

DIFFERENTLY CRUCIFIED

Understanding the Islamic Martyrs

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IF THE 1989 MARTYRDOM of six Jesuits and their companions in El Salvador was remarkable for its political context, it was not the object of theological controversy. The same cannot be said of that form of martyrdom in the name of Islam which started with the suicide-bombing of the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut in December 1981, and which has since generated so many headlines.¹ Within contemporary Islam, the dispute tends to be between those who deplore the failure of Muslims to honour the ‘forgotten duty’ of *jihādi* struggle against Western, secularist oppression and those who, sticking to the tenets of an Islamic legal system built up over many centuries, maintain that suicide-bombing is quite clearly a contravention of juridical custom. This *ad intra* debate is often refracted through the political discourse of assorted Western observers who demand to be told, once and for all, whether ‘Islam’ really sanctions ‘martyrdom operations’ or not.

This article takes a more phenomenological perspective, leaving aside the all-important question of legitimacy and taking as its point of departure the fact that modern practices of *jihādi* terrorism, deeply questionable as they may be juridically, are nevertheless religiously comprehensible to large numbers of Muslims. It is, I argue, by looking at the development over the centuries of the Islamic concept of martyrdom that we can begin to make religious sense of what that tiny minority of Muslims who practise terrorism think they are doing by killing themselves in the cause of God.

¹ Of course, suicide-bombing is no Muslim invention, prefigured as it was by the culturally Hindu but atheistic Tamil Tigers and, in the more distant past, by European anarchists at the end of the nineteenth century.



Witness

The first act of the Muslim is to testify to the singularity of the Deity and the prophethood of Muhammad. This *shahāda*, the giving of public testimony to these truths, the most vital a human being can hope to know, is the first pillar of Islam. From the same trilateral linguistic root, SH-H-D, is derived the Qur'ānic *shahīd*, the witness in the courtroom, who eventually, as in church history, becomes the 'martyr'. But already in the respective scriptures there are surprising differences of stress with regard to what Christian and Muslim witness actually means. In the New Testament apostolic witness is primarily given to the almost incredible truth of Christ's resurrection; but Qur'ānic witness is less focused and often less positive. Admittedly Abraham *is* said to have testified to God's Lordship,² but Muhammad himself is more often than not a witness *against* his people, arising on the Day of Judgment to testify that, in spite of his faithful preaching of God's Word, the non-believers culpably refused to listen.³ His witness deprives the non-believer of the hiding place of the attenuating excuse. This is, in effect, a witness to human perversity and, only indirectly, to the justice of God's eschatological condemnation. As for the astonishing conceit we find in the Gospel of John that, in the person of the Son, *God* is somehow on trial, requiring witnesses and even an advocate (παράκλητος), this is, needless to say, both alien and wholly unintelligible to the Qur'ān's unremitting proclamation of divine sovereignty.

The witness envisaged here does not in any way involve the loss of one's life. One Qur'ānic passage alone seems to endorse the idea that witness to God's truth can be achieved through death in battle, though

² Qur'ān 21: 56.

³ Qur'ān 16: 84, 22: 78.

its meaning is open to ambiguity.⁴ Certainly there were some in the first generation of believers who did die defending Islam on the battlefield,⁵ but it was largely,

... after the Muslim conquest of Palestine in the seventh century that the notion of 'witness' (*shahid*) took on the explicit meaning of 'holy death' and the connotations of the Greek notion, meaning both 'witness' and 'martyr'.⁶

Thus, second-generation Muslim martyrs were likely to be noble warriors engaged in conquest and the defence of their community and faith rather than puzzling pacifists like the Christian martyrs of the Roman persecutions. It is such contrasting attitudes to the deployment of violence that show most obviously that the *shahīd* and the New Testament *μάρτυς*, though related, are not of exactly the same species. So why did military *jihād* and 'witness' become so closely associated so soon?

The answer is rooted in contingent historical experience. The very first Muslims, just like their Christian counterparts, found that God's Word encountered resistance, and both alike responded by adopting their founders' mode of counter-resistance. For Jesus' followers this meant the loving surrender of one's own life in the confident expectation of the resurrection. For the early Muslims it meant armed struggle, an 'offensive martyrdom' geared to the foundation of a just and Islamic social order, akin to that established by Muhammad in Medina.⁷ But it need not have been so. It is possible to imagine an alternative history in which Muhammad's mission was received peacefully and his military mettle was never tested. As it is, the long-term missionary spread of Islam did often proceed eirenically; the Sufis who spread their religion in the massive regions of south and south-east Asia, for instance, were not incoming colonialists whose presence

⁴ Qur'ān 3: 138–143. There is a case to be made for taking a quietist notion of *jihād* as predating the martial one. See Asma Afsaruddin, 'Competing Perspectives on *Jihad* and "Martyrdom" in Early Islamic Sources', in *Witnesses to Faith? Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam*, edited by Brian Wicker (Aldershot: Burlington, 2006), 24. According to this interpretation, the idea of the *shahīd* as one who dies for his or her faith is first found only in the *hadith* literature, the body of accepted traditions and sayings about Muhammad and early Islam, and not in the Qur'ān itself.

⁵ One such is Hamza, the well-known uncle of Muhammad, who died in the Battle of Uhud (AD 625).

⁶ See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs*, translated by David Macey (London: Pluto, 2005), 11.

⁷ See Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers*, 6–10.

threatened the *status quo* and generally they attracted converts by the power of their devotion and spirituality. Hence, the figure of the 'missionary martyr', so common in Christianity even until recent times, is all but unknown in the Islamic world. There is, thus, no necessary analytical link between the Islamic dispensation and the emergence of Muslim military martyrs.

The lack of definition in Islamic sources makes for a greater surplus of meaning, more leeway and creative potential in the concept of martyrdom than is the case in Christianity. Structurally speaking, this is for two reasons. First, the *essential* struggle delineated in the Qur'an is that of truth versus falsehood rather than that of believer against

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unbeliever, the latter confrontation being merely a special case of the former.⁸ Second, the ambition of living by Truth is often fulfilled in Islam by mimetic practice, which is to say self-conscious imitation; since the Truth proclaimed in the revealed text is also exemplified in the action of the Prophet, the *shahīd* imitates him as a model, becoming, in turn, an exemplar for others. Certainly, martial struggle does not exhaust the possible expressions of *shahāda*, and the unfolding tradition bears this out by generating an unruly profusion of martyr-types which elude systematic classification. The western orientalist whose ambition is to analyze and master this unwieldy reality will be even more frustrated by the absence in Islam of a central court of appeal competent to arbitrate on precisely what martyrdom involves and who merits the crown. Two factors have been crucial in shaping the evolution of the martyr-figure: sectarianism and Sufism.

In spite of the impressive unity of the *umma*, the community gathered around Muhammad, within a short time of his death a dispute over who should succeed him had led first to a protracted period of vicious internecine warfare and then to a definitive fracturing of the community which resulted in enduring dynastic feuding and a plurality of caliphates, each beholden to a different theological orthodoxy. This fissiparous legacy had been foreseen, according to oral tradition, by the Prophet himself. One group of vigorous martyrs, ready

⁸ See Abolfazl Ezzati, 'The Concept of Martyrdom: A Shia Perspective', in *Witnesses to Faith?* 117–121. This is reflected in the way *jihād* itself does not denote war as such but more generally effort and striving in the cause of righteousness.

to die in battle against their fellow Muslims (though they would object to the appellation) were the Kharijites. This sect, now often forgotten though highly evocative of modern Islamic radicalism, held that a Muslim guilty of significant sin had effectively left the state of Islam and could therefore legitimately be slain. This extreme juridical position was hardly conducive to social stability and became anathema both to their *Sunni* and *Shi'i* foes, and Kharijism was mercilessly suppressed, today surviving only in enclaves in North Africa and Oman.⁹

Sunnism

Within the majority *Sunni* community,¹⁰ martyrdom was far from unknown and usually associated with cruel persecutions by oppressive states. The overwhelming political tendency within Sunnism has always been towards quietist collusion, even with nominally Muslim rulers who habitually contravene the requirements of the *shari'a*. The prospect of insurrection and anarchy is so repellent to *Sunni* sensibilities, being reminiscent of the *fitna* (discord, dissension) that followed the Prophet's death, that almost any tyrant is worth enduring to avoid it. This has often meant that good Muslims have found themselves on the wrong side of manifestly unjust authority and have suffered egregiously for it.

A famous case, that of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780–855), the founder of the great Hanbali law school, involved the defence of the integrity of the prophetic Word against the rationalist tendencies of a powerful dynast.¹¹ When the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun decided to impose the rationalist theology of the *mu'tazili*, which denied the eternal and uncreated status of the Qur'ān, as his imperial creed, Ibn Hanbal stuck to his insistence on the primacy of scripture as the ultimate authority in legal reasoning. The Caliph launched a *mihna* (inquisition) against his opponents to force submission to the notion that the Qur'ān had

⁹ David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 62.

¹⁰ *Sunni* Muslims take their name from the *sunna* or customs of the Prophet. That are more fully described by the title *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-ijma'* (the people of the *sunna* and of the consensus). The great majority of Muslims in the world today, they characteristically accord more hermeneutical authority to the prophetic *sunna* than, say, to reason or to the will of a living ruler.

¹¹ An important reminder for rationalist-minded Westerners that Muslim tradition is suspicious of unfettered, secular reason not because Islam is irredeemably obscurantist but because it has found that rationalism usually serves the purposes of the governing élite.

been created. Ibn Hanbal resisted, suffered imprisonment, torture and banishment, but his view prevailed; the (to the Sunnis) heretical position on scripture was defeated and the consensus that survives to this day proclaims the Qur'ān as the uncreated Word. Ibn Hanbal was not executed, but his readiness to suffer is an indication that what often counted for Muslims was not actual death but the nobility and bravery of the *shahīd* in the face of hostile power.

Shi'ism

If the Kharijites and the *Sunnis* are only incidentally prone to martyrdom, for the *Shi'is* it defines something at the very heart of their faith. Theirs is Islam in the minor key. Justice finds no refuge in the *Shi'i* world. First, they believe that the Prophet's succession went seriously wrong: 'Ali should have succeeded the Prophet, his cousin and father-in-law, but the machinations of other factions carried the day and 'Ali would only briefly rule as the fourth and last of the 'Rightly Guided Caliphs' before his assassination and succession by usurpers. Then 'Ali's eldest son, Hasan, renounced his claim, making a pact with the usurper Mu'awiyah, the first of the Umayyad dynasty, that he could rule as long as the caliphate returned to the Prophet's own line at his death. Husayn, Hasan's younger brother, did not approve of this agreement, fiercely opposing what he saw as the ungodly rule of the Umayyad clan. But he also resolved to adhere to the pact as long as Mu'awiyah lived. However, on Mu'awiyah's death, Hasan having died already, the Umayyad heir, Yazid, demanded the allegiance of Husayn. At this point the young Imam (the special title the *Shi'i* reserve for those twelve descendants of the prophet chosen to lead the *umma*) drew the line, his understanding of Islam and the claim of the prophet's family being such that he could not countenance shirking his responsibilities. It was, after all, the Imam's duty to guide his people and to confound the false leadership of the usurpers.

From Husayn's personal resolution springs the consummation of the tragic *Shi'i* view of salvation history. Husayn sent an emissary to Kufah in Iraq to make plans for revolt, left his pilgrimage in Mecca prematurely and headed north for battle. On his long journey, many tried to discourage him from proceeding, warning him of the futility of his endeavour. But Husayn, a noble idealist, persisted, understanding his role as divinely appointed. Meanwhile, the emissary had been



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Rituals marking the Day of Āshūrā in Iran

discovered in Kufah and brutally executed. Plans for the revolt rapidly unravelled. Husayn, ignorant of how things were coming undone, continued his journey, managing to keep a small number of followers at his side while others began to desert him. On arrival in Karbala he appeared to be ready to compromise on the succession, but elements within the Umayyad court were anxious to seize the opportunity to quash the claim of the Prophet's family forever, so Yazid's generals demanded complete submission. And so began Husayn's long, slow passion, every detail recounted agonizingly in *Shi'i* lamentation: his camp was denied water; his followers were picked off one by one; and eventually the Imam himself was hacked to pieces as he fought on foot, then stripped naked, trampled underfoot and dismembered.

This is an immensely powerful narrative. Husayn is the archetype of the noble hero, at once courageous and vulnerable, morally blameless and possessed of a rare sense of duty. It is not only the *Shi'i* who are moved and impressed by his example, but they have made remembrance of his martyrdom something of an art form, more so even than Christians have done with the passion of Christ. The rituals of Āshūrā on the 10th Muharram, which commemorate the battle of Karbala, involve a long liturgy of mourning and extroverted grief. Clerics intone poetry, telling the story all over again in meticulous and

pathos-arousing detail, working the throng into a state of intense emotion. Grown men sob into their handkerchiefs. The extraordinary spectacle of *Shi'i* devotion which, in some quarters, takes rather more extreme and bloody form, strikes many *Sunni* Muslims as distasteful in the extreme. But what does it tell us about the religious function of Husayn's martyrdom?

To answer that question requires reference to doctrinal development over many centuries. In mature *Shi'i* theology, Husayn's martyrdom was no tragic accident but a divinely foreordained redemptive event. All twelve Imams of *Shi'i* history are said to have pre-existed the creation of the world; they are as close as Islam ever allows to 'Incarnate Words'. Therefore, what they experience in life tells us something about the eternal truth of God and God's Will. According to tradition, the site of Karbala had already been identified by those endowed with divine intuition as the place where God's beloved would suffer and die. Husayn and his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad, had long known what was to transpire there. This predestined event was to be the very theatre of redemption. Husayn's martyrdom becomes salvific for all who weep and remember his fate. His noble victory, won through suffering, draws the believing soul to God; and the narrations are there to remind us just how great that suffering was. Satan is said to have come to the battlefield that day to challenge God and to pour scorn on Husayn; God, to show the fibre of his Imam, increased some seventy times the intense heat of the sun and still Husayn did not weaken.¹²

The story is recounted so as to ennoble the hearer. The almost Christic idea of Husayn's superhuman submission to the Divine Will later becomes the basis of much piety and hagiography. His martyrdom does show up, to some extent, the depth of his followers' belief in God and their hope in an eschatological vindication; the narratives stress the reward that the Imam and his family glimpsed before they died. But surely more important is the redemptive function and the nobility of sentiment that lifts souls to great thoughts. This martyrdom is one which millions venerate; and their remembrance, whether in pilgrimage to the shrines of the Imams or the ritual recital of their

¹² Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague, Paris and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 126.

passions, wins saving merit in God's eyes. The sixth Imam praises the remembrance of the Imams, promising that,

... anyone who remembers us or if we are mentioned in his presence, and a tear as small as the wing of a gnat falls from his eye, God would forgive all his sins even if they were as the foam of the sea.¹³

Indeed, in the drama of human redemption, the cosmos itself is redeemed and sanctified.¹⁴

Sufism

Sufism is a highly variegated phenomenon, but in its more intellectually developed and spiritually virtuosic forms it has promoted a particular experience of spiritual practice alongside a theoretical elaboration based on radically monist metaphysics. The experience, to which the tradition accords the label *fana'*, is construed as the suppression of the self, indeed its momentary annihilation. The metaphysics resemble, in some ways, the *advaita* school of Hindu philosophy. Some have claimed that Sufism is indeed the fruit of Indian Vedanta imported into the Islamic world; others deny this, seeing it as a creative development of the Qur'ān's own monotheism, which, taking to extremes the divine monopoly on being, downgrades the quality of the world's own reality, leaving it as a mere shadow or illusion. Whatever the origins of the ideas, they evoke a monistic, even pantheistic, world-view, in which the cosmos and the human are conceived of as veiling the Divine reality which is all that is. The aim of the spiritual enterprise is to allow Divinity to be unveiled so as to contemplate Itself in the mirror of the human. Since God's existence is the only 'truth' (*haqq*), the Sufi is not deified but disappears, becoming nothing more than the locus of God's self-contemplation. This view, known by the shorthand *wahdat al-wujūd* ('Unity of Being'), is usually associated with the thought of Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) and is the object of immense criticism from other branches of Islam.

The divine motive for creation is captured in a famous *hadīth*: 'I was a hidden treasure, and I longed to be known, and I created

¹³ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, 143.

¹⁴ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, 147.

humankind so that I might be known'. God's yearning for self-knowledge is prolonged in the desire which inhabits the Sufi's heart, the longing of the finite creature for its infinite source and only Truth, to be able to reflect God's very Self.

This implosive knowledge of self as lord contains an unknowing, a deliberate uprooting of sense knowledge and a rejection of cognitive knowledge It requires an exertion, a discipline, a patience that can be sustained only by a higher reflex, a longing for vision of the creator, and acceptance of the pain of separation from one's source. It requires divine love, love inspired by God, love satisfied with nothing less than God. It is an overpowering love. It is a love that leads to annihilation. It leads to what is described as 'destruction of the soul'.¹⁵

There is hope of a return of the self after this experience, of *baqa'*, a 'remaining in God', but it will be 'permanence without comfort, medicine without cure. Such love can be imagined and experienced only as burning.'¹⁶

It should be clear by now that the cultivation of this form of spirituality, predicated as it is upon the loving surrender of one's existence to make way for Truth, easily adopts the garb of martyrdom. The unquenchable, burning love to which the Sufi gives voice will not be satisfied with any illusory truth but yearns insatiably for the Absolute. A secondary fulfilment of the martyr's vocation arises for a number of Sufis when, in coming into conflict with a more legalistic construal of Islamic truth that is appalled by the apparently blasphemous utterances of the ecstatic, they meet an unpleasant death at the hands of the public executioner.

The classic case of this conflict was that of Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), a Persian mystic put on trial for heresy by the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir and crucified in Baghdad. The ostensible reason for his trial was that he had taught that the *Hajj* (pilgrimage) rites could be performed meritoriously outside Mecca. Behind this teaching was a highly idiosyncratic take on the climax of the *Hajj*, the ritual of sacrifice. Al-Hallaj had declared that he himself craved immolation as a substitute victim to suffer in atonement for Muslims. This heterodox

¹⁵ Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 15.

¹⁶ Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 15.

idea seemed to subvert many of the assumptions to which orthodox Muslims were committed, including a resolute resistance to any notion of mediation, let alone substitution. It also sounded worryingly Christian. Al-Hallaj interpreted Muhammad's reinstatement of Abraham's sacrifice during the *Hajj* as the winning of forgiveness for the multitude through the intercession of certain 'self-sacrificing souls ... who are the apotropaic¹⁷ pillars (*abdal*) of his community'.¹⁸ Mounting the gibbet he famously proclaimed '*ana'l-Haqq*' ('I am the Truth'), an utterance taken by many as a scandalous claim to divinity. Bit by bit, he has become a symbol of the suffering of the intoxicated God-lover, and of the Sufi struggle against the narrow, confining religion of *shari'a* law.

The Persian poet Hāfiz (c.1310–1390) diagnoses al-Hallaj's fate in verse: 'That friend by whom the gibbet's peak was ennobled —his crime was this, that he made secrets public'.¹⁹ There is in this idea of the gallows becoming the symbol of the highest mystical exaltation an almost Johannine echo of the cross as Christ's throne of glory. But Hāfiz is also referring to the revelation of a dangerous secret: the whole of the cosmos is constantly but silently crying out 'I am



The death of Al-Hallaj

¹⁷ Evil-averting.

¹⁸ Louis Massignon, *Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr*, translated, edited and abridged by Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), 222.

¹⁹ Quoted in Carl W. Ernst, 'From Hagiography to Martyrology: Conflicting Testimonies to a Sufi Martyr of the Delhi Sultanate', *History of Religions*, 24/4 (May 1985), 314–315.

the Truth', the mystic being simply that cosmic region able to utter it out loud. This 'secret' *topos* is later reiterated poetically by Jihangir Hashimi (d. 1539):

Whosoever makes the secret of God openly known,
The decision of law makes him stoned to death.
When Truth found the way into the heart of Hallaj,
Gallows and rope found the rank of ascension.
When Truth from out absolute Being gives a sound,
Who is it but Truth who says 'I am the Truth!'²⁰

The fate of al-Hallaj becomes a highly significant trope throughout the Islamic world, taking on a quasi-mythical aura. He is made the hermeneutical key by which all Sufis executed by state authorities can be understood.²¹ He even inspires others, such as the Persian philosopher 'Ayn ul-Qudāt al-Hamadhānī (1098–1131/2), to claim him as their exemplar. At a time when it was perilous to do so, 'Ayn ul-Qudāt very publically set about doubting the foundations of the legalist Islam of his day. He held distinctly unorthodox philosophical views on the eternity of creation and wilfully blasphemed, radically internalising the orthodox assertion of the complete otherness of God and even putting Muhammad and Iblis (Satan) on a par. His deconstruction of the legalistic religion translated as a refusal, in the name of Islamic monotheism itself, to take the Muslim law-scholars as idols and a resolution to turn towards God alone as Master, a 'subversive transgression against the most sacrosanct in routinized "Islam"'.²² He was skinned alive and hanged, wrapped in a kerosene-soaked cloth and burned. What makes 'Ayn al-Qudāt different from al-Hallaj is that at no point did he experience the extinction of his ego. Sufism was, for him, 'a discourse promising something that waits to be delivered'.²³

What are we to make of the cult that has grown up around al-Qudāt and others like him? Hamid Dabashi is suspicious of an

²⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, 'The Martyr-Mystic Hallaj in Sindhi Folk Poetry: Notes on a Mystical Symbol', *Numen*, 9/3 (November 1962), 170.

²¹ Ernst, 'From Hagiography to Martyrology'.

²² Hamid Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 520–521.

²³ Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative*, 522.

excessive spiritualisation of his death and of the redemptive turn that it has taken. He notes with unease the dynamic opened up by hagiographical texts:

Both the writer and the reader create and participate in a pious act of remembrance, a necessary memorial to the saintly life, in which certain idealized virtues are celebrated. The collectively saving memory which is thus engendered provides a hallowed space, constitutes a consecrated environment, in the sacred certitude of which generations of 'Muslims' (thus identifying themselves), perform their necessary 'penance' What is being (only momentarily) relieved here is a permanently guilt-ridden imagination, a memory Biblically perturbed by sins (not) committed, transgressions (not) imagined, the breaching of a contract (not) signed, the contravention of an oath (not) made, the infraction of a pact (not) promised, and ultimately the trespassing into a space (only) imagined.²⁴

Our commentator is pointing us towards an uncomfortable fact. The logical corollary of Sufi monism is that the existence of the human 'I' is itself an affront to God, a kind of primordial disorder, and is prone, therefore, to fomenting a generalised, free-floating sense of guilt, of having no right of abode—an anxiety that can only be assuaged by self-destruction or by some substitutionary expiation. Once again, we see the cult of the martyr deployed to open up propitiatory channels of mediation, a mechanism always in tension with mainstream Islamic legalism.

Martyrs of love do not have to be executed by the state. Sometimes they just die of love. The many stories which fit this paradigm must also be open to figurative reading as allegories of the passionate yearning for God which inflames the heart of the Sufi.²⁵ The Chishti order is singular in its use of music and poetry to promote states of heightened spiritual awareness. Sometimes they can prove fatal. Cases of death by poetic intoxication have been recorded even as recently as the early twentieth century: when one Maulana Muhammad Husayn Ilahabadi attended a Chishti *dhikr* (remembrance of God), he became so entranced by the singing of a verse that he

²⁴ Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative*, 506.

²⁵ The main work which explores this and many other derivative forms of love-martyrdom is *al-Wadih al-mubin fi dhikr man ustushhida min al-muhibbin* by Mughaltay (d. 1361). He recounts 177 martyrs of love, most of them men, variously in love with women, boys, a jinn and the Qur'an. The centre of gravity seems to be the vulnerability of the human person to the affliction of love.

made the singer repeat it until he was overwhelmed by its power and expired.²⁶ From here it is only a small step to fatal affliction by love for a human being.²⁷ The adoration by Sufis of human beauty, customarily that of a boy, is susceptible to more suspicious construal, of course, but it is nevertheless an outgrowth of the more metaphysically rooted aestheticization of the burning desire which inhabits the heart of the devotee. To count as martyrdom, the love had to remain hidden, certainly unconsummated.

Modern Islamic Martyrdom

After this brief survey, it will be clear that, though the modern concept of the *jihādi* suicide-bomber is certainly an innovation, nevertheless it reflects elements from the tradition. From the Qur'ān itself it takes the aspect of negative witness, expressing a condemnation of the world of unbelief. There is also a clear debt to *Shi'i* tradition and traces of Sufi hagiography. There is a rich irony here, for the reformed Islam which breeds *jihādi* militancy has a knee-jerk hostility to both *Shi'i* and Sufi piety.²⁸ Yet it is through the innovations of the Iranian Revolution and its ideologues that *Shi'i* martyrdom radically changed key. Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977), the Iranian intellectual whose reformist thought drives the new Shi'ism, wanted to infuse his religious tradition with a modern, activist and above all revolutionary, impulse.

A reader of the French Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), whose progressive evolutionary thought saw history as driven by the perpetual conflict of 'closed' and 'open' forms of religion, Shari'ati sought to dispense with the old *Shi'i* quietism, with its morbid fascination with death and mourning, to make way for a new struggle for justice and a resistance to all those oppressive forces symbolized by Husayn's Umayyad enemies. The Ayatollah Khomeini promoted this revisionary portrait of Husayn, the martyr, during the Iran–Iraq war, encouraging a generation of young Iranians to join his new *Basij*, or militia, effectively as human minesweepers.²⁹

²⁶ The verse in question, written by a great Chishti master goes: 'Quddusi, a mendicant in annihilation and in permanence, said: "The self was freed by the Self, then the Self itself became captive"'. Quoted in Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 16.

²⁷ Cook, *Martyrdom*, 98.

²⁸ Cook, *Martyrdom*, 161.

²⁹ Cook, *Martyrdom*, 140.

The *Sunni* world had its own version of reform. The Egyptian Islamist and militant Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) was also an enthusiastic advocate of martyrdom, and died himself at Nasser’s orders. What best distinguishes the first phase of modern Islamic martyrdom is the relatively novel conviction that the *shahīd* is struggling on the side of the forces of progress. The martyrologies of Palestinian radical ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam are premised on the idea that Islam is founded on the blood of its martyrs and include stories of modern *mujahidīn* which, with their descriptions of miraculous aromas emanating from the martyred body and the dreadful calamities which inevitably befall the oppressor, owe a blatant debt to ancient Sufi hagiographies.³⁰

But a second, more sinister phase also seemed to arise once the Iranian revolution lost its lustre. Farhad Khosrokhavar has coined the neologism ‘martyro-path’ to describe those young men of the *Basij* who are positively enchanted by the prospect of death. He sees the advent of this new form of religiosity strictly within in the dynamic of the revolutionary process, in particular at the moment that followed the aftermath of the utopian period. The difficulty of sustaining their faith in the success of the revolution led some youngsters to look for an existential resolution to the dissonance they experienced by sacralising death and creating a morbid cult of self-destruction. Khosrokhavar points out that this death-wish is quite different from the Sufi spirituality of self-extinction which it might superficially resemble. Above all, it is underpinned by a formidably dualistic world-picture which we see emerging from the imaginations of these young martyrs: the body is utterly negative, an obstacle that must be put to death so that the ‘spiritual goal’ can be attained.

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the prospect
of death**

Traditional Sufi discourse had decidedly erotic overtones. In contemporary *jihādi* martyrdom, Khosrokhavar argues, the martyr’s body is utterly desexualised; the erotic impulse has been totally displaced by the lust for death.³¹ Why is this? Khosrokhavar recognises it is part of a strategy of resistance to the West. Sexual liberation went

³⁰ Cook, *Martyrdom*, 158f.

³¹ Farhad Khosrokhavar, ‘Le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran’, *Social Compass*, 43/1 (1996), 90 following. A very different and much more positive interpretation is offered by Lawrence Rosen who sees the suicide bomber as attempting to shore up the social system by his self-sacrifice. See his *Varieties of Muslim Experience* (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago P, 2008), 39–46.

hand in hand with the Shah's repressive regime, and so sexuality and embodiment became a source of shame and impurity. That impurity now becomes the warrant for the destruction of corporeality altogether. What is more, the martyrpath acts out of a profoundly different motivation from that of past Islamic martyrs:

Whereas the sectarian martyrs of the Islam of the premodern age were convinced that their actions would bring about the advent of a new world and the destruction of the old, the actions of modern Muslim martyrs are intended to destroy a world in which there is no place for them as citizens of a nation or of an Islamic community. In most cases, they do not cherish any chiliastic³² ideal as a central theme in their motivations.³³

The modern suicide-bomber does indeed present a disturbing shift away from the positive glorification of God to a flirtation, and sometimes more than that, with the suicidal. This is not entirely foreign to early developments in Christian martyrdom, in which the pull of *thanatos* at times overshadowed other considerations in the attraction of the martyr's vocation. Augustine was aware of this subtle creep towards morbidity, clamping down on any hint of self-destructiveness by deeming suicide to be a most grievous sin which, by its very nature, precluded repentance. But there is a difference too. The Islamic tradition shows a repeated tendency to turn the martyr into an icon of distilled human yearning. It aestheticizes self-consuming human love in a manner that appears indifferent to that love's reciprocation. There is a profound Islamic truth here, though it is not always easy for Christians to register it: God's greatness is figured not so much in an outpouring of Divine love for the creature but in the enduring desire of the human heart which longs for the Divine.

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³² Or millenarianist.

³³ Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers*, 25.