

## Introduction

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Death as a voluntary act has always raised highly emotional and controversial discussions throughout human history. The moral assessment of this final decision in human life is closely linked to its historical, religious and political context. Any attempt to define the term *martyrdom* by distinguishing it from the terms *self-sacrifice* or *suicide*, faces the difficulty that we are not dealing with supra-temporal ontological facts, but with historically shifting social-moral criteria, which each community establishes for itself. However, the historicity of the events leading to martyrdom is not the exclusive factor in determining the credibility and legitimacy of this exemplary role model for a society. Here we need to consider two further factors, seemingly inherent to all the various ways of understanding the essential meaning of a martyr: firstly, how cult practices shape the specific historical transmission of a martyr figure, in particular the ritual or religious veneration at sanctuaries or *lieux de mémoire*; and secondly, how the legends surrounding the martyr figure are structured in terms of their narrative strategies and their poetic fashioning.

Through the imaginary formation of the idealized martyr figure, societies emphasize crucial moments in their common history and integrate them into their collective memory. Broadly speaking, in this process the communities shaping these literary visions of the martyr perceive themselves to be a community of victims, and their readiness to offer one of their own members for the sake of a higher cause then transforms it into a community of sacrifice. The staging of violent death is to be understood as a response to the collective experience of suffering, fear and utter confusion. The paradigm of martyrdom helps to render experiences of despair and powerlessness meaningful, understandable and explainable. It is interesting to note that in violent conflicts in which both sides have to cope with martyrdom, it is frequently the case that both of these parties perceive themselves to be the victimized community defending its very existence.

Martyrdom has to be understood as “the place that reveals the cultural sense of heroic dying and thus refers back to the meaning of physical force in social communities and their shared mentality. Given this background, we may programmatically formulate that whoever studies martyrdom is also inquiring into conceptions of self and world – and thus, into the normative cultural imaginations that are commonly called ‘identities’.”<sup>1</sup>

Nobody is born a martyr; rather the martyr figure is based on the common agreement reached by groups that shape the views and opinions of a community.<sup>2</sup> The imaginations about a martyr’s very essence are closely connected with oral and written narrations, with poetry and songs which express the anxieties, hopes and ideals of a group or society. If these collective imaginations change, the image of the martyr is transformed

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1 Peter Burschel, “Leiden und Leidenschaft” in this volume.

2 This process is quite similar to the formation of a “hero” as a role model in a society; cf. Scheffler 2003, 92ff.

as well. This is why the role that literary representation plays in the imagination, actualisation, realisation or critical deconstruction of martyrdom is crucial for the comprehension of this worldwide cultural figuration. Studying the literary representation of martyrdom may provide us with deeper insight into the human experiences covered by this phenomenon, tapping into dimensions inaccessible for other areas of cultural studies. Literary representation is the site where imagination and emotion, where discourse and image emerge in their interaction, and thus enables us to trace how they influence and direct the perceptions and actions of the recipients.

Martyrdom, which seems to be a rather late historical phenomenon, first evident around the fourth century BC, is a voluntary act. It is also an altruistic act, as Samuel Klausner points out in his attempt to develop a social theory of martyrdom: "The martyr may avoid death by conceding to the adversary, but nevertheless accepts, affirms or even seeks death."<sup>3</sup> Even if voluntary death is not regarded as self-destructive or nihilistic suicide, but rather as martyrdom for the sake of a laudable cause, the judgements on the very notion of martyrdom differ enormously in different contexts. As it is used in current Middle Eastern religious and political discourse, the term 'martyrdom' displays fundamental differences to that of the modern European conception. Due to processes of historical semantics, since the Enlightenment, the term martyrdom has gained a specific meaning in Western modernity. This is why contemporary Middle Eastern ways of understanding martyrdom in both Islamic and secular nationalistic discourses has aroused – one could add necessarily aroused – angry bewilderment and confusion in the West. We are faced here with an unavoidable and insoluble problem: we have to deal with one and the same term – martyrdom – and with its quite divergent perceptions in different regions of the world.

The present volume aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the very human phenomenon of martyrdom by analysing in detail its highly varied re-enactments in European and Middle Eastern literature. The idea of martyrdom is evident in such divergent historical, religious, philosophical or political circumstances<sup>4</sup> that doubts could be raised as to whether there is a sufficiently common and consistent basis for such an endeavour. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a certain inner logic, a metaphorical structure or symbolical subtext underpinning and thus unifying these divergent literary manifestations of the idea of martyrdom.

The often fluid border between suicide and martyrdom – the former strictly rejected in Christianity, in Islam and Judaism while the latter is commended as the strongest proof of faith and an honourable act of sacrifice for the sake of God<sup>5</sup> – is one of the most disturbing aspects of this cultural figure and has repeatedly aroused lively debates. Re-

3 Klausner 1987, 230.

4 It cannot be the aim of this introduction to analyse these divergent circumstances. This remains the task of the respective articles tackling exemplary historical cases in detail.

5 For the debate on suicide in religious discourse cf. Harran 1987, 125-131; Hoheise 2001, 442-445; Christ-Friedrich 2001, 445-453; Rosenthal, art. "intiḥār", in EI<sup>2</sup>; Rosenthal 1946. For the view that voluntary death can be considered more honourable than continuing to live, cf. Durkheim 1897/1983, 242-256 ("altruistic suicide"); Droge/Tabor 1992 ("honourable death").

cently, due to the horrifying use of “human bombs” in terrorist attacks, public sensibility for the transitional zones of suicide, sacrifice<sup>6</sup>, martyrdom<sup>7</sup> and murder has increased. Although the notion of martyrdom in a war situation, where the act of killing coincides with an act of martyrdom, is not completely new in history<sup>8</sup>, it certainly represents a harsh contrast to and a fundamental questioning of the traditional Christian conception of the martyr as a “sacrificial lamb”. Whether a voluntary act resulting in death is regarded as suicide, sacrifice or murder sometimes solely depends on the political perspective.<sup>9</sup> Frequently, the different facets of martyrdom seem to be unified by a certain longing for death, and are combined with the altruistic readiness to sacrifice one’s own life for the sake of a community, of a beloved, an idea, or God; while these aspects occur in different contexts they all possess a strikingly similar symbolic subtext.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most powerful texts of early Christianity representing the second-century orthodox theology of martyrdom is the letter of Ignatius from Antioch, the most important martyrologue before Origenes. In this letter addressed to the Roman congregation and written on the way to Rome, where he was supposed to be executed, Ignatius expresses his vivid longing for *pathos* and *mimesis*,<sup>11</sup> a step that ushers in the long-lasting tradition of literary self-representation as a figure of passion and rebirth:

I die willingly for God. (...) Let me be the meal of beasts, through which I can reach God. I am the wheat of God, and I will be grinded by predator teeth, so that I will be created into the pure bread of Christi.<sup>12</sup>

## Martyrdom – Literary Visions of Birth and Release from Life

Death is imagined in literature as an act of grace and, taking place as it were in the presence of the assembled congregation, a ritualistic act of sacrifice. But what is perhaps

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- 6 Cf. for the term sacrifice: Burkert 1972; art. “Sacrifice” in *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics*. Hastings, ed.; art. “Opfer” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Müller, Ed. 1995; Schenk 1995; Meslin 1997.
- 7 Cf. for a broad survey of the term martyrdom: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 22, art. “Martyrium”. For the Islamic concept: Kohlberg, art. “shahid” EI<sup>2</sup>; Wensinck 1921; Seidensticker 1998, 2002. For Judaism and Christianity: Boyarin 1999.
- 8 “The spread of Christianity into the rank and file of the Roman army (and perhaps also the increasing importance of soldier-emperors in the third century) led to the first group of soldier-martyrs, as reflected in the martyrdom at Durostorum on the Danube. To the Diocletianic age, on the eve of the Christian empire, martyrological literature was to assign many more soldier-martyrs, who would bring to reality the traditional metaphor of fighting in the cause of Christ.” Bowersock 2002<sup>2</sup>, 41-2.
- 9 For Arab debates on this issue cf. al-Sharbassī 1969; al-Taqrūfī 1997. For a cultural morphology of political violence and sacrifice cf. Scheffler 1997.
- 10 Cf. for comparative surveys: Croitoru 2003; Bremer 2002; Kermani 2002a + b; Reuter 2002; Bergen 2001; Hassan 2001; Juergensmeyer 1992.
- 11 Cf. Campenhausen 1964<sup>2</sup>, 74. For the relationship between the terms patience (*patientia*) and passion (*passio*) and the comprehensive and coherent exposition of the new ideology of patience at the turn of the second century cf. Shaw 1996, 296ff.
- 12 *Ad Romanos*. 4.1f. Quoted from Habermehl 1992, 43. The tradition is still alive in modernity: cf. the poem by Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb quoted below: “My heart is the earth, brings forth wheat and flowers and pure water;/ My heart is the water, my heart is a stalk of wheat,/ Its death is resurrection: it lives in him who eats of it.”

even more significant for us is that martyrdom, in one crucial aspect, is not a final or irrevocable end. Instead, as a transitional stage, the martyr's death is imagined as an *open end vis-à-vis* the Hereafter. Thus, sacrificial death means birth and new life<sup>13</sup>:

My birth draws near. Forgive me, brothers, fight not for my life, want not that I die. (...) Let me receive pure light. When I have reached it, I will become a man. Permit me to become an emulator of the sufferings of my God. (...) I write to you as a living man who is in love with dying. My love is crucified, and no fire is in me that loves earthly matter, but a lively water that whispers in me and speaks from within: 'Come to thy Father.'<sup>14</sup>

In such visions of martyrdom "ordinary" death is represented as a much more frightening force than death for the sake of a cause. Tertullian, the Latin ecclesiastical writer (ca. 160-220), transmitted an oracle of the Montanist sect,<sup>15</sup> whose sympathizers strongly emphasized the significance of martyrdom:

Yearn not to die in your beds or in miscarriages and in feeble fevers, but in martyrdom, so He is praised who suffered for you.<sup>16</sup>

Some hundred years later, another form of enthusiasm for dying for the sake of God figured as a main characteristic in the verses of the Khārijites, an Islamic sect which emerged in the year 658 AD during the dispute over the Caliphate.<sup>17</sup> They considered every Muslim who did not subscribe to their views to be an infidel. They thus regarded every Khārijite who died in battle against the Caliphate as a martyr. Even women were among these activists, and the poetess Umm Ḥakīm expressed her longing for the Hereafter through her scorn for life:

I carry a head which I am weary of carrying; I am fed up with washing and anointing it; where is the man who takes this burden from me?<sup>18</sup>

The Late Antique poems of Prudentius, "On the Martyr's Crowns" (the *Peristephanon*) include two narratives of nubile girls, just emerging out of childhood, who not only voluntarily proclaim their Christian faith and accept the consequences, but indeed demand and rapturously welcome torture and death. One of the girls, Eulalia, begs: "... come, torturer, burn, slash, cut up the limbs which are put together from clay..." The other girl's desire for martyrdom is even more explicit (Pe. xiv 69-80):

13 For an analysis of early Christian remembering, retelling and thus commemorating "the martyr's birthday" *natalitium* cf. Clark 1998, 103ff.

14 *Ad Romanos*. 6.1-7.2. Quoted from Habermehl 1992, 44.

15 Montanism is the name of a movement founded in the second century in Phrygia, in today's Turkey, and was named after Montanus, who preached that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Montanists were asked to live in strict renunciation of worldly things and not to avoid persecution and martyrdom, but to actively seek it.

16 Tertullian, *De fuga in persequutione*. 9.4. Quoted from Habermehl 1992, 42.

17 A comparative study of the above mentioned Montanism, which emerged in a period when Christianity had begun to integrate itself into the world, and the khārijite movement might establish some important intellectual parallels between these two highly enthusiastic and purist groups.

18 *Diwān shīr al-khawārij*. Ihsān 'Abbās, Ed. 4th ed. Beirut-Cairo, 1982, No. 142, line 1-3. English translation by Seidensticker 1998, 66. Cf. also Renate Jacobi, who in her article in this volume describes the Kharijites as an "active counterpart of the 'Udhrites, sharing their discontentment with social conditions and their despair of life."

When Agnes sees the harsh man stand  
 with naked sword, more happily she says:  
 'I exult that such a man comes –  
 crazy, savage, violent armed man,  
 rather than a languid tender youth  
 soft and scented with perfume  
 who would destroy me by the death of my chastity.  
 This lover, this one I want, I confess it.  
 I shall meet his onrush half-way  
 And not postpone his hot desires.  
 I shall take the sword's length into my breasts  
 And draw the force of the sword to my inmost heart.  
 Thus wedded to Christ I shall leap up  
 Above the darkness of the sky...'19

The insistence with which martyrs express their readiness, indeed their eagerness to sacrifice themselves is so ubiquitous in literary representations that we must identify it as an essential literary motif. As in the case of Ignatius<sup>20</sup>, the imagined inner monologue of Agnes as she faces up to her impending death ignores almost any distinction between martyrdom and desire for death. Tertullian discussed this issue repeatedly in his work. In the *Apology* he invokes the noble suicides of the great pagans of the past, citing Heraclitus, Empedocles, Lucretia, Dido, Cleopatra, and even Peregrinus (who immolated himself at Olympia years after his dissociation from Christianity) (Tertullian, *ad mart.* 4). G. W. Bowersock has outlined Tertullian's argumentation as follows:

If these courageous people destroyed themselves for a false way of life, should Christians not do the same for the true way? 'We want to suffer', says Tertullian, 'just as a soldier wants to fight.' (Tertull., *Apology*, 50) It is the profession of a Christian to suffer. It is the work of a Christian to be taken to court. By being conquered or subdued in the Roman persecutions, in Tertullian's view, the Christians are victorious. The paradox is that in defeat lies victory.<sup>21</sup>

## Noble and Ignoble Death

It was first in the fourth century that the boundary between self-destruction and martyrdom was sharpened, as the Church officially disapproved of suicide. Augustinus (353-430) formulated the prohibition in clear terms: "*neque enim qui se occidit aliud quam hominem occidit* (For he who kills himself kills no other than a man.)". This verdict "constituted a formal and final repudiation of the old Roman way to a glorious death. (...) With the ultimate exclusion of suicide from that ideology Christian martyrdom was deprived of its most militant, its most Roman feature. But ironically it was that very feature that was conspicuously to survive in Islam, when the heirs of the prophet Muhammad ruled in the land where Jesus was crucified."<sup>22</sup> Anton van Hooff mentions in his ar-

19 Quoted from Clark 1998, 104. For erotic and gender aspects cf. al-Azmeh 1995 (Islam); Burschel 1999 (Christianity).

20 Cf. Bowersock 2002, chapter "Martyrdom and Suicide", 59-74; 63.

21 Bowersock 2002, 63.

22 Bowersock 2002, 74.

ticle on "Female Suicide Between Ancient Fiction and Fact"<sup>23</sup> the case of the young Pelagia who, during the Great Persecution of 303 AD, suddenly noticed that her house was encircled by enemies. Being exposed to this mortal danger without any help, together with her sister she jumped into the river. "Ambrosius (*De virginibus*, 3.33-36) could only free himself from his scruples by presenting the deed as a baptism in the waters of the Orontes. For, as he puts it, faith wipes away misdeed (*facinus fides ablevat*)."<sup>24</sup>

This negotiating of a border between "noble" and "ignoble death" did not end in Antiquity<sup>25</sup> – right up to the present day it has remained a highly disputed issue throughout the centuries. In a surprising twist to the argumentation, even Jesus Christ has been occasionally deprived of his status as a martyr. For example, the poet John Donne (1572-1631), who belonged to a Roman Catholic family but ended up as a dean of the Anglican St. Paul's Cathedral in London, argued against an unqualified condemnation of all suicide. In Donne's understanding, it is the *intention* that matters. His argument is based upon the martyrs who were ready to sacrifice their lives for a noble cause. Christ sacrificed His life for the best of causes, the redemption of mankind, Donne holds, and "therefore, as He Himself said [No man can take away my soule] And [I have power to lay it down] So without doubt, no man did take it away, not was there any other then his own will, the cause of his dying at that time."<sup>26</sup> Following this logic, Donne – who in the opening lines of the Preface to his essay "Biathanatos" (1607) confesses to have often felt that "sickly inclination" to put an end to his life – regarded Christ as an example for "the pure suicide". In this case, as Anton van Hooff put it, "we have a sincere Christian trying to reconcile his psychic inclination with Christian doctrine."<sup>27</sup>

The argument that it is the *intention* that differentiates noble from ignoble death is echoed in the lively debates set off in Arab public life in response to the first cases of suicide attacks by Muslim assassins at the end of the twentieth century. These debates focus on a differentiation between suicide (*al-intihār*) and self-imposed martyrdom (*al-istishhād*). Quite often, the boundary drawn proved to be fluid, the categories employed to distinguish between the two concepts subjected to the expediencies of everyday political advantage. One of the most popular voices in this debate is that of the theologian Shaikh al-Qaradāwī, a graduate from the most important Islamic academic institution, al-Azhar, in Cairo. In his weekly TV programme "Shari'a and Life" on the al-Jazira news channel, Shaikh al-Qaradāwī explains to his Muslim audience, which numbers many millions, how they are to understand the world. Early in 2001, writing an essay, he defined an "Islamically correct" martyrdom.<sup>28</sup> His argumentation was based upon – as many centuries before in early Christianity with Ambrosius' judgement that "faith wipes away misdeed" (*facinus fides ablevat*) – the right *intention* of the acting person:

23 Van Hooff 1992, 151f.

24 Van Hooff 1992, 152.

25 Cf. *Martyrdom and Noble Death*, von Henten, Avemarie, eds. 2002.

26 Quoted from Van Hooff 2000, 117 (punctuation sic).

27 Cf. Van Hooff 2000, 117.

28 Cf. for this discourse Bergen 2001; Reuter 2002; Croitoru 2003.

He who commits suicide kills himself for his own benefit, while he who commits martyrdom sacrifices himself for the sake of his religion and his nation. While someone who commits suicide has lost hope with himself and with the spirit of Allah, the Mujahid is full of hope with regard to Allah's spirit and mercy.<sup>29</sup>

## Martyrdom – the Inversion of Death and Life

If intention is to decide on whether voluntary death is suicide or sacrifice, we still need to consider the motivation of the potential martyr. Why have throughout human history individuals made up their minds to end their lives as martyrs? One of the most important from amongst the several possible motivating sources is the transitional state or the liminality,<sup>30</sup> which strengthens the attraction of martyrdom:

And reckon not those who are killed in God's way as dead; nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord; Rejoicing in what God has given them out of His grace and they rejoice for the sake of those who, (being left) behind them, have not yet joined them, that they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Qur'ān, Sūra 3:169-70<sup>31</sup>)

In Islam, as much as in Christianity and Judaism, dying for God means to be nearer to "real" life and resurrection than to ordinary death. Dying for God means new life and rebirth, as Ignatius put it: "My birth draws near." More detailed study may be able to determine whether this imagination possesses any similarity with the idea that motivated the Islamic mystic al-Ḥallāj (857-922). Condemned for rebellion and heretical ideas, then publicly beaten "before an enormous crowd" with a crown on his head, half-killed and exposed, still alive, on a gibbet (*ṣalīb*),<sup>32</sup> he cried out:

Kill me, o my friends,  
As only in death is my life.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of the martyr's death being the "real" life occurs not only in Islamic mystical or Christian imagination. It was, and still is, also used in the context of aggressive military discourses in order to minimize the soldier's fear of death and to maximize his motivation and readiness to risk his life for the common cause.<sup>34</sup> Even in religions that are traditionally considered as non-aggressive and peaceful, this idea occurs as a practical element in military discourse. In the course of colonial wars, Buddhism was not immune from exploitation, harnessed to the propaganda of the aggressive imperial Japanese expansionist policies. Beginning in the 1930s, the Japanese Army engaged Buddhist army chaplains, seeing in the Buddhist leadership a potential source of mobilisation. Earlier, respected Buddhist scholars like Osuga Shudo firmly supported Japanese

29 *Al-Ahrām al-'arabī*, Febr. 03, 2001, Memri translation: *Inquiry and Analysis*, No. 53, 2.5.2001.

30 As to how far martyrdom in early Islamic history might be interpreted as a *social drama*, in the course of which an interstitial or liminal space emerges that can be characterized as a world inverted and carries qualities related to the erotic, the holy and the divine, is discussed in the article by Christian Szyska in this volume. Cf. Turner 1968, 1989; Van Gennep 1981.

31 Translation of *The Holy Qur'an*. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

32 Cf. Massignon/Gardet, art. "al-Ḥallāj." E12; Arnaldez 1964; Massignon 1982 (1:1922); Ḥallāj as literary motif, cf. Schimmel 1984.

33 "Dīvān, Essai de reconstitution." *Journal Asiatique* (1931), qaṣīda No. 10.

34 For a broad discussion of this issue cf. Scheffler 2003.

aspirations to become a great power. In his work "General Manual for Proselytising in Times of War" (1905) the Buddhist scholar recommends the following to Japanese soldiers:

Whoever recites the name of Amidu Buddha is able to march to the battlefield in the firm belief that rebirth in paradise will follow death.<sup>35</sup>

Calls for civil disobedience, armed struggle and the readiness to suffer for the cause overlapped in the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation as well. Christ's death on the cross was reinterpreted as the climax of rebellious "counter-suffering", and the Messiah with his message of love and eternal life became a freedom-fighter on the "fighting cross":

My freedom's voice resounds with the rattling of the chains,  
and my cross is fighting!<sup>36</sup>

In modern Arabic poetry the idea of martyrdom was integrated into a sustained cultural and political critique and became part of a highly syncretic setting in different cultural figures and contexts. Death and resurrection were combined to form a powerful modern and heterogeneous image, fusing pagan Mesopotamian vegetation myths, mystical allusions and social critique with biblical symbols. The Iraqi poet Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb represented the poetic speaker as an embodiment of Jesus Christ, albeit a Christ who also integrates aspects of Tammūz and mystical experiences:

My heart is the earth, brings forth wheat and flowers and pure water;  
My heart is the water, my heart is a stalk of wheat,  
Its death is resurrection: it lives in him who eats of it. (...)  
I died by fire: I burnt the darkness of my clay, but the god was untouched.<sup>37</sup>

Literary examples of this kind of inversion and the transitional stage between life and death it ushers the martyr into can be found all around the world, in many different places, times and contexts. Highly motivated volunteers ready to risk their lives for the sake of an idea or a religious belief, and who are regarded as martyrs by their community – or who consider themselves as victims or martyrs due to certain circumstances or a certain *Weltanschauung* – are evident throughout history in various cultures and settings. But what does this ubiquity of martyrdom mean? Since direct influences and exchange processes can only rarely be proved with absolute certainty and are thus the exception rather than the rule, the question arises as how to deal with this worldwide and supra-temporal phenomenon. Should one think vis-à-vis this striking case of *cultural mobility* about categories of elementary human experience, of a certain basic structure of thinking and behaviour occurring in a certain setting and thus shaped by different historical conditions?<sup>38</sup>

35 Quoted from Croitoru 2003, 31.

36 Maḥmūd Darwīsh, *Dīwān*, vol. 1. Beirut, Dār al-ʿaūda 1984<sup>11</sup>, 291 ("al-Mazmūr 151"/"Psalm 151").

37 English translation: Asfour 1988, 140. Arabic text: "Al-Masīḥ ba'da al-ṣalḥ" ("Christ After Crucifixion", 1957), in: "Unshūdat al-maṭar", *al-Amāl al-kāmila*. Vol. 1. Beirut, Dār al-ʿaūda 2000, 457-462.

38 Cf. for this question relevant to Historical Anthropology e.g. Dressel 1996, 71ff.



## Martyrdom and *Memoria*

A recurring motif in the literary representations of martyrdom is the yearning for or the fascination with death ascribed to the martyr figures. Multifaceted in the literary imagination, this nearness of death is closely connected with the paradoxical idea, formative for martyrdom, of a transcendental life despite physical death. This connection between life and death, generating meaning and hope and furnishing consoling support, may be conceived as a kind of symbolic capital that lies dormant in the imagination until it is aroused and activated by different social, historical or psychological constellations: for example, as a powerful motivating force for involvement in armed conflict, where death must be reckoned with; as a means for lending blameless and inevitable suffering and death meaning; or as a way of bolstering courage when in mortal danger. Whenever comparable social, political or historical situations emerge, mythical or earlier historical paradigms of martyrdom are “reactivated” and enriched with contemporary allusions and facets.<sup>39</sup> Time and again, literary texts transport and transform these ideas, and introduce them into the public sphere.

The shared remembrance inscribed in literary texts creates amongst the audience/readers a community of suffering, forming a sense of identity and shaping a perception of past and future in equal measure. This is the case for both contemporary political, religious or ethnic minorities as well as for the medieval epics of love and death. In Gottfried von Straßburg’s version of the Tristan legend we read:

Their death shall be eternally  
 Alive for we who live and always ever new.  
 For there wherever one hears the tale  
 Of their devotion, of the purity of their fidelity,  
 Of the happiness and the bitterness of their love:  
 That is where all noble hearts find bread.  
 Through this their death lives.  
 We read of their life, we read of their death,  
 And it replenishes us like bread.  
 Their life and their death are our bread. So lives their life, so their death lives on.  
 So they still also live and are not dead,  
 And their death is bread for those who live.<sup>40</sup>

## Martyrdom – Mental Power and Rebellion

A further fascination that has repeatedly inspired literary representations of martyrdom is the power, developing out of absolute devotion, ascribed to the martyr figure. Martyrdom as a consciously chosen act of self-sacrifice contains, in particular from a Western perspective influenced by the Enlightenment and Protestantism, an equally disquieting

<sup>39</sup> One example for the re-enactment of martyrdom is the re-staging of the prophet’s grandson Husain in the “Karbala paradigm” as represented in contemporary Shiite imagination: Schmucker 1987; Khosrokhavar 1995; Ayoub 1997; Kermani 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Gottfried von Straßburg 1981, verse 228-240. Cf. I. Kasten’s article in this volume.

and fascinating aura of the irrational, of something excessive, of something uncompromising, and in some eyes even of something absolutely free. In the literary imagination martyrdom breaks down social borders, undermines social values and institutional authority. This power of transgression is evident in both the literary imagination of the *Liebestod* as well as in representations of religious zeal or national sacrifice in situations of hopeless inferiority. In all these cases the power of the martyr is imagined as being unbounded by convention, the suffering experienced is an outcry stirring others into action, a public appeal, an act of rebellion, a form of "counter-suffering" as described by Erich Auerbach.<sup>41</sup> This form of rebellion has no need for weapons, no need for outward shows of power; the rebellion of the martyr is limited to the suffering inflicted on an extremely vulnerable body. The more vulnerable and weaker this body appears – and the production of such an image is the task of literary media – the greater the impact of the symbolic power. Brent D. Shaw has discussed the aspects of body – power – identity in the passions of the martyrs (1996) as forms of "bodily resistance". In her article on the "Bodies and Blood", Gillian Clark (1998, 106) recounts Late Antiquity debates on martyrdom, virginity and resurrection and describes the literary re-enactment of the martyr's death in martyr acts: "Martyr-acts described the suffering of the body in order to re-enact the triumph of the body. The martyr may be shown declaring that what is done to his or her body does not affect the soul, but the suffering of the body is of central importance: it is not a temporary and finally irrelevant anguish, left behind as the triumphant soul ascends to God, but a glorious demonstration of God's power manifested in what seems most vulnerable, human flesh and blood."

The symbolical power of a martyrdom represented in literature needs, naturally enough, an audience for it to unfold and display its impact. In his considerations on a social theory of martyrdom, Samuel Z. Klausner identifies how martyrdom can become exemplary, in both the public and political spheres: "To be exemplary, martyrdom must be public and publicized. A private act, meaningful only to the martyr and the executioner, fails in this exemplary function." This publicity, provided by literary remembrance, may be received as provocative and challenging. In this respect, martyrdom is political, as Klausner states: "Martyrdom is a political act affecting the allocation of power between two societies, or between a subgroup and the larger society. (...) Certain religious martyrs may refuse to inflict physical violence on an adversary, but, as a political act, martyrdom is never a passive submission. The non-violent martyr strikes the enemy psychologically."<sup>42</sup>

In his study *Martyrdom and Rome* Bowersock points out the peculiarly Roman character of Christian self-sacrifice by comparing it to other forms of fatal resistance to authority. Through a detailed analysis of Tertullian's writings, he is able to prove that "the rush to martyrdom was presented by Tertullian as an ever-present danger to the Roman government." (Bowersock 2002, 2) In 180 AD a Roman governor in the Asia province, located in contemporary Turkey, was met by an excited mob, which without any prior

41 Cf. Auerbach, "Passio als Leidenschaft" 1967, 161-175.

42 Klausner 1987, 231.

complaint voluntarily confessed their Christian faith *en masse*, thus provocatively denying him allegiance. They demanded that the governor condemn them to death, and he acquiesced to their wishes. As then however an even larger mob surrounded him and shouted their desire to be martyred, he called out: "You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang by."<sup>43</sup> Tertullian recalled this story during a speech to the Roman governor in North Africa in the early third century. He warned against a repetition of this scene in Carthage:

If you think that Christians should be persecuted, what will you do with thousands and thousands of men and women of every age and every rank presenting themselves to you? How many fires and how many swords will you need? How will Carthage itself tolerate the decimation of its population at your hands when everyone sees even men and women of your own senatorial order and aristocratic leaders of the city, relatives and friends of your own friends?<sup>44</sup>

The obvious helplessness of the Roman government official reveals the paradox of *power through powerlessness*, which explains the attractiveness of provocative sacrificial death, especially for minority social groups. Even lone individuals without any weapons or any means of exerting power can counter and revoke the power others have over their lives by demonstratively showing their contempt for death.<sup>45</sup>

It is thus my opinion that it is misleading to refer to the level of meaning alien to Christianity in the *jihād* context when comparing the martyr concept in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It would be more meaningful to locate defensive, minority constellations in Islam as well, such as are to be found amongst the first Muslims (cf. CHRISTIAN SZYSKA's article in this volume), in Shi'ism (cf. FRIEDERIKE PANNEWICK's article in this volume), or amongst the mystics or poets under suspicion of heresy (cf. the articles by ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH and SUNIL SHARMA in this volume). Another striking fact is that even among modern Egyptian Islamists – as CHRISTIAN SZYSKA's article shows – a self-stylising as *victims* predominates, and not as *fighters* (as the *mujāhid*). Even al-Qā'ida, in the description of its activities and aims spread in the internet, utilises the "legitimacy" of such Islamic model stories in which those martyr figures stand out who innocently become victims.

### Narrations of God's Heroes

Apart from the paradigm of sacrifice and power, literary imaginations of martyrdom provide exemplary narrations praising heroism<sup>46</sup> and noble death: "The sophisticated literary rendering of the martyr figure mostly resides in how the hero has the *choice* of saving his life, but decides instead for death so as to send a public *signal* that reinforces the unconditional truth claims of his convictions."<sup>47</sup> This semantic significance is de-

43 Tertullian, *ad Scap.* 5; quoted from Bowersock 2002, 2.

44 Ibid. 2. To what extent this eagerness to die for God is to be regarded less as historical fact than as a literary topos is discussed in Butterweck 1995.

45 Cf. for the modern Middle Eastern context Jaber 1997; Hassan 2001.

46 Graf 1998; Kantorowicz 1951.

47 Scheffler 2003, 95.