

# Martyrdom

*Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.* - Blaise Pascal

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, which impacted the world, there has been renewed interest in Islam. Secular as well as Christian bookstores feature literature analyzing this second largest religion after Christianity. Why did these young and well-educated Muslims willingly go to their death? Why were they ready to cause so much structural damage and so many deaths? Why were they called "martyrs" by millions of their co-religionists? Why do young Palestinians blow themselves up in the name of Allah and for the sake of their people?

Do they commit suicide in the name of Allah? Suicide is not once referred to in the Koran. It is forbidden in the Hadith [the oral tradition of Islam, sayings or deeds attributed to Muhammad] where the Prophet claimed to have said, "Whosoever shall kill himself shall suffer in the fire of hell." He shall "be excluded from heaven forever."

The secular West, which refuses to take religion seriously, can't understand why people are willing to die for their faith. Martyrdom has become a foreign idea even for modern Western Christians. But in radical Islam martyrdom is a key element. It has a religious as well as a political function.

## Martyrdom in Islam

If suicide is forbidden in Islam, why is suicide then morally justified in the eyes of radical Islamists? In their ideology, voluntary death is a fulfillment of a "sacred" mission. They are not victims but volunteers. They die for a higher cause and are entitled to the rank of a martyr.

A perfect martyr is one who has either been slain in a religious war or has been killed unjustly. A special blessing is promised to those who die in a jihad, or holy war. The Koran declares: "Think not of those, who are slain in the way of Allah as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord they have provision." [Surah iii: 169] "Let those fight in the way of Allah who sell the life of this world for the other. Whoso fighteth in the way of Allah, be he slain or victorious, on him, we shall bestow a vast reward." [Surah iv: 74]

Long chapters in the Hadith are devoted to the Jihad, from which the following are quotations of the sayings of the Prophet "He who assists another with arms to fight in the way of God, is as the champion, and as a sharer of rewards. And he who stayeth behind to take charge of the family of a warrior is even as a champion in war." In other words, the benefactors of a family who has lost a son are also promised a reward by Allah.

The wrath of Allah is a strong element in Islam ideology. In the Hadith, Allah comes to the assistance of those who serve him. But he is the destroyer of his enemies, the infidels. However, it appears that those radical Muslims, who are totally committed to

martyrdom for the cause of Allah, are frustrated with him for postponing the outpouring of his wrath. They see themselves as Allah's instruments in protecting his name and advancing his cause at all cost. They are men of action, who seek martyrdom on the battlefields and in terrorist acts. Success in action is secondary. They argue that Muslims should have an attitude of jihad in order to grow in discipleship. A young radical Muslim may say, " Even if I do not succeed, that is not the issue. I might become a martyr and a model to be followed. After all, what is ahead of me is paradise, but as for you, the fires of hell are waiting to receive you."

For many Muslims the Iranian revolution was an inspiration and a model that was reproducible. The late Ayatollah Khomeini greatly influenced Iranian youth. He also had an impact on many parts of the world, especially on radical forms of Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini was a Shiite - a branch of Islam much more dogmatic and militant than Sunni Islam - and he was an outright autocrat. He didn't allow any opposition to his regime. " There is no place for opinions and whims in the government of Islam," he declared. " The prophet, the imams and the people obey God's will and Sharia." He practiced what he preached. He declared and showed his willingness to be a martyr in "the struggle between Islam and the infidels." He defined "jihad" as a holy war with its stated purpose the conquest of all non-Muslim countries. "Such a war may well be declared after the formation of an Islamic government of that name, at the direction of the Imam ... or under his orders. It will then be the duty of every able-bodied adult male to volunteer for this war of conquest, the final aim of which is to put Koranic law in power from one end of the earth to the other."

In his *Blueprint Islamic Government* Ayatollah Khomeini carefully outlined his plan for an Islamic state. In this book he often referred to the need for a jihad as a means to achieve the goals of Islam. He called upon holy men to sacrifice themselves to gain God's approval. He told his followers that the Friday sermons in the mosques are meant to influence and to serve as an inspiration to the extent of preparing the people to fight with courage and valour and even make people proceed to battle fronts without any fear of poverty, sickness, death or loss because people fear Allah alone and nobody else. And he left no one in the dark about the fate of infidels. He wrote: "Christian, Jewish and Baha'i missionary centers are spread in Tehran to deceive people and to lead them away from the teaching principles of religion. Isn't it the duty to destroy these centers?" And he called upon young people to "help and rescue Islam because Islam is crying out for your help."

One example of Khomeini's influence outside of Iran was the 1981 assassination of Egypt's president Sadat. A casual observer of Egyptian politics may wonder why Sadat was assassinated. He didn't prevent the spread of Islam in Egypt. In fact, he encouraged those who wanted the Islamic law code, the Sharia, to become the source of his nation's legislation. The policies he followed tended toward its Islamization. Volunteers were sent with Sadat's blessing to fight the Soviet forces; these men, now called mujahidin or the Afghan Arabs, were among the military groups fighting security forces in Egypt and Algeria in the mid-1990s.

Sadat's assassins did not belong to some anti-Islam faction. They were members of Al-Jihad (holy war movement). Why then did they kill Sadat? Because they believed they were Allah's instruments in executing justice. Sadat was accused of making the peace treaty with Israel, fighting the Muslims in Libya, and offering the possibility of extended Nile water to reach Israel.

### Christian Martyrdom

In Biblical spirituality a Christian doesn't choose martyrdom. He becomes a martyr. He doesn't commit "suicide" for the sake of becoming a martyr with the prospect of earning a heavenly reward. He doesn't seek martyrdom. The glory promised to suffering Christians is not based on their suffering, but on Christ's atoning- meritorious work on the cross.

During the fierce persecutions the Christians underwent in the Roman empire, the early church equated voluntary martyrdom with suicide and deplored it.

A Christian is not called upon to be brave so much as he is called upon to be faithful to his Lord, which is a far more exacting standard than the one of radical Islam. He doesn't seek revenge when suffering wrong. He remembers the words of his Lord, which says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (Romans 12:19). He isn't overcome by evil, but overcomes evil with good (Romans 12: 21).

In a world marked by strife and injustice of all sorts, the Christian will proclaim the message found in the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. He reminds himself of the apostolic command to have his "feet fitted with the Gospel of peace" (Ephesians 5: 15). For the Christian the Word of the Lord is his only weapon in this world. He does not turn ploughshares into weapons.

But throughout the long history of the church many believers have been persecuted or even killed when they were faithful ambassadors of the Gospel of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5: 19) It is good to remember, therefore, that the Biblical word witness, the Greek word *marturein*, is linked to martyrdom. A martyr is one who witnesses for Christ by his death (Acts 22: 20; Rev. 2:13). The New Testament describes martyrs as the "the cloud of witnesses" who surround us (Hebrews 12:1). No more and no less. They loved the Lord even into their death. One scholar attributes the survival of the church through the first three centuries of persecution to "its clear and uncompromising idea of martyrdom."

A classical example of a suffering church in the early annals of church history comes from Armenia, the first Christian kingdom. It served as a refuge for Christians from the Roman Empire between 301-312 A.D. In the fifth century it succumbed to irresistible forces and fell under a succession of foreign rulers. In 451 A.D. Armenia was defeated. Thousands of Armenians, mostly Christians fled to the mountains. A contemporary description put it as follows:

"They preferred to live in caves like wild beasts, in godliness, rather than softly, each in his own mansion, in apostasy ... Psalms were the burden of their songs,

and the reading of Scripture their perfect delight. Each was a church in his own person, himself the priest thereof, each body a holy altar, and every spirit an acceptable sacrifice."

The Biblical definition of a martyr has a message for us today. It means that a faithful church - witnessing in word and deed - can expect to be wounded. On the basis of Biblical evidence and the testimony of history, researcher and number cruncher David Barrett, whose summaries of annual statistics of the state of worldwide Christianity are published in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, offers this important definition of a martyr: "A martyr is a Christian believer who loses his or her life prematurely, in a situation of witness, and as a result of human hostility." And he points out that martyrdom was not just a scourge for the church in ancient history. He estimates that in our modern times there are 150,000 martyrs each year.

Christians can expect to be persecuted. When Jesus spoke to His disciples He told them that just as He was being persecuted, so would they. The entire history of the church has substantiated that Jesus was not speaking only of His disciples in His own generation. As strangers and pilgrims on earth, Christians can never claim a privileged position in society. If they are truly faithful to their Lord and the Gospel, society normally finds this witness intolerable and will react by persecuting them. They are involved in a spiritual warfare, contending not against men, but "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Persecution is a result of Satan's attack and is intended to strike out at God. When Saul was on the road to Damascus to wipe out the Christian church in that city, the risen Christ encountered him with this question: "Why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4).

Christians suffering and even perishing for their faith by the most brutal means are not without hope. The New Testament descriptions of suffering have a curious upbeat tone that is mixed with painful realities. The Saviour is depicted as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12: 2).

Thus the joy in the midst of terrible suffering comes from putting suffering in its true context. And this context is the hope of glory awaiting the people of God when Jesus Christ returns. His ultimate victory over all His enemies will be shared by His faithful disciples. From this perspective Paul could testify in the midst of his trials: "We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

The apostle Paul went to Rome to witness. He never sought suffering and death. Although he viewed suffering as a positive element in his spiritual journey. He could be a faithful witness because he had appropriated the Gospel and was changed by the

Gospel. From a persecutor he became a missionary of the Gospel of reconciliation and a martyr. He was beheaded during the rule of the cruel emperor Nero.

## **Conclusion**

If suffering for the sake of the Lord is so predominant in the Scriptures, why are we so estranged from this difficult road set aside for the children of God? I believe that in the Western world we give the wrong impression to people about knowing and following the Lord. We talk about it too sweetly, forgetting that it is the lot of the sheep in the fold of their Shepherd to be shorn by the world. We would rather accept a "health and wealth gospel" and a consumer's church mentality than the challenge of cross bearing.

We must remind ourselves and teach our youth that to belong to Jesus means to walk a difficult, lonely, and even a dangerous path in a world antagonistic to the claims of the Gospel, a world unwilling to submit to the Lordship of Christ. We need to learn the cost of discipleship in our hedonistic, entertainment saturated culture. The progress of the Gospel in the line of generations is unthinkable without martyrdom.

The historical records of martyrdom, the recent martyrdom of missionaries, and the accounts of severe persecution of Christians in Islamic dominated nations confirm and illustrate the Biblical definition of a witness. They serve to prepare us better for what could befall any of us. They also show us why we should help Christians who are suffering for their faith.

We also need to bring the plight of the persecuted to the attention of our politicians. Turning a blind eye to persecution would be a betrayal of the Christian heritage of Canada and the USA. Furthermore, we should regularly and systematically acquire information about persecuted Christians, to remember them in prayer and seek to meet their needs. We need interaction with organizations such as the Voice of the Martyrs, which provides reliable information and offers persecuted churches aid in word and deed. If one part of the church suffers, "every part suffers with it." ( 1 Cor.12: 26).