

## The Desire to Die

The message of martyrdom was not unknown to me in my youth. I recall it as a decisive challenge, conveyed in the lives of the saints, models of piety to be emulated by the faithful. Did I have what it took? The nobility, inner conviction, desire for the face of God? I was sure that I did, if only presented with the opportunity: bloodthirsty savages looking to make a martyr of any Christian who stumbled across their path or a Soviet committee coldly presenting me with the choice of my life or my faith. Was I manly enough? Was I truly devoted? (The two somehow went together.) Or was I attached to this world, this valley of tears and turmoil?

So, after 9/11, when my nephews and nieces asked me, “Why would they crash the plane if they knew they would be killed too?” -- it seemed irresponsible to refer to some cobweb in their uncle’s mind. And yet, I felt my childhood musings still could offer something of an explanation.

First some preliminaries: The understanding of meaning and order comes in different forms. To some, the world functions according to laws – whether divine, natural or human – that tell us what to do and not to do in order to be happy. To others, meaning and order are determined by hierarchy – ecclesiastical, political, intellectual, or professional, and those occupying its highest levels enjoy a privileged right to speak on behalf of the rest of us in determining matters in their respective spheres of authority. To still others, it comes down to personal experience – whether poetic and mystical or prosaic and rational, an innate, perhaps god-given ability to discern and pursue one’s destiny and bring it to bear on the ever undefined course of the universe.

The list goes on, with the possibility of overlap or change depending on the circumstances and age of the person in question. The martyr’s framework of meaning and order -- our concern here -- is decidedly eschatological. Eschatological here does not signify a belief in the imminent end of the present world, but a sense of the world as a place of struggle, a test of one’s sincerity, a fight for something amidst a jumble of

conflicting claims and fleeting perversities: this world as a theatre in which the drama of the next is to be staged.

What does this reveal about the rhetoric of lethal martyrdom, where the goal is death? Lethal martyrdom, to define a term, is the intentional sacrifice of one's life for a cause in an attack on people considered to be the enemy of that cause. The cause can be national, cultural, political, or religious. Also known as suicide attacks since, unlike martyrdom as traditionally conceived, death is actively sought out, these acts of self-sacrificial violence can be distinguished from suicide in one respect: They are undertaken for the sake of a communal cause. It should be mentioned that lethal martyrdom can serve the goals of national autonomy, a last act of despair in the face of what is perceived to be a threatening or occupying power bent on subduing or even erasing a nation, its identity and way of life. This nationalist type of lethal martyrdom exists in many forms, has been described by its promoters as a constitutional right to defend a nation, but is not the lethal martyrdom of 9/11, since it tends to be abandoned as a means of resistance once the encroaching power has withdrawn or been re-imagined in more favorable terms – as co-existent if not friend. The lethal martyrdom of 9/11, in contrast, is the logical outcome of an extremist interpretation of world order.

In the preface to the first edition of *Join the Caravan*, Abdullah Azzam, mentor of Osama Bin Laden, writes: "This is a small treatise that I wrote for those who are pining away for jihad and who hope for martyrdom in this way." The final words of the preface to the second edition of that work speak of the twofold duty of waging jihad to rouse the believers, i.e. Muslims, against the satanic forces at work in the world that aim to destroy Islam. Significantly, the strategy in response to such adverse circumstances is not formulated politically or territorially, nor even religiously (in the sense of the tangible needs and concerns of a believing community), but as death, death as a display of piety and commitment, as Azzam concludes at the end of his preface: "It suffices us that we have striven sincerely and called attention, with insight, to the terror of the situation. And we hope that Allah will provide us with sincerity and steadfastness and that He will accept our deeds from us, and bring us our end in martyrdom."

To conceive of the world as an array of satanic forces is only to set the eschatological stage necessary for the act of martyrdom to make sense. Struggle to the death, rather than negotiated settlement or accommodation and co-existence, makes sense only as a response to an irrevocably polarized world, in which the godly remnant is witness, in death, to the final victory awaiting true believers in the world to come. Hence, sacrificial death becomes an end in itself, lethal martyrdom a political platform. Death here does not serve any worldly goal – political, territorial or religious, but displays to God a purity of intention amidst the world's corruption: It is an effective way to prove to God one's desire for His face alone, free of worldly interests and considerations.

Could one not effectively display one's piety in other ways, through charity, acts of service, love? There is, not at all ironically, something conclusive about death. Other demonstrations of piety are always latently hypocritical, potentially done for the sake of a worldly motive, e.g. generosity out of an ambition for fame. Martyrdom alone, whether self-inflicted or not, definitively rules out the possibility of worldly motive. A piety that ends in death can therefore be unequivocally reckoned as sufficient merit for salvation and the right to a place in the heavenly kingdom -- an effective means of confirming one's godly orientation.

Thus, one might attack an overwhelmingly superior military force or use one's body as an explosive weapon against the enemy, not because it is an effective strategy to attain concrete goals or because all solutions to a crisis have been exhausted, but because the anticipation of death gives meaning to one's world. Meaning here is not to be proven legally, hierarchically, mystically or rationally, but eschatologically – the only act of substance in a war pitting the godly against the satanic: One either annihilates the enemy or oneself in attempting to do so. No other option exists. And so, in his *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, Ayman al-Zawahiri, erstwhile leader of the Egyptian based al-Jihad and intellectual architect of al-Qa'ida, insists upon "the stage of the global battle, now that the forces of the disbelievers have united against the mujahidin." The logic

proceeds as follows: Without a global stage, the idea of an eschatological battle cannot be properly conceived and conveyed to the adherents of the movement, and without the idea of an eschatological battle, martyrdom of the kind advocated as an end in itself by al-Qa'ida does not make sense. It is no accident of a globalized world that when al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden joined forces in 1998, they called their movement "The World Islamic Front for Fighting Jews and Crusaders." Throughout his book, al-Zawahiri harps on the theme of a global conspiracy against Islam, of which -- he claims -- Muslim youth (!) have increasingly become aware. In point of fact, his movement and its martyrs in waiting need to make such an extremist interpretation of world order if their goal is to make any sense. The world must be cleanly divided into two camps, which is why al-Zawahiri is so careful in the aforementioned work to renounce insinuations that the U.S. ever had any dealings with the Arab Afghanis, who have formed the core fighting element of al-Qa'ida.

Again, an eschatological framework that divides the world into good and evil demands annihilation either of the enemy or of oneself, as al-Qa'ida spokesmen, Suleiman Abu Gheith, puts it in an article entitled "In the Shadow of the Lances": "How can [he, i.e. the Muslim] possibly [accept humiliation and inferiority] when he knows that his community was created to stand at the center of leadership, at the center of hegemony and rule, at the center of ability and sacrifice? How can [he] possibly [accept humiliation and inferiority] when he knows that the [divine] rule is that the entire earth must be subject to the religion of Allah -- not to the East, not to the West -- to no ideology and to no path except for the path of Allah?"

One might wonder why this martyrdom is sought so actively, why martyrdom is associated with battle, armed conflict in potentially successful military campaigns, rather than a more passive death at the hands of hostile authorities for refusing to renounce one's faith or most deeply held principles and convictions. Abdullah Azzam reminds his readers in part one of *Join the Caravan* that the Prophet and his Companions -- in other words, the exemplary apostolic community of early Islam to be imitated by later generations of Muslims -- set out on military expeditions against the enemy: "The

virtuous Companions continued upon the path of the noble Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace), for the glorious Qur'an had brought up this generation with an education of jihad. They had been bathed in jihad and cleansed of engrossment in worldly matters, just as a wound is bathed in water." The argument is further developed by Azzam, in echo of 'Abd al-Salam Faraj (author of "The Neglected Duty," the text supposed to have inspired the assassins of Anwar Sadat), that jihad is the highest peak of Islam.

What could this all mean? Jihad is a sufficiently complex term, that has been used in manifold ways by Muslims through the centuries in response to their needs and historical circumstances, as I have argued elsewhere ("Jihad Revisited," forthcoming in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*). For Muslims in general, jihad -- meaning struggle, whether armed or not -- is a means to an end: for the mystic, discipline of the interior life as preparation for union with God; for the state, defense of borders and quelling of rebellion to maintain itself in power; for the philosopher, preservation of socio-political order as the proper end of a polity, including the possibility of just war to achieve that goal. For the ascetic warrior bent on death as a way to confirm and display the purity of his godly intentions in this world, jihad became an end in itself. It is armed struggle deemed holy for two reasons: First, set in eschatological context, it is holy as a struggle against satanic forces, as previously discussed. For this reason, lethal martyrdom only works if carried out against the non-Muslim, especially the non-Muslim worldly powers of the day. Secondly, it is an imitation of the military expeditions undertaken by the exemplary apostolic community who themselves struggled against the irreligious and worldly powers of their day that sought to suppress Islam: It is thus a way to identify with the sacred story of Islam and the intervention of God in human history. Jihad, in that sense, becomes ritual action, no less a form of worship than the ritually prescribed prayers or pilgrimage. Muslims throughout history have sought to imitate the Prophet and his first Companions. Most have sought to imitate their acts of charity and kindness towards others, their closeness to God, their high-minded ethics, their commitment to the revealed law. Only a very few -- the ascetic warriors, the eschatologically minded of the Muslim community -- have chosen to imitate their military expeditions.

But is that all? A global conflict in which martyrdom in battle is associated with an apostolic model? In a recruitment video, Osama Bin Laden states: "The only way to destroy this atheism is by jihad, fighting, and bombings that bring martyrdom. Only blood will wipe out the shame and the dishonor inflicted on Muslims." Later in the same video, he refers to the youthful fighters for Islam "as great heroes who imitated our Prophet. We incited, and they responded.... I view these great men with the utmost respect and humility. They have wiped away the shame from the face of the Muslim community." Among sixteen reasons given for jihad in part one of *Join the Caravan*, Abdullah Azzam includes "following in the footsteps of the pious predecessors," "hoping for martyrdom," and "a shield for the Muslim community and a means for lifting disgrace from them." In illustration of the last point, he cites a statement allegedly attributed to the prophet Muhammad: "When people are stingy with dinars and dirhams, and trade in round-about ways with usury, and follow the tails of cows, Allah will establish over them a disgrace which He will not remove until they return to religion." In other words, Muslim abandonment of their religion and association with worldly interests has led them to be disgraced in the eyes of God, who must therefore be placated in some way and thereby restored to His proper place of omnipotence.

In the Book of Leviticus 4:13-16, we find the following pronouncement (similar ones occur elsewhere in the Bible): "If it is the whole Israelite community that sins inadvertently by doing what is forbidden by any of the Lord's commandments, and so incurs guilt, and the matter is not known to the assembly, then, when the sin they have committed is brought to their notice, the assembly must present a young bull as a purification-offering and bring it in front of the Tent of Meeting. The elders of the community must lay their hands on the victim's head before the Lord, and it must be slaughtered before the Lord."

The connection is all too obvious. Muslim youth act as sacrificial offering by which the Muslim community can restore a relation with God perceived by the eschatologically minded to have gone awry. The Muslim sense of shame and humiliation

-- colonialism, defeat in war, the willingness of Muslim leaders to sell the interests of Muslims on the global market to the goals of U.S. foreign policy, etc. -- has led this kind of piety-mindedness to conclude that God has removed His favor from the Muslim community: It is He who has permitted the Muslim community to be humiliated and disgraced for their betrayal of His ways in pursuit of worldly ones. A pollution, a plague, a disgrace has been inflicted upon the Muslim community, and the only way to treat it is in the manner of ancient Israel, by offering an unblemished animal on the altar of the Lord. In the case of 9/11 and al-Qa'ida, the offering was made up of Muslim youth, pure of heart and free of worldly attachment, at least in principle, who had declared their willingness to restore the Muslim community's distorted relation with God by offering their lives as a sacrifice to His name. Lethal martyrdom -- the desire to die, to be sacrificed, to be put to death, to offer one's blood for the God, i.e. the active pursuit of death through acts of violence against the enemies of God -- is to demonstrate to God that the community is still committed to His way. It is, perhaps ironically, Muslim youth who have either convinced themselves or been convinced that they alone can play the role of willing victim for the sins of their elders, the likes of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who have failed to re-imagine how God might still be with them in the modern world, even or especially amidst hardship and lack of understanding. Or does the tale of Job no longer hold true today?

Theologically, it is to placate God, but psychologically, it is to allay the confused anger within the breasts of believers that suicidal martyrdom is undertaken. It is in this sense that the martyr is not saying, "O God, see what I have done, please now remove this disgrace You have inflicted upon us?" Rather, it is a cathartic symbol by which to treat communal frustration and bewilderment, an odd but effective means of stabilizing the chaos and uncertainty emerging from the dissonance between what a community perceives to be the divine will and actual reality, as the title of another of al-Zawahiri's books implies: *Allaying the Anger in the Believers' Hearts*. Martyrdom is, then, meant to have communal repercussions. Other members of the Muslim community can value the act of martyrdom as evidence that the faith remains a vital force in a modern world in

which the voice of Islam has been made to appear atavistic and irrelevant: If the religion can inspire people to offer their lives for it, there must be something to it!

But why not sacrifice an unblemished animal? Or money as charity for those who are needy? Why the death of young Muslims? Again, it is only by martyrdom that the purity of a cause can be unequivocally established. By martyrdom alone can it be shown that the faith remains unsullied. Martyrdom is a way to show that Islam is not the cause of Muslim humiliation and disgrace – otherwise how could one offer one's life for it? Martyrdom is an act of dissociating oneself from the sins of the community, thus demonstrating that not Islam, but rather Muslim deviation from religion, is the cause of Muslim woes. Martyrdom witnesses to the vitality of the faith and thereby serves to disassociate it from communal shame and disgrace. This witness adds a further 'evangelical' value to martyrdom that animal sacrifice cannot. The lethal martyrdom of 9/11 brought Islam into the global limelight, and it is in that sense that 9/11 fully achieved the goals of its masterminds, which were, again, not political, territorial or even religious, but the promotion of one side of an eschatological battle, to witness to its strength and power, and thus to bring front and center on the global stage the Islam that one group of Muslims believes to have been globally marginalized.

It is in that sense that al-Qa'ida has achieved its goal. It is worth recalling the joy with which Osama Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri received the news of 9/11, who then voiced their expectation that it would bring people to read about and convert to Islam. Did anyone not find that an odd initial response, as if 9/11 were a missionary endeavor destined to bear new and invigorated adherents to Islam and not a military campaign? It cannot be denied, however, that the missionary endeavor has borne fruit. Islam is topical, to say the least. It has captured global attention and wonder. Bin Laden's goal is achieved.

Or is it? Lethal martyrdom, for all its religious, psychological and communal connections, is fundamentally an act of despair since it involves the taking of one's own life. It is not an act of hope and love, even if the human mind can be conditioned to see it

as godly. It is for this very reason that in the end it will not be recognized as Islamic, even if there are now Muslims, even some leaders, who lend it a certain credibility. It is to be emphasized, however, that the lethal martyrdom supported by certain Muslim leaders – for example, Sheikh Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, the top Egyptian cleric of al-Azhar University or Yousef al-Qaradawi, Qatar-based ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood – is decidedly nationalistic, i.e. a weapon in the cause of Palestinian national identity. One is hard-pressed to find a recognized Muslim leader who gives any Islamic credibility to the lethal martyrdom of the eschatological kind. In point of fact, the opposite is true: Muslim leaders worldwide condemned the lethal martyrdom of 9/11, and al-Qa‘ida operatives are considered freakish at best by Muslims who do not look at the world as a struggle between satanic and angelic forces, but seek a life-giving relation with the global community without any eschatological overtones. This is not to dismiss al-Qa‘ida as a serious international problem: Post-9/11 al-Qa‘ida-sponsored attacks, for example in Saudi Arabia, demonstrate that the desire to die remains a potent force for terrorism. Rather, it is to encourage all – regardless of religious affiliation – to work for a global harmony in which eschatological possibilities exist only at the end of time.