

# MARTYRDOM IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

## *Analogy and Differences*

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DEATH PLAYS A SPECIAL ROLE in every culture. And voluntary death for a higher purpose has a very specific meaning in both religious and secular traditions, including the traditions of Jewish, Christian and Islamic martyrdom. These three Abrahamic religions display similarities and differences: for all of them martyrdom is the highest grace which the believer can possibly receive, and the only circumstance in which voluntary death is acceptable. But only in the Christian tradition is every martyr in *imitatio Christi*. All Christian martyrs die with Jesus into God.<sup>1</sup>

What moves people to die voluntarily for their beliefs? Is there a difference between religious and secular martyrs? Are martyrs fanatics? In today's world, for the first time since the beginning of human culture, human beings have the ability to destroy the world as such. In this apocalyptic context the use of the term 'martyrdom' has become inflationary.<sup>2</sup> Different groups and states are trying to put themselves in the position of the victim, presenting the victims from among their ranks as martyrs, and then attacking one another *from this point of view*.

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Rahner, 'On Martyrdom', in *On the Theology of Death*, volume 2 of *Quaestiones disputatae* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> See René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origin of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), and Roman Siebenrock and Hüseyin Cicek, 'Zeugen und/oder Märtyrer. Klärungen aus der christlichen und muslimischen Tradition', in *Im Wettstreit um das Gute. Annäherungen an den Islam aus der Sicht der mimetischen Theorie*, edited by Wilhelm Guggenberger and Wolfgang Palaver (Münster, Hamburg, Berlin, Wien, London and Zürich: LIT-Verlag 2009), 105–152.

I should like to explore this tendency here, and the particular significance of martyrs for politics today, in the context of a more general overview of the Abrahamic martyrdom traditions seen in the light of the mimetic theory of René Girard.

### **Terminological Preamble**

The term ‘martyr’ in English derives from a Greek word (μάρτυς) meaning ‘witness’. A martyr is someone who bears witness to something, or someone who witnesses another person doing something. It is a word that is used in court, in legal proceedings. In the Greek language it *only* means witness in this sense.

In the Jewish tradition the idea of the martyr has been associated with *kiddush hashem*, the sanctification of God’s name—that is, with that which brings glory to God. Everyone who lives according to *kiddush hashem* is witnessing, and is a witness of, the one and true God. Every religious Jew has to live according to *kiddush hashem*, if he or she seeks salvation, because life is a gift from God. The only way of honouring God is *kiddush hashem*.

A similar conception is to be found in Islam. Here the Arabic word ‘*shahīd*’ is translated as ‘martyr’; it is linked to the expression ‘*fi sabil Allāh*’ (on the path of God). However:

Whatever the similarities, there is one major difference in conception between Muslim and Christian martyrdom: for Muslims, one earns the title of martyr (*shahīd*; pl. *shuhadā’*) without any apparent act of witnessing. The martyr’s sacrifice does not generally attest to anything specific, nor does it symbolize much beyond the obvious sense of death in the service of God’s plan. The Qur’ān, our earliest Muslim testimony, does not know the term *shahīd* in its technical sense, although the later exegetical tradition has sought to read ‘martyr’ into a few passages where the word appears.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Keith Lewinstein, ‘The Revaluation of Martyrdom in Early Islam’, in *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, edited by Margaret Cormack (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 78–79. Qur’ān 3:130: ‘That God may know who are the believers, and that He may take witnesses [*shuhadā’*] from among you’, and 4:69: ‘Whosoever obeys God, and the Messenger—they are with those whom God has blessed, Prophets, just men, martyrs [*shuhadā’*], the righteous; good companions they!’ All references to the Qur’ān are taken from the English translation by Arthur John Arberry, *The Koran: Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998 [1955]).

### ***The Scapegoat***

The influential philosopher and social theorist René Girard holds that humans are *mimetic* creatures. ‘Mimesis’ comes from a Greek word meaning imitation. Children have to imitate their parents or other humans in order to become humans themselves. Imitation is the key to humanity. But imitation can also be also very destructive. Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*:

If any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies, and in the way to their End ... endeavour to destroy, or subdue one an other.<sup>4</sup>

Hobbes believed that human rationality would ultimately stop people from destroying each other and that, because of this, humanity had found a state of relative security.

But Girard disagrees with Hobbes, because the evidence of myth suggests that human communities arose not out of rationality but out of violence. In primitive societies, without a centre of power to control people’s desire for the same thing or ‘mimetic rivalry’, the human desire for objects which are not divisible would lead to what Hobbes called ‘a War of every man against every man’.<sup>5</sup> But a way out of this situation of total chaos, which is always at the core of myths, can be found. Mythology tells us that a person or group will be accused and found guilty of causing the chaos. When the community has killed or ejected the troublemaker peace will be restored. Girard describes this process as ‘scapegoating’.

It seems to those who murder or eject the scapegoat that they have done the right thing, because the chaos has ended and peace has returned. Their action has stopped the mimetic rivalry. Moreover they go on to assume that both the chaos and the reconciliation were intended by the scapegoat. The scapegoat is transformed into a higher creature—a god! This peacemaking mechanism becomes a cornerstone of the community’s collective religious memory. The event is repeated in rituals, and now the community is leading itself, controlled by priests or other religious authorities, into mimetic chaos with the purpose of killing or ejecting a scapegoat (which may be a human or an animal)

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1651]), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 249.



*The Man of Sorrows, by William Dyce*

and restoring peace. We should not blame the ancient mythic traditions for their violence, because their intention was to restore peace, even when the process was a cruel one. In the myth traditions the victims are demonized and then divinised after being killed. This why the mythical gods are good and bad at the same time.

With this background it is more understandable that Abraham should try to sacrifice his son. In this story the belief that God needs sacrifices is being refuted for the first time. The story of Joseph and his brothers further exposes the nature of the scapegoat mechanism. But for Girard the passion of Christ is the ultimate unveiling of this mechanism, which demonstrates the lies that structure the non-biblical religions. Jesus is not divinised because the community collectively kill him, but because he is pure from his birth until his death. In myths the scapegoat is always guilty. But, contrary to the logic of myth, the apostles bear witness to Christ's innocence. The difference between biblical and non-biblical traditions is that the Bible is siding with the victims, whereas the non-biblical traditions are siding with the collective murderer. Girard shows that myths are always told from the perspective of the aggressor.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004).

Christian martyrdom is directly connected to this unveiling of society's violent origins, since it is understood to reproduce the passion of Christ. But in the two non-Christian Abrahamic traditions martyrdom is not explicitly related to the discovery of the scapegoat mechanism: it is primarily an act of witnessing God's laws. Of course suffering plays a very important role in the Jewish and Muslim traditions but, crucially, in Judaism and Islam God cannot suffer, whereas in Christianity 'God experiences the role of victim ... deliberately, in order to free man from his violence'.<sup>7</sup> Judaism and Islam also lack the moment of forgiveness that we find in the Christian tradition, for example in Stephen's martyrdom: 'Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them". When he had said this, he died.' (Acts 7:60) In the Qur'ān there are verses that stress the importance of forgiveness (Qur'ān 42:40–43),<sup>8</sup> but there is no central model of the forgiving victim as in the Christian tradition. Judaism and Islam do not have the clear model of martyrdom that Christ represents for Christianity. A key problem in relation to what interests us here is therefore the way in which the Torah and the Qur'ān are read and understood.

### ***Jewish Martyrdom***

In the Jewish context it is, strictly speaking, not right to talk about martyrdom as such. What Christians would call martyrdom is one way of living *kiddush hashem*—if a Jew dies in the duty of *kiddush hashem* or while defending *kiddush hashem*, in killing the enemies of God and God's people. The Hebrew Bible gives us examples both of active and of passive martyrs.

Then Samson called to the Lord and said, 'Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes'. And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left

<sup>7</sup> Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 199.

<sup>8</sup> 'The recompense of evil is evil the like of it [in degree]; but whoso pardons and puts things right, his wage falls upon God; surely He loves not the evildoers. And whosoever helps himself after he has been wronged—against them there is no way. The way is only open against those who do wrong to the people, and are insolent in the earth wrongfully; there awaits them a painful chastisement. But surely he who bears patiently and is forgiving—surely that is true constancy.'

hand on the other. Then Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines'. He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life. (Judges 16:28–30)

Like the other Abrahamic traditions, Rabbinic Judaism did not sanction voluntary death, but Samson's is not a voluntary death: he is fighting for *kiddush hashem*.

In 2 Maccabees a story is told about Hannah and her seven sons. The mother and her sons suffer and die because they are not willing to obey their conqueror, the king Antiochus Epiphanes, and eat pork. They would rather die than disobey the laws of the Torah. A very interesting point in the story is what Hannah's sixth son says to the emperor as he is about to die:

Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God! (2 Maccabees 7:18–19)

The son is suffering, he believes, not only because he has disobeyed Antiochus, but also because the whole Jewish community has disobeyed the laws of the Torah. Here the archaic theme of sacrifice is trying to find a way back into the Abrahamic faith. Another important point this story makes is that worldly authority is temporal but divine authority is eternal: therefore the loss of life is not a significant deterrent against Jews witnessing to their faith.

During the Jewish government in Palestine, the reasons for martyrdom were centred on the Promised Land and on the Temple. But after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 Judaism was transformed by the experience of exile into a 'portable' religion. What mattered was that the survival of Judaism should not be in danger, and consequently ideas about martyrdom changed. At the council of Nithza in Lydda, probably around AD 135, the elders ordered that every Jew had to choose death rather than violate the commandments against idolatry, incest (which was considered to include adultery) or murder. In a public situation it was necessary to accept martyrdom rather than violate even a minor precept.

### **Muslim Martyrdom**

The first martyrs in the Islamic tradition were Bilal and Sumayya, who were also among the first who converted to Islam. Both lived in Medina, where the Islamic community was suffering persecution from the polytheistic Arabs, and suffered torture for their beliefs.

Qur'ān 3: 169–170 plays a very important role in the understanding of Islamic martyrdom:

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 that 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.

As with *kiddush hashem* in the Jewish tradition, those who live, fight and die for God, *fi sabil Allāh*, are witnesses of the true religion and will surely achieve salvation. Although both the Muslim and Jewish traditions condemn murder, killing becomes permissible when it is in the name of *fi sabil Allāh* or *kiddush hashem*.

The *hadīth* (sayings and acts of the Prophet) traditions show that Muhammad's own position on martyrdom was not as clear as those of Muslim radicals today. One day the Prophet asked some soldiers whom they believed to be a real martyr. They answered: those who fight and get killed in battle. The Prophet said that they were wrong, and that a woman who dies in childbirth could be more of a martyr than someone who fights and dies in battle. We can see from this example that Muslim martyrdom cannot be limited to a particular battlefield; those who are firm in their belief and bear witness are martyrs in the Islamic tradition.<sup>9</sup>

### **Christianity**

Although Christianity, unlike the Jewish and the Muslim traditions, has a model of martyrdom in Christ, the significance of Christian martyrdom has not always been clear. For René Girard, the Christian martyr testifies to Christ's unveiling of the scapegoat mechanism, the

<sup>9</sup> Al-Muwatta 16:12.



The Martyrdom of St Denis, by Henri Bellechose

profound injustice of human violence. Girard stresses the fact that in Greek the words ‘Satan’ and ‘Paraclete’ (Holy Spirit), like ‘martyr’, appeared in the context of the lawcourts, though they are not restricted to that setting. Satan is the accuser and the Paraclete is the advocate of the victim.<sup>10</sup> The martyr is a witness: his or her death represents, without replacing, the event of Christ’s passion, in the sense that it shows everyone the injustice of the scapegoat mechanism.<sup>11</sup> The machine of myth-making machine has been derailed by the passion. It is still possible to hate our scapegoats, but not to turn them into gods. Since the passion it is increasingly possible to see ‘mythopoetical activities’ in a rational light; martyrdom is not as beautiful as the myths suggest. Therefore, on an anthropological level,

<sup>10</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), 207.

<sup>11</sup> Christian martyrdom was very consciously perceived as a reproduction and a re-actualisation of Christ’s passion: Marie-Françoise Baslez writes in her recent and important work, *Les persécutions dans l’antiquité: victimes, héros, martyrs* (Paris: Fayard, 2007): ‘Les spectateurs chrétiens ont très consciemment perçu le martyre de leurs frères comme la reproduction et la réactualisation de la passion du Christ’ (203).



every martyr in the Christian sense amplifies the truth that the passion brought into the world.

The Christian martyr testifies, anthropologically speaking, to the injustice of foundational violence and, theologically speaking, to God's forgiving love. The martyr dies in a spirit of forgiveness and demonstrates with his or her death that it is always possible to love and to resist the temptation of reciprocal violence, even in the most extreme circumstances. The model *par excellence*, once again, is Christ and the way in which he forgave his enemies and remained faithful to the non-violent love of the Father, who 'makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good', to the very end. Even some of his disciples were absorbed into the mimetic scapegoat mechanism, as when Peter wounds the high priest's slave at Gethsemane,<sup>12</sup> but in the resurrection narratives Christ's forgiveness is underlined: 'peace be with you'.<sup>13</sup> In the Gospels, God is the forgiving victim.

### ***The Perverted Ideal***

Since in the Christian tradition we have the model of Christ, there is a clear *ideal* of martyrdom. But this ideal can be perverted. I particularly want to speak here about the deformations and political (mis)use of the concept of martyrdom in our own age. But the Christian ideal of martyrdom has been perverted before now. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard underlines that once Christianity was no longer a persecuted religion itself, it started persecuting others and acting in a political and violent way, contrary to the teachings of the Gospels. What is, however, new today is that Christianity has begun to acknowledge its own victims. A new kind of self-critique has appeared that was wholly absent in premodern times. It is in cultures influenced by the Jewish and Christian traditions that this 'modern concern for the victims' first appeared.<sup>14</sup> So, when I speak about the misuse of the ideal of martyrdom, this is in the context of an ever more global culture in which this concern has become mainstream, even beyond Christian culture.

<sup>12</sup> Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 259.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase occurs repeatedly: Luke 24: 36, John 20: 19, 20: 21 and 20: 26.

<sup>14</sup> See René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Leominster: Gracewing: 2001), 161.

In this context the position of the victim, of the martyr, can become a desirable object among global mimetic rivalries. Here the martyr does not die in a spirit of forgiveness, nor to testify to God's forgiving love, but to testify to the badness of the enemy (the victimiser). The Christian ideal of martyrdom is perverted when it does not break with violent reciprocity by 'turning the other cheek', but feeds violent reciprocity through retaliation, whether physical or rhetorical.

### ***Political-secular Martyrs***

Secular martyrs are linked to particular ideologies. They do not speak for all humans, but are rather acting for a specific group, which does not include those who do not fit into their world-view. For example, the grave of the unknown soldier is common to most countries, but what in each case does it represent? The grave represents a national collective consciousness. The unknown has died for those who are living today, but was killed by a specific enemy. In remembering the unknown a line is drawn between 'us and them'; the symbolism is exclusive. It is testimony to the 'modern concern for the victim' that unknown soldiers are commemorated at all; but they are restricted to the dead of a single nation.

The unknown soldier can be exploited to mean: 'we were not those who started the conflict—we only tried to defend ourselves and regain our freedom'. The ideology of political-secular martyrdom needs to exclude others, because it is grounded in what Carl Schmitt called 'friend' and 'enemy' logic, according to which it is necessary to have enemies in order to recognise your friends. In a famous lecture, Ernest Renan said:

Nor can religion offer a sufficient basis for establishment of a modern nationality ....

A nation is then a great solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices that its citizens have made, and of those that they feel prepared to make once more.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?' in *Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Studies*, translated by William G. Hutchison (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2003), 77, 81.

Here secular martyrdom is something like a modern form of idolatry. Especially in times of crisis, the martyr is revealed as crucial in maintaining national identity.<sup>16</sup>

### **Terrorism**

Once martyrdom becomes an idolatry, the way is open for terrorism to unleash violent self-destruction in a world where the archaic protections offered by scapegoating are disappearing. Having been revealed for what it is, the scapegoat mechanism is no longer effective. Girard notes that 'today the escalation to the extremes uses Islamism as yesterday it used Napoleonism and pan-Germanism'.<sup>17</sup> Self-perpetuating violence, 'war' in von Clausewitz's definition, constantly adapts itself to new circumstances. What makes today's Islamist terrorism more dangerous than earlier forms is merely the greater technological development in our time.

The terrorist 'martyr' is not a witness: if terrorism testifies to anything, it is the utter absurdity of human violence in a world without archaic protections. Terrorism is a typically modern phenomenon. In archaic cultures and in myths there are, no doubt, victims who 'spontaneously' (that is, mimetically) sacrificed their lives in order to restore or rearrange a social order in disarray.<sup>18</sup> But today it is impossible to restore order in that way. The terrorist sacrifice is therefore never efficacious or redemptive, not even in the archaic sense: the mechanism is not working any more. It can only instigate more violence and disorder. For all its bloody atrocity, it operates in the void.

However the cross, and martyrdom in the true sense of the word, have always been capable of demystifying the scapegoat mechanism and undermining the efficacy of sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> They have exposed false restorations of peace and the myths that cover up and conceal unjust

<sup>16</sup> Compare Valérie Rosoux, 'The Politics of Martyrdom', in *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Politics of Self-sacrifice*, edited by Rona M. Fields and Cólín Owens (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2004), 87.

<sup>17</sup> René Girard, 'On War and Apocalypse', *First Things* (Aug/Sept 2009), available at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/07/apocalypse-now>.

<sup>18</sup> See Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> In *Des choses cachées* Girard speaks of the 'efficacy of the Cross' (*l'efficacité de la croix*). (René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987], 192.)

violence against victims who are in principle innocent. In death the true martyr, whether Christian or not, makes plain his or her innocence and the injustice of violence. The martyr is therefore always a witness to truth.

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