II.
Witnessing and Sacrifice: Theological and Philosophical Implications of Martyrdom

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Sunni and Shiite Passion Stories Revisited

On the Superseding of Sacrifice and Its Eventual Re-Empowerment

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In the Western imagination – at least until recent times – the passion story of Christ's violent death on the cross has figured as the original scene, or *Urszene*, of meaningful sacrificial suffering and compassion. Annually conveyed in elaborate liturgies and portrayed in innumerable visual, aural and textual representations – involving a number of concomitant figures such as the weeping women under the cross or the *Mater Dolorosa* –, it has proven to be a very powerful trigger of emotions. Moreover, Jesus Christ has occasionally been perceived as a martyr and thus as the prototype and role model for generations of Christian martyrs, though this view has been subject to some controversy.[1] Far from claiming that the history of martyrdom "begins" with the Christian passion story,[2] I regard the contextualisation of the Islamic passion stories and martyr narratives with this emblematic event – which they mirror in diverse aspects – as particularly challenging. It is difficult to ignore that Sunni and Shiite Islam have approached the two main concepts involved in the Christian passion story and its reception, sacrifice and emotionality, in substantially different ways. Indeed, one may claim that their peculiar exposure to these two concepts in early Islamic history marks a fault line in the religious landscape of Islam, one still awaiting closer investigation. The preliminary observations presented here – analogies to the story of Christ's passion including its Biblical subtext on the one hand, the negotiating and superseding of its theological dimension on the other, are meant to shed some light on the contrasting hermeneutics that govern the self-understanding of the two denominations of Islam, Sunnism and Shiism.

I. Two Myths of Origin, Sunni and Shiite

One of the most striking differences between the two denominations of Islam is the contrasting status assigned not only to the set of issues relating to sacrifice, but more basically to emotionality. Sunni Islam – the majority branch – is re-

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1 Jan Willem van Henten, "Jesus als Märtyrer", in: *Grenzgänger der Religionskulturen: Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zu Gegenwart und Geschichte der Märtyrer*, ed. Silvia Horsch et al., Munich 2011, 47-64.

2 See the discussion by Sigrid Weigel, "Exemplum und Opfer, Blutzeugnis und Schriftzeugnis. Lucretia und Perpetua als Übergangsfiguren in der Kulturgeschichte der Märtyrer", in: *Grenzgänger der Religionskulturen*, 25-45.

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nowned for its sobriety: it holds a firm grip over both private and the publicly exhibited emotions. Neither carnivalesque displays of excessive joy nor particularly pathos-laden forms of mourning are admitted. At funerals, females are excluded from the act of burial to avoid possible emotional outbursts. There are no commemorations of historical catastrophes, nor are the anniversaries of the death of memorable figures, be they public or private, marked. The idea of endowing suffering with meaning does not easily conform to the rigorous monism of Sunni Islam – though it did assert itself in the realm of Sufism. The officially accepted forms of public emotional display are thus strikingly sparse – an impression that historical sources seem to affirm for the earliest epochs of Islamic history as well. This low status granted to emotions – according to the most plausible explanation – is a reaction against forms of excessive emotional self-expression displayed in the neighbouring religious cultures, an explanation that is in tune with the new, self-confident and optimistic collective identity of early Islam. And it comes as no real surprise, for since the emergence of the mainstream Sunni branch of Islam – accompanying the establishment of a new world empire – has presented itself as an unprecedented success story.

II. Shiite Martyrdom

By contrast, Shiism presents itself as decidedly pessimistic. Shiite piety is widely dedicated to the mourning of religious heroes who died a violent death.[3] Not only male victims are lamented, there is also a female founding figure – sometimes compared to the Virgin Mary – who suffered a tragic fate. But the main role belongs to her son, Ḥusayn. According to its foundation narrative, Shiism grew out of the experience of an historical catastrophe dating back to the very beginnings of Islam. After Muḥammad's death in 632 prominent members of the community claimed that he had chosen his son-in-law and cousin, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, as the caliph to rule after him. Ali was, however, repeatedly passed over until he was finally elected in 656. Soon civil strife broke out which culminated in Ali's murder, after a short rule, in 661. His opponent, Muʿāwiya, took power and founded the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled for the following century. Many of the followers of ʿAlī, the *shīʿat ʿAlī*, remained loyal to his name and family however, the closest blood relatives to Muhammad. They encouraged Ḥusayn, one of ʿAlī's sons to re-establish his father's claim. In 680 Ḥusayn started a revolt, claiming the right to the caliphate. It is here that the Shiite passion story is staged: Ḥusayn entered the battle against a large caliphal army near the Iraqi town of Karbalāʾ in 680 with no more than 72 followers and they were soon overwhelmed and massacred by their enemies. The death of ʿAlī's son and

3 Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, The Hague 1988.

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Muhammad's grandson Ḥusayn is remembered with great mourning until this day. As scholars like Reuven Firestone have observed, it is considered to be the most tragic of a continuing series of martyrdoms experienced by Shiites throughout the generations.[4] Shiites refer to ʿAlī and his sons, as well as their successors, as the rightful leaders by divine legacy, Imams, of Islam; their personas came to be seen as the "rightly guided", or *mahdīs* of the community, bearing a redemptive, indeed messianic aura. The last of his line to have assumed physical existence is believed to gone into occultation but is expected to return in a *parousia*, initiating a glorious age of rightful rule. The events of 680 thus constitute the founding scene of a martyr religion – diametrically opposed to the successful Sunni majority of Islam.

It is obvious that the passion narrative tells a hagiographic story. It is packed with superlatives: the enemy's overpowering number, Ḥusayn's fearlessness, the enemy's excessive cruelty, etc. But yet another element points to its mythic dimension: its date. The Incident of Karbalā', labelled *ʿĀshūrā'* ("tenth day"), coincides exactly with the Jewish 'tenth day' – the tenth of Tishri, Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, stands for sacrifice; it commemorates Moses' sprinkling of the blood of a sacrificial animal over the community in order to atone for their sins (Exodus 24:8). This momentous, foundational event – which in its Biblical guise involves massive sacrificial bloodshed – is recognised as the typological pre-figuration of Christ's institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:23). Likewise, it connects into ancient Mesopotamian rituals celebrating the autumnal turn, when the God Tammūz, or Adonis in the Syrian context, dies violently, spilling his blood on the earth and thereby reviving the seasonal cycle. In Judaism the rite of atonement introduced by Moses was successively transformed into an unbloody ritual celebrated annually; though some sprinkling of animal blood may still be involved, it primarily consists of commemorative recitations of texts which extol the capacity of the sacrificial blood to cleanse human beings of guilt. The placing of the Shiite *ʿĀshūrā'* into the context of the Day of Atonement should be regarded as an act of mythopoesis, endowing the narrative with an extremely significant typological redemptive subtext.

Thus, from the very beginning, Shiite Islam subscribes to the paradigm of sacrifice. It adopts the aetiology of the Biblical Yom Kippur, the idea that blood sacrifice will re-establish truth and justice in the community. The self-sacrifice of Ḥusayn in particular – soon followed by similar collective acts – links the story to Christ's vicarious death on the cross. Although Shiite theology did not develop a theological edifice comparable to Christology – as Ḥusayn was never endowed with divinity –, the similarities are striking: self-sacrifice, the awaited *parousia*, the mimesis of the adherents, and even iconic representations recalling

4 Reuven Firestone, "Merit, Mimesis, and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shiʿite Meta-historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian, and Sunni Muslim Tradition", in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66/1 (1998), 93-116.

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Fig. 1: Icon of a Shiite martyr

Christian precursors, for instance a "Mater Dolorosa" canvas[5] and a poster of an "Ecce Homo" image (fig. 1).[6]

It is unsurprising that the Shiite re-enactment of the Christian passion story presents itself as a martyr narrative. Islam was born into the cultural landscape of Late Antiquity where a Christian cult of martyrs had long prevailed. In contrast, and of course contrary, to this, not only the term "martyr", *shahīd*, but moreover the concept of the martyr itself were excluded from the theology of the Koran: the new type of warrior sacrificing himself for the sake of the community's cause, who would at least in substantial aspects have met the formal preconditions of martyrdom, is deliberately kept apart from the martyr discourse of Christianity.[7] And yet, just a short time after the death of the Prophet, the warrior slain in battle recognised as a martyr was adopted as a powerful role model by the Muslim community at large.[8] But it was Shiism that raised martyrdom to the rank of the very core of its ideology. The vitality of the martyr cult, still alive today in Shiite Islam, would hardly be understandable without a rich centuries-old ritual tradition: the processions of flagellants as well as re-enactments of Ḥusayn's martyrdom in the so-called passion plays, or *taʿziyih*, practiced by the Shiites from early times onward, but officially encouraged and fostered by the authorities since the Ṣafawīd reign in the 16th century.[9] Once a year, in the month of Muharram, i.e.,

5 Kazem Chalipa, "Self Sacrifice", see fig. 4 in the article by Bombardier in this volume.

6 Cf. Eric Butel, "Martyre et sainteté dans la literature de guerre Iran-Irak (1980-1988)", in: *Saints et héros du Moyen-Orient contemporain*, ed. by C. Mayeur-Jaouen, Paris 2003, 301-318, fig. 28, undated.

7 Silvia Horsch-Al Saad, *Tod im Kampf: Figurationen des Märtyrers in frühen sunnitischen Schriften*, Würzburg 2011.

8 Maher Jarrar, "The Martyrdom of Passionate Lovers. Holy War as a Sacred Wedding", in: *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature. Towards a new hermeneutic approach*, ed. by Angelika Neuwirth et al., Beirut 1999, 87-108.

9 See for the history of the ceremonies Angela Gregorini, *La dolorosa festa: Per un `interpretazione antropologica della taʿziye persiana*, Florence 2004.

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the first month of the year, corresponding to the Jewish Tishri, the month of Yom Kippur, the martyrdom of Ḥusayn is commemorated in an extended feast with spectacular mass processions of self-flagellants. Furthermore, on each day of the ten-day festival, a specific episode of Ḥusayn's martyrdom is enacted in a kind of theatre play, which due to its cathartic impact has been compared to ancient Greek drama.[10] Both forms of commemoration, which have their roots in very early Shiite history, have persisted until today, and are observed in Shiite communities not only in Iran but also in other countries and regions, particularly in south Lebanon.[11] Three elements – the exhibition of blood as a medium of atonement, the suffering of pain as an *imitatio* of the founder figure, and the verbal commemoration of an *Urszene* – all of them powerful triggers of emotion, clearly connect the ritual to the Christian passion, which is virtually re-staged. Due to space constraints we cannot dwell here on the re-actualisation of martyrdom in the Iranian-Iraqi wars, but it should be mentioned that the slogan "Every day is *ʿĀshūrā'*, every grave is Karbalā'"[12] was powerful enough to witness thousands of young men march into the fatal venture of desperate battle.

III. Koranic Foundations of Sunni Martyrdom

Let us now return to Sunnism, a denomination which, contrary to Shiism, has shown little interest in the religious practices surrounding traditions, preferring instead strict adherence to the Koranic text's literal sense. The Koran adamantly rejects the Bible's ascription of an immanent redeeming power to blood ritual. Although the Koran has preserved the reminiscence of bloody sacrifice, which continues to constitute part of the hajj, the annual great pilgrimage, the idea of sacrifice as such – the shedding of sacrificial blood to atone for guilt – is completely absent. The Koran goes so far as to eliminate sacrificial meaning even where sacrificial rites continue to be carried out – thus sura 22:36f., discussing the hajj sacrifice, explicitly states: "The flesh and blood of the sacrificial animals will not reach God, but your piety will reach him." The significance of this verse as a clear statement against the forms of mythopoesis prevailing in the neighbouring religious cultures can hardly be overestimated.[13] According to Sunni Islam, there is

10 Navid Kermani, "Katharsis und Verfremdung im schiitischen Passionsspiel", in: *Die Welt des Islams* 39 (1999), 31-63.

11 Cf. Jalal Toufic, *Ashura: This Blood Spilled in My Veins*, Beirut 2005.

12 Hans G. Kippenberg, "Jeder Tag ʿAshura, jedes Grab Kerbela. Zur Ritualisierung der Straßenkämpfe im Iran", in: *Religion und Politik im Iran. Mardom nameh – Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Gesellschaft des Mittleren Orients*, ed. by Kurt Greussing, Frankfurt 1981, 217-256, and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'islamisme et la mort: Le martyre revolutionaire en Iran*, Paris 1995.

13 The point has been missed by Walter Burkert, *Homo necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*, Berlin 1972, 19, who counts Islam among those religious cultures still adhering to the concept of sacrifice. His misreading of the Koranic evidence has misled a number of later scholars.

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no mythic power whatsoever involved in the shedding of blood. Sacrifice is thus reduced to an act of mere obedience or – at the most – a mimesis of Abraham, who is – according to the Koranic narrative – the initiator of the Meccan rituals.

This refusal to mythologise bloodshed must be seen in the Late Antiquity context out of which the Koran emerged – a context in which a negative attitude toward animal sacrifice had already manifested. Sunni Islam took the Late Antiquity "end of sacrifice" particularly seriously;[14] not unlike Judaism and Christianity, it replaced sacrifice with liturgical acts. But unlike Judaism, which kept the memory of liturgical sacrifice alive as a core part of its spirituality, and unlike Christianity, which spiritualised sacrifice in the shape of Christ's redemptive suffering, the Koran, and subsequently Sunni Islam, played down sacrifice by framing the act of ritual slaughtering with strikingly low-profile gestures of piety. It thus defied the emotionally dramatic models of both Christianity and Shiism. In the absence of a grand narrative of vicarious suffering, the question arises as to what sources does Sunni Islam draw on in order to endow suffering and violent death with meaning? Looking into this will reveal the remarkable fact that, in spite of its refusal to mythologise, Sunni Islam has not remained devoid of a sacrificial paradigm.

Whereas the Shiite concept of vicarious suffering emerged *against* the spirit of the Koran, so to speak, in Sunni Islam the opposite is true: the roots of Sunni sacrificial hermeneutics are found in the Koran itself. Here a rigorous refusal to adopt a mythic dimension of bloodshed is manifest. Yet, on closer examination, there is one breach in the Koranic paradigm of absolute abstention from myth-making based on bloodshed – the image of the warrior slain in battle. Unlike the Shiite martyr, this type is virtually dissociated from individual historical personages; there is no Biblical or early Islamic figure to feature as the prototype of what was to become the Sunni martyr. His emergence as an idealised role model is in no way self-evident but surprising – not only in view of orthodox Islam's strict rejection of saints, but also in light of the pronouncedly life-affirming, hedonist pagan culture that preceded Islam. We have to remember that although the heroic death of the hero in pre-Islamic times meant honour and glory for the tribe, it was nonetheless perceived as a taboo – a sacrilege that had to be immediately atoned for by avenging his loss of life.[15] Therefore in the Medinan period, when the Koran summoned believers to fight and risk their lives,[16] the sacrilegious suffering of death had to be re-evaluated; it had to be transformed into a rewarding achievement. There is one short text in the Koran that today still serves as the most evident religious justification for voluntary suffering and death

14 Guy Stroumsa, *Das Ende des Opferkults: Religiöse Mutationen der Spätantike*, Berlin 2011.

15 Angelika Neuwirth, "From Sacrilege to Sacrifice: Observations on Violent Death on Classical and Modern Arabic Poetry", in: *Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of death and meaningful suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. by Friederike Pannewick, Wiesbaden 2004, 259-281.

16 See for the unwillingness of Muhammad's followers to fight: Koran 2:216, and for the negotiation of "heat on earth" vs. "heat in Hell" Koran 9:81.

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(Koran 3:169f.). Indeed, it is a praise of the martyr: "Count not those who have been killed in the way of God as dead, nay, alive with their Lord, provided for, delighting in what God has vouchsafed them of His bounty and rejoicing [...]".[17]

With this Koranic reappraisal of voluntary self-sacrifice acclaiming violent death as a means of achieving closeness to the Divine, the Biblical sacrificial paradigm of blood exchanged for divine favour surreptitiously re-entered the Islamic orbit. Blood, the most disturbing sign of the body's destruction, took on a mythical meaning, transforming violent death into a promise of life. The result was nothing less than the invention of a new ideal: the Sunni martyr.

This however is not yet implied in the Koranic text. On the contrary, it is striking that there is no explicit identification of this figure with the type of the "martyr", *shahīd*, most familiar in the milieu of the Koran, i.e. in Christian tradition. The Koran though, acknowledging a category of martyrs among the historical righteous of monotheist tradition (see 4:69, 39:69, 57:19), evidently avoids the designation "martyr" for the new community's religious heroes. No continuity is intended – the new hero is kept distinct.[18] There is no sanctification of the new hero, the verse does not raise those killed in battle to the rank of saints; there is not even explicit mention of their entering paradise. Yet the paradoxical claim of non-death in a situation of obvious death and the martyr's immediate enjoyment of life in the – undefined – hereafter are both very expressively phrased. The verse does not sound triumphal, but rather appeasing; it is a consolation rather than a propagandistic invitation to give up one's life.

IV. The Sunni Martyr and His "Sacred Wedding"– Cultural and Literary Prototypes

It did not take long, however, until martyrdom emerged as a programmatic practice to vindicate a most intransigent concept of Islam: in the movement of the Khārijiyya.[19] This militant opposition group who waged extended wars against the Umayyads, demanding that not the most powerful pretender but the most pious Muslim should rule as caliph, first appeared on the historical stage as early as 658. Applying a most rigorous interpretation to Koranic moral rulings, they excommunicated all non-adherents of their views from the community of the believers, raising those of their own group killed in battle against the religiously half-hearted Umayyads to the rank of martyrs. The numerous poems transmitted from individual Khārijiyya fighters express an ardent desire for martyrdom, and this is often

17 The translation is that of Richard Bell (1937).

18 Even according to the later juridical categorisation of martyrs, which will raise diverse other victims to the rank of martyrs, the battlefield martyr, *shahīd al-maᶜraka*, will remain "the martyr" *par excellence*.

19 Tilman Seidensticker, "Martyrdom in Islam", in: *Awrāq: Estudios sobre el mundo arabe e islamico contemporaneo* 19 (1998), 64-76, esp. 65-67.

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connected to images of paradise. And yet their extremism, their defiance of the majority's social and political stance, meant that their concept of martyrdom was hardly conducive for emulation.

All the same, martyrdom in a far more comprehensive sense soon became part of the Islamic discourse.[20] Moreover, an elaborate Sunni martyr myth emerged – one that does not so much draw on the Koran which – as we saw – does not advocate voluntary death, but bears a striking resemblance to ancient Oriental mythology. In the oldest Islamic martyr traditions – which date from the 8th/2nd century, from an area in which a Christian martyr cult was prominent – the notion of the battlefield martyr's untimely death soon gained new momentum. In some traditions it was re-interpreted as a union to a divine winged female being – reminiscent of Nike, the ancient Greek goddess of victory.[21] While the close connection between *eros* and *thanatos* which these traditions celebrate apparently harmonises with the Koranic promise that male believers will experience paradise as a place of sensual, indeed erotic, pleasures, the staging of the "wedding of the martyr", *ʿurs al-shahīd* – as the union between an individual warrior and a mythical being – is more reminiscent of an ancient Oriental *hieros gamos*: the wedding of a hero to a goddess, which raises him to the rank of a ruler.

This equation between violent death and sacred wedding proved fruitful time and again. After having been marginalised in collective memory for some time, the *ʿurs al-shahīd* powerfully re-emerged in Modernity, conferring a simultaneously tragic and exhilarating quality on martyrdom. This is particularly evident in the Palestinian celebrations in honour of the martyr, practised until 2002 and which will be discussed in the final section.

Since the mid-1960s, the Palestinian reaction to the 1948 loss of land has included acts of resistance which feature the fighter, *fidāʾī* (literally: "he who gives himself as a ransom"), or *shahīd* (martyr), as the bearer of collective hope. In various poems between 1966 and 1977, Mahmud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet who died in 2009, created the icon of the fighter as a hero who, through his violent death, consummates a mythical marriage, a "marriage of the martyr", *ʿurs al-shahīd*, seemingly reviving the old model of the early Islamic warrior – upon closer inspection however, this was very much new venture. The bride of this hero is not a mythic being but a creation of nationalist culture, the personified homeland. And yet the concept of the martyr's union with an imagined, supernatural beloved remains unintelligible as long as it is merely contextualised with its surrounding nationalist culture. To sound out the psychological dimensions of the Palestinian suffering, Darwish has referred to diverse universal religious symbols that appeared suggestive enough to express the agony of the bereaved, the image

20 Silvia Horsch, "Kampf, Tod und Zeugnis. Sunnitische Märtyrerfigurationen im Feld der Abgrenzung und Aneignung zwischen den Religionskulturen", in*: Grenzgänger der Religionskulturen*, 65-82.

21 See Jarrar, "The Martyrdom of Passionate Lovers".

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of the cross figuring most prominently.[22] In the case of a martyr's voluntary death for the sake of an ideal beloved, he draws however on a core experience pervading Islamic culture, the Sufi tradition. It is no exaggeration to state that transferring the dying fighter's mythic wedding from the religious into the nationalist discourse would be unthinkable in isolation from an extremely powerful poetic genre that had exercised a massive impact on educated society in classical Islam: mystic love poetry, the *ghazal*. Throughout the Islamic world, the *ghazal* tradition has spiritualised the idea of passionate love into an attachment to a divine beloved and further into a kind of sacrificial death.[23] True love for God could only be made manifest in the ultimate form of self-dedication, in voluntary death or self-sacrifice. It is love poetry, the genre of the *ghazal,* whose highly sensual theo-erotic imagery is deeply inscribed into classical Islamic culture. Its motto can be gleaned from the 13th-century poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ: *man māta fīhi gharāman ʿāsha murtaqiyan/ mā bayna ahli l-hawā fī arfaʿi darajī*.[24] "Whosoever dies in ardour for his sake, lives evermore raised up/ among the people of passion, to the most exalted degree".[25] Even a prophetical saying was discovered to justify passionate unconsummated love: *man ʿashiqa wa-ʿaffa wa-māt/ māta shahīdan*; "Whosoever loves passionately but remains chaste and dies, dies as a martyr".[26] The Hadīth has a long history: in the romantic recollections of early Islamic *ʿudhrī*, chaste lovers,[27] the saying is introduced to underpin their heroic endurance. It is moreover in the very focus of the mystic *ghazal* where the lover, *ʿāshiq*, can hope to achieve union with the beloved only through extreme efforts in adoration and faithfulness that will never allow him a normal rhythm of life and even will induce him to willingly accept death. A particularly famous case is that of the early mystic al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), who voluntarily accepted death for his passionate love of God. Over the centuries the mystic *ghazal* has exerted its power to counterbalance and often subvert the normative sharia-informed Islamic discourse. Whereas in the case of the mystic *ghazal* no real active killing is involved, the metaphor of a battle or violent fight, if only against the soul's desires, *nafs*, is powerfully present. An activist implication of martyrdom thus remained lurking and was to come to the fore again in times of political crisis. In modern times it has even managed to challenge superimposed foreign power structures.

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22 Friederike Pannewick, "The Martyred Poet on the Cross in Arabic Poetry: Sacrifice, Victimization or the Other Side of Heroism?" in: *Martyrdom in Literature*, 105-124.

23 Angelika Neuwirth, "Victims Victorious. Violent Death in Classical and Modern Arabic Ghazal", in: *Ghazal as Word Literature I: Transformations of a Literary Genre*, ed. by Thomas Bauer et al., Beirut et al. 2005, 258-280.

24 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, Beirut 1903, 72-75.

25 The poem has been translated by Arthur J. Arberry, *The Mystical Poems of Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, Dublin (1956), 27-34.

26 On the so-called *ḥadīth al-ʿishq* see Stefan Leder, *Ibn al-Ǧauzi und seine Kompilation wider die Leidenschaft*, Beirut et al. 1984, 271-276.

27 Renate Jacobi, "The ʿUdhra: Love and Death in the Umayyad Period", in: *Martyrdom in Literature*, 137-148.

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V. The Palestinian Martyr as the Redeemer of Collective Memory

In the Palestinian context the classical poet's "martyrdom of love" is theatrically re-staged. It is embedded in a rural wedding ritual – by far the most emotional ritual in Islamic culture. It draws on ancient local traditions in which the bride figures as a representation of mother earth and the groom as a ruler. Numerous panegyric hymns, sung in praise of both the bride's and the groom's physical beauty, celebrate them as ideal symbolic figures – as warrants of new life. The feast culminates in the couple's consummation of the marriage, and the display of the bride's virginal blood, traditionally stained on a bed sheet, which the women of the family receive with ululations. The groom is thus perceived as having performed a bloody sacrifice, the climactic part of his marital *rite de passage*, from which he emerges as an adult and full-fledged member of society. The ceremony thus involves a number of emotionally loaded situations: the delight in the description of the couple's bodies, the climax of the bride's blood being spilled (an event immediately communicated to the public). Taken together, these moments make the wedding feast the most significant collective event in rural society. It was Mahmud Darwish's poetical genius that successfully suggested the substantial congruity of the two *rites de passages*, the wedding and (sacrificial) death, to the collective consciousness, not only of the Palestinian but the Arab public of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, martyr celebrations came to fill the vacant place of religious rituals of collective mourning which Sunni Islam does not offer. For a few decades the martyr was received as a redeemer figure who, though militarily mostly ineffective, succeeded in restoring not only Palestinian but Arab collective memory in general.[28]

What does it mean, then, to celebrate the martyr's death as a wedding? The carnivalesque exchange of one *rite de passage* for another, the inversion of loss and defeat into triumph, inspired an elaborate ritual drama enacted by the collective: to dramatise the *fidāʾī*s burial as a wedding, the dead fighter was cast as a bridegroom. His female partner, however, remained symbolic; the martyr's bride was an abstract entity, none other than the imagined homeland – a most ambiguous ensemble.[29] An inverted world emerged. The condolence ceremony was chosen as the setting, in light of the prohibition against women at burials. This

[28] It needs to be mentioned however that Darwish himself – though the creator of the poetically founded martyr ideology – soon became aware of its moral ambivalence, see Neuwirth, "Hebrew Bible and Arabic Poetry. Reclaiming Palestine as a Homeland Made of Words: Mahmoud Darwish," in: *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. by Angelika Neuwirth et al., London 2010, 171-196.

[29] This was recognised very early on by Arab intellectuals, see for the case of Emile Habibi, Angelika Neuwirth, "Traditions and Counter-Traditions in the Land of the Bible: Emile Habibi's De-Mythologizing of History", in: *Arabic Literature*, 197-219. For the case of Rashid al-Daif see Angelika Neuwirth, "Lingustic Temptations and Erotic Unveilings: Rashid al-Daif on Language, Love, War, and Martyrdom", in: *ibid*., 110-133.

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ceremony, staged by women rather than men, was transformed from a gathering of mourners into a feast of joy, a wedding ritual. In this ritual the groom is represented by a large portrait of the young man, placed on a seat next to his mother, so as to establish a substitute to the traditional verbal wedding panegyrics which praise the bridegroom's body. The mother is expected to play her traditional role as the groom's mother, i.e. to utter the ululations at the event of his sacrifice; she is cheered by the attendants who sing: "Mother of the martyr, rejoice – all the young men are your sons."[30]

In this ritual the martyr's mother obviously represents the Palestinian collective, to whom "her sons" offer the sacrifice of their own blood. Like a real bridegroom, the dead fighter guarantees the perpetuation of his community – not genealogically, but by upholding their collective honour and identity. This pragmatic gain is, however, only the surface achievement. What is more important is that the martyr, whose body bears fatal wounds, permits the mental wound of the collective body to keep bleeding. There is a strong claim to redemptive suffering here which is publicly acclaimed, not least thanks to a comprehensive corpus of martyr poetry that is avidly promulgated: he thus perpetuates both the collective's victimisation as well as its heroic persistence. This is equally manifest in the martyr's visual representation: the fighter remains iconically present through the publication of his image; reproduced onto posters and fixed on the walls of his camp or neighbourhood, the nationalist martyr's image – that of a physically intact, handsome, sometimes triumphant young man (fig. 2) – became an icon of virile virtues. It does not depict real suffering, as in the case of the Shiite martyr (fig. 1) – who is at least in the Iranian case always shown dead bearing the traces of violence on his body –, but shows triumphal perseverance, as if the young man had been resurrected and given his physical integrity once again.

This complex mythopoesis appears to reflect particularly Palestinian political exigencies: a new revolutionary nationalism seeks to express itself through the myth of earth/mother/bride and fighter. The literary critic Harold Fisch has asked if it would not "perhaps be more correct to reverse the formula? May it not be that political movements are actually generated by the changes in literary mythology, literature preceding history? At the moment when the father image declines and the mother image comes to replace it, we find everywhere the passionate devotion to the land becoming more articulate".[31] What affirms Fisch's hypothesis is the fact that upon Darwish revoking his poetical pact with the martyr figure, the Palestinian martyr ideology as such has since disintegrated. Almost forty years after his invention of the martyr, in a long poem of some hundred pages[32] Darwish lets him-

[30] The verse is part of a panegyric that the peers of the dead young men recite on their visit to his mother. I have been present at several such occasions in the Old City of Jerusalem.

[31] Harold Fisch, *Remembering the Future: A Study in Literary Mythology*, Bloomington 1984, 115.

[32] Mahmud Darwish, "Ḥālat Ḥiṣār", in: *Al-Karmil* 70/71 (2002), 7-19.

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Fig. 2: Mural of a Sunnite martyr[33]

self be taught by the figure he himself created. 'His martyr' – again no real person but a poetical persona – tells him to retreat and leave him alone. He claims that there is no poetry about martyrdom, "no aesthetic outside my freedom".[34] Still, the poet cannot but speak about the shocking phenomenon of martyrdom which as a manifestation of strife – in Asʿad Khairallah's words – "seems to originate somewhere deeper or higher than the human condition and thus to possess the power to make us transcend it".[35] A few verses from *Ḥālat Ḥiṣār* speak for the entire poem in which Darwish bids farewell to the martyr, his poetic creation:

The martyr besieges me when I live a new day
He asks me: Where have you been?
Return the words you gave me as presents
To the dictionaries,
Relieve the sleepers from the buzzing echo.

The martyr teaches me: There are no aesthetics outside my freedom
The martyr explains: I have not searched beyond the distance

33 From Elias Sanbar, *Les Palestiniens: La photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 à nos jours*, Paris 2004, 327, 363.

34 Ibid. Translations of extracts have been published by Amina Elbendary, in *Al-Ahrām Weekly online*, 11-17 April 2002, Issue No. 581. The poem was written in February 2002, during the siege of Ramallah.

35 Asʾad Khairallah, "'The wine-cup of death': War as a mystical way", in *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 8 (1990), 171.

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For eternity's virgins, I love life
On Earth, among the pines and figs,
But I had no access to it. I have searched
For it, using every last thing I own: blood in a body of azure

(…)

The martyr warns me: Do not believe the women's ululations
Believe my father when he looks at my picture, crying
Why did you change turns, my son, walking on ahead of me
Me first me first.

V. Conclusion

To return very briefly to our initial question as to the hermeneutic foundations of the various readings of the sacrificial paradigm in Sunni and Shia Islam: the Koran rigorously rejects the Biblical sacrificial paradigm and accordingly does not accept Christ's death on the cross, let alone a veneration of a sacrificial hero. It remains completely silent about the ideal of martyrdom that prevailed in neighbouring Christian belief. Though officially accepting the Koranic message, Shiites chose to cling to the idea of vicarious suffering and death – deeply anchoring it in their foundational narrative and supporting it through strategies of allegorical interpretation of the Koran. In Sunni Islamic societies it was another venue of allegorical thinking, namely mysticism, which kept a counter-narrative alive: the theo-erotic paradigm of passionate love implying the ideal of sacrificial death. It thus needed little more than the substitution of the "Great Other" imagined as God and male by the "Great Other" of nationalism, the homeland and the imagined female, to arrive at the myth of the modern Sunni martyr. We can thus affirm Harold Fisch's assumption that it was not least the literary/philosophical image of a weakened father figure or figure of God in Modernity that paved the way for the establishment of the "modern", Darwishian, sacrificial paradigm, which conversely – with the receding of the grand narratives and perhaps also its incompatibility with Sunni literal readings of the Koran – lost its *raison d'être* and vanished almost completely from the scene. Emotions – emanating from the Biblical paradigm and formerly so efficient in creating a delusive collective coherence – have been extinguished, giving way to more pragmatic endeavours in overcoming the political crisis.

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