In Islamic law, suicide for personal reasons is wrong and considered an enormous sin. However, current Islamic scholars, including the Egyptian Yusuf al-Qaradawi, {Zeidan, 2003 #190} who was welcomed to London a couple of years ago by Ken Livingston, have declared that suicide missions against a declared enemy of Islam are not suicide in the personal sense but are rather death and martyrdom in battle. This is a new development in Islamic law which goes against many centuries of tradition, but it must be said that this does seem to be in agreement with the earliest views of martyrdom found in the Qur'an and the Hadith.

So, as Christians today are more in line with the original view of passive martyrdom as taught and demonstrated by Jesus and His apostles, so also Islamic fundamentalists are acting more in agreement with Islam's original views of active martyrdom as found in the Qur'ān and the example of some of the earliest Muslims.

Passive martyrdom is to die for truth, for refusing to give up your faith, for resisting compromise peacefully, without resorting to violence or physical retaliation.

Active martyrdom is to die while fighting for truth, to die in battle, to die while inflicting violence on those who refuse to accept your view of the truth.

This basic difference of passive and active martyrdom also points to another and more foundational difference between Islam and Christianity. These views of martyrdom point to different views of the nature of God and what kind of devotion pleases Him.

## B. What Really Pleases God

According to Jesus in the Bible, God delights in self-sacrificial love. I quoted earlier the verse that says, "For God so loved the world he gave His one and only Son..." We are told in the Bible that because Jesus, as the unique Son of God, died for our sins voluntarily, He is honoured above all creation. Christians are told (Philippians 2:5-11):

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Bible explicitly teaches that Christians should follow Jesus' example in martyrdom. Christians are never told in their Scriptures that they can be martyrs for killing enemies of their faith. In fact, this attitude was condemned repeatedly by Jesus. One of the times is where He prayed for his enemies from the cross itself (Luke 23:34): "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." Christians are told to forgive their enemies, not retaliate. One notable recent example is a woman in Turkey last year, who on national television, forgave the men who had killed her husband for helping Muslims and others become Christians.

In the Qur'an and Islam, Allah delights in conquest and victory over the enemies of Islam. Muslims are commanded to actively strive to defeat the enemies of Islam in all forms of Jihad, and martyrs are those who die doing this very thing.

These are very different views of God's character, and I think, different views that are not reconcilable. They are also very different views of what God requires from people. These bring to all of us some particular challenges.

#### IV. Challenges

A. First, *that* there are many Muslims and Christians today who are willing to die for their beliefs should make us all consider seriously if there are ideas and causes worth dying for. I think they force on our attention that Truth with a capital T is something we should all seek, and not yield to cynicism that causes many to be jaded and disillusioned.

B. Second, these different views of martyrdom with their connected views of God and human responsibility, challenge us to realize that all religions do *not* teach the same basic things, and that religions as a whole should not be blindly accepted nor superficially dismissed, but should be evaluated carefully on their own merits.

C. Third, since I am a Christian, I would like to make the following request to Christians and Muslims who are here. While recognizing that we disagree about essential, core truths about Jesus, salvation, the nature of God, and human ethics, we must each be willing to ask ourselves, 'Have I got it right? Is my faith really the true one that God wants me to have?'

Martyrdom brings this issue to a crucial, focussed point. According to the Bible, Islamic suicide bombers are *not* martyrs pleasing God and earning a reward. They are instead breaking one of the Ten Commandments- the one against murder. They also violate what Jesus said was the second greatest commandment to love one's neighbour

as oneself. This commandment is second only to loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. These bombers are actually *not* loving God in their sacrifice the way God wants but are instead setting themselves up for the most awful of judgements. According to the Bible, though they might be zealous for God and courageous and sacrificial in their action, they are completely wrong and God hates how they are taking their own life and the lives of other people.

Similarly, if Christians are wrong, then they are setting themselves up for judgement according to the Qur'an for not embracing Islam.

As I have wrestled with these issues for myself, I have come to the conclusion that Jesus' view, based on His own death on the cross and resurrection, is the one that is the Truth, and the one that will also bring the most good to the greatest number of people in this world. I commend Jesus Christ to you for your consideration.

Martyrdom matters. There are ideas and issues worth dying for. Your life and your death matter to God. May God bless you as you work out your convictions.

Thank you for listening.