1 Introduction

Concerning Martyrdom

Finishing his videotaped testament with the words, "God is the greatest," a man strapped on an explosives-filled vest and walked to his death. Standing before an angry Roman judge, a woman answered all questions by saying, "I am a Christian," before being condemned to death by wild animals. Crouching in a trench in France, a soldier cried out, "Wondrous God!" before going over the top to meet the hail of enemy bullets. Remaining still as flames engulfed her robes, a woman prayed, "All-knowing Chenrézig, Tenzin Gyatso, may you stand firm until samsara ends," before collapsing to the ground. Each statement was a confession of devotion, each spectacle horrifying to onlookers, and each person a willing participant in their own violent demise. Each individual would be celebrated by their community as a paragon of virtue while being condemned by outsiders.

And each person is remembered as a martyr.

Martyrs appear throughout human history in a diverse variety of contexts. Some are widely respected and remembered – like Joan of Arc, the maid of Orléans, who battled against gender norms as well as the English and, at nineteen, was burned at the stake for her efforts. Others are condemned and discounted, like Mohammed Atta who flew a plane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, killing himself along with thousands of innocents. Both have been labeled martyrs, though they spark radically different reactions depending on one's perspective. The term "martyr" stems from the Greek *martus*, a word originally referencing a witness who provided testimony during a legal trial, while the category of "martyrdom" originates within early Christianity. Greek Christian texts used the term *martus* in reference to those sentenced

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to die by adversarial power structures – be they the Roman state or the Jewish Sanhedrin – on account of their Christian identity and practices. Those individuals are said to be witnesses to Christ through their death, and speaking of martyrdom in terms of "bearing witness" or "testifying" recalls this early character. The earliest extant Latin martyr text, the second-century *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, used a transliteration of the Greek term *martus,* which suggests the term had already moved beyond its meaning of witness in a courtroom to be seen as a technical term for a specific category of death.[1] Medieval Syriac and Arabic scholars returned to the root "witness" for Muslim concepts of similar deaths, *sohaido* and *shahid*, respectively, offering a contiguous concept within related religious rubrics.[2] *Shahid* is etymologically close to *shahada*, the confession of faith required of all Muslims and first "pillar" of Islam, marking the connection between death as witness and the requisite testimony of one's religious belonging.

In a pair of articles, linguist Sandy Habib has explored the etymological usages and shapes of *martus* and *shahid* in tandem, showing that a host of similar simple concepts join together into the complex of meanings deployed in the terms. Those concepts include a "someone" who is morally good, was killed because of their way of thinking about life, inspired others through their death, and was remembered by people "who say something like this: '[T]his someone is a very good someone.'"[3] Laying bare the ideas anchoring the martyr in this way illuminates how applying the term to a death does

[1] Paul Middleton makes this point in his "Creating and contesting Christian martyrdom," in P. Middleton (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 25.

[2] Glen Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19. See also George Heyman, *Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 175.

[3] Sandy Habib, "Dying for a cause other than God: Exploring the non-religious meanings of martyr and shahid," *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 37:3 (2017): 319. See also his "Dying in the cause of God: The semantics of the Christian and Muslim concepts of martyr," *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 34:3 (2014): 388–398.

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interpretive work, highlighting the dying person as something special and worthy of note. A person may qualify as a martyr for one group with one existential perspective while being rejected by others. It also points to the connotations of the death as a product of a certain ideology, though the particular ideology may vary.

For that reason, martyrdom has traditionally been articulated through the lens of religion: A martyr is often said to be one who dies for their religion.[4] Such a statement depends on what we mean by religion, however. As scholars have repeatedly shown, the constructed category of "religion" relies on assumptions shaped through experiences of Western Christianity, which were inherited into broader cultures of the Global North.[5] The deployment of "religion" as a descriptor often serves to isolate it from spheres of power, attempting to articulate a *personal* sphere of experience separate from collective experiences of politics, law, economics, and so on.[6] Such constructions obfuscate the ways religion is inherently engaged in all aspect of life, particularly questions of power and moral authority. Martyrdom stories make that very point, relying on authorities and perspectives that blend spheres of experience.

Moreover, relying on "death for religion" as a determinant of martyrdom excludes dying on behalf of a nationalist configuration, which disregards some stridently atheistic settings where the term has found great purchase. Mao Zedong's revolution, for instance, created sprawling "Martyr Memorial Cemeteries" found in urban settings throughout the People's Republic of China. Those there interred are commemorated for their contributions to the Cultural

[4] Joyce Salisbury, for instance, makes a common statement in martyrological literature, "[M]artyrs accept death rather than give up their religious beliefs; they are witnesses." See her *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 148.

[5] Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3, makes this point perhaps most forcefully.

[6] See ibid. as well as Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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Revolution without connections to something generally labeled a "religion." The concept has also been routinely used to communicate the sacrality of values evident in other nonreligious contexts: Suffragette Emily Winding Davison,[7] President Abraham Lincoln,[8] and those who fell during the French Revolution[9] are just some who have been treated as secular, political martyrs.[10] If we resign martyrdom to the realm of religion alone, we predetermine its character.[11] Still, some studies of martyrdom rely on a sharp distinction between the secular and religious. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi exemplifies this stance when he argues that the label of martyrdom gives death "a cosmic meaning, while death in the service of a secular ideology – national or supra-national – can only have a historical meaning."[12]

[7] Gay Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison: Secular martyr?" *Social Research*, 75:2 (Summer 2008): 461–484.

[8] Eval J. Naveh, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: New York University Press, 1990).

[9] See Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism and Social Thought in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[10] See also Michaela DeSoucey et al. "Memory and sacrifice: An embodied theory of martyrdom," *Cultural Sociology*, 2:1 (2008): 99–121; for the place of martyrdom in reference to Maoism, see Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, "'Kill one, he becomes one hundred': Martyrdom as generative sacrifice in the Nepal people's war," *Social Analysis*, 50:1 (Spring 2006): 51–72. Craig Hovey could also be seen to operate on this distinction, though with a particular theological bent that distinguished witnesses from martyrs on the basis of the latter being willing to forgive those who are responsible for their death. See his "Being and witnessing: Minding the gap between martyrs and witnesses," *Anglican Theological Review*, 97:2 (Spring 2015): 265–280.

[11] The boundaries of religion have been shown to be blurred by myriad scholars, many of whom will be engaged with here. For some of the most effective, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, esp. chaps. 1 and 3; see Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1964), and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), for only two studies that deal with this level of construction, along with the Asad text quoted above. Apart from the authors mentioned, others that fall under this category include Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Michael P. Jensen, *Martyrdom and Identity: The Self on Trial* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); C.C. Pecknold, "The end of martyrdom, religious liberty in liberal orders," *Nova et Vetera*, 12:2 (April 2014): 415–431.

[12] Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, "The return of martyrdom: Honour, death and immortality," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4:3 (December 2003): 23.

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Likewise, Madawi Al-Rasheed and Marat Shterin focus on faith as a determinant of a distinct form of self-sacrificial violence.[13] These scholars see martyrdom as a label that hides the mundane reality of a deadly conflict behind transcendental terms.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (whose definition is taken for granted by too many studies of martyrdom) recounts the religious – specifically Christian – context first before offering the more general "one who undergoes death (more loosely, one who undergoes great suffering) on behalf of any religious or other belief or cause, or as a consequence of his devotion to some object."[14] Not only does this inherently equate sacred and secular causes and beliefs on the level of devotion, but it also places the emphasis on the *why* of the deaths. Martyrs die *on account of* something: They are *attached* deaths.[15]

Ultimately, as Habib suggests, martyrs are not found but rather made, constructed by a hermeneutic move that connects deaths to a wider complex of symbols and practices aimed at providing meaning. Martyrdom is a death *contextualized*, a death *interpreted*. It is a way of speaking about death through reference to power relations,

[13] Madawi Al-Rasheed and Marat Shterin, "Introduction," in *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), chap. 1. The distinction has led some, like Lacey Baldwin Smith, to treat martyrdom as an archaic institution that will vanish as secularization slowly continues its unstoppable march across the world. Martyrdom is therefore simply a way of disguising more fundamental political motivations and "making death easier." Lacey Baldwin Smith, "Can martyrdom survive secularization?" *Social Research*, 75:2 (Summer 2008): 457. See also her *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

[14] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. "Martyr." Also mentions the definition as "Simple attribution . . . martyr complex, an exaggerated desire to sacrifice oneself for other and to have the sacrifice recognized."

[15] The *Oxford English Dictionary* also notes the term's provenance from the Indo-Aryan root "smer-" and its correlate Sanskrit "smar-". Both roots are concerned with memory and remembrance, strengthening the more commonly referred to Greek root's relationship with the recalling of that which was experienced. The Sanskrit term *smara* (स मर) not only refers to remembering and recollection but also has explicitly religious references as well, including an interpreter of the Vedas and the God of Love. In fact, love provides the context for a great many words building on that root (*Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, available at www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/monier).

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informed by particular knowledges about the right way to live in the world. While the colloquial use of martyrdom has largely been determined by its original Christian context, any study of martyrdom must attend to the ways other communities use the concept to make a death meaningful. Doing so will avoid formulating a normative definition that establishes necessary and sufficient conditions for "authentic" martyrdoms, thereby excluding others constructed as deviant. As scholar of martyrdom Paul Middleton has shown, such attempts serve only to replay historical disputes without advancing our understanding of the concept.[16] The goal of this analysis will not be to protect or encourage one particular usage but rather seek what lies behind the term's purchase in such a variety of settings.

At the same time, a host of questions are left open, both logistical and conceptual. How does one suffer *on behalf* of something? What kind of devotion leads to death? The term "cause" (as in "they died for the cause") could include the pursuit of ideological goals as much as material ones, social as well as personal; so, can any cause create martyrs? If so, what precipitates their creation? If not, what are the core differences between those that can and those that cannot? Moreover, how exactly is death seen to serve a cause? Are they necessary for the cause to continue? Are martyrs like cogs in a larger machine, with their blood providing the lubrication for the mechanism's operation?

In hopes of answering these questions, this work will attend to the significance of martyrdom by analyzing a selection of cases where the discourse of martyrdom is employed: cases ancient and modern, theistic and nontheistic, from settings constructed as both "political" and "religious." For the cases under consideration here, martyrdom is a label applied to a certain kind of death. The shape of death varies, but its characteristics and attached meanings bear significant resemblances amidst disparate contexts. The cases considered in this study have been selected on account of their potency, their diversity

[16] Paul Middleton, "What is martyrdom?" *Mortality*, 19:2 (May 2014): 117–133.

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regarding religio-cultural embeddedness, and the apparent differences in the forms of death. Common patterns of usage within these diverse contexts can lead us to a better understanding of martyrdom's import in social and cultural affairs. At the same time, I will treat martyrdom as a composite concept harboring multiple symbolic components balanced in symbiotic tension. Individual consciousness is shaped by social expectations; people seek martyrdom, but groups establish martyrs; political situations are read through religious frames; the past reappears in the present, which in turn is built on projections into the future. Only by attending to these levels simultaneously can we illuminate what we mean by calling someone a martyr.

THE PRACTICE AND DISCOURSE OF MARTYRDOM

Martyrdom is both a way of dying and a way of talking about death. While certain characteristics may resonate with cultural expectations around the valorous death of martyrdom, those are often fluid and shift over time. No unique set of qualities ensures a death will be counted a martyrdom; martyrs are created by a sympathetic group that applies the term to certain deaths. At the same time, individuals intentionally seek a death that will be recognized as martyrdom, responding to the expectations of their religio-cultural group. The death of a martyr is both performed and interpreted, and the shape of the performance and its hermeneutics vary between time and culture. Neither of these aspects can be ignored; a person cannot make themselves a martyr without a social collective accepting and using the term in reference to their death, and a group only applies the term when the death is perceived to align with their expectations derived from their cultural history. Martyrdom therefore is best approached as both a *discourse* and a *practice*.

The label of martyr rearticulates social systems produced by and reproducing knowledges, power relations, and frameworks of thinking based in conceptions of truth. Guided by ideas of the "proper" ordering of the cosmos, martyrdom discourses participate in creating

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a certain conception of the world as true. As Michel Foucault, largely credited with the modern conceptualization of discourse, noted:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, that types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[17]

Discourses not only reflect the understanding of the speakers but also serve to construct the very things they label. Discourses of martyrdom are as varied as their contexts – or epistemes in Foucault's terminology – wherein they are put to work. Indeed, those discourses themselves are not completely articulated or fully understood even by those who employ the discourse. People use language as a means of achieving certain ends, but as they do, their sense of self is constructed according to the same frameworks they are seeking to mobilize. Those frames provide the sense of reality and shape of the world within which certain activities seem practical.

That constructed sense of self is a core concern of most forms of martyrdom. Martyrs die because they belong to a certain group at a certain moment when challenges against that group create the perception that a death carried out in the right way is preferable to a life lived outside sacred principles. Such perceptions stem from and seek to perpetuate a vision of cosmic order. They emerge from within what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as a person's *habitus*:

> [S]ystems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is,

[17] Michel Foucault, "Truth and power" (interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino), in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 131.

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> as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules that are collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.[18]

A person's conduct comes from having adapted to the expectations learned through the *habitus*, which are preserved and shaped through activity. Though martyrdom is an extreme action, its origin is in the same set of structured structures as any other behavior. When extreme conditions arise, a set of strategies appears reasonable given the view of the world, including the appropriateness of dying in certain ways. That may seem surprising when viewed from inside a culture that holds physical health and individual existence as the *summum bonum* of life, but even within modern neoliberal societies, the idea of giving one's life in service to a nation is celebrated as the "ultimate sacrifice." Within that possibility lay the core of the martyr concept: A martyrdom is a death understood to somehow serve *others*, a death that is embraced for its *communal* benefit. Although many have explored the personal benefits gained through martyrdom – namely an auspicious or blissful next stage of existence – it is always rendered as serving the group, as a death *for us*. (As we will see, attempts to delegitimate martyrs often articulate a selfishness at the action's core, like seeking heaven, notoriety, or even relief from depression.)

Serving the good of the group is in some way hardwired into Bourdieu's theory of practice, as the *habitus* naturally seeks to reinscribe its own arbitrariness, and the dispositions stemming from social existence are favorable to those same social formations.[19] Conformity with the group is persistently encouraged through praise

[18] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 54. See also his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 193.

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and coercion, since those actions best promise to maintain sentiments over time. Of course, there is no single set of dispositions and practical knowledges that circulate within a community. Multiple perspectives derive multiple outlooks, any of which could gain dominance when a plurality of people act in accord. The more individuals that do so, the more ascendant those outlooks become. Martyrdom contributes to this process, shaped by expectations while also having the power to reshape cultural forms and value systems by celebrating some deaths as in pursuit of the right that lamentably required the death of the bold martyr. Nowhere is martyr a negative term, and the martyr's elevated place makes them useful in articulating and promoting perceptions of the world. Those who claim the martyr and accept the designation of martyr join themselves to a certain order by avowing a social identity inscribed in the martyr's flesh. Martyrdom can thereby confirm or resist against cultural ideologies. One group's martyr is another group's victim, suicide, or terrorist. The category's openness shows that the deployment of the concept is normative, used to articulate a relationship between the group that approves of the martyr and the martyr's own outlook and behavior.

These dramatic acts are meant to draw their audience into the narrative world martyrs inhabit by reenacting extant traditional tropes, which provide the model of right action during trying times. Comparative religions scholar Gavin Flood uses the phrase "the performance of tradition" to describe how a cosmology is internalized by and demonstrated through the actions of religious ascetics.[20] Their sacred tradition is made visible in the suffering flesh of the ascetic, conflating the real and symbolic world. By internalizing the cosmologies of their textual traditions and constructing their ways of thinking and acting along tradition-based ideological lines, martyrs effectively accomplish the same. Their strategies for dealing with their social situation is anchored in religious symbolism they actively

[20] Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chap. 1.

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interpret and reinscribe through their behavior. In performing their tradition, martyrs seek recognition by dying in culturally comprehensible ways, and where the label of martyr is bestowed upon their death the social world shifts to align more with their interpretation. It is vital not only to act in expected ways, but also to be *seen* acting in ways that embody the qualities of a group member. The result is a performance of martyrdom, conforming to culturally defined templates that are aimed to impress an audience and communicate an ideology through their spectacle of suffering and death.

Speaking of martyrdom as performance highlights the process of individuals taking up a certain role during certain moments. Actors, after all, are people who adopt different personas within a dramatic context. Their role exists only within the framework of the drama, which defines their character, their relationships to others, even their words and actions. Martyrdom analysts Eugene and Anita Weiner deploy this frame, explaining a martyr is:

> [N]ot an actor, someone "who comes forward to play certain parts on the stage of society," [but rather] "someone irretrievable within the play." The character lives within the play, and the play comprises the essence of his or her reality. "The actor leaves the stage; the character really may not do so. The actor belongs to the same world as the author and participates in the making of a fiction; the character is in a closed world."[21]

The analogy of an actor existing solely and entirely within the play syncs well with a person whose very existence is bound up in an ideological framework. The religio-cultural world of the martyr provides the lens for their understanding and the rationales for their action. Untethered individualism – where an agent participates in social life voluntarily and can therefore separate oneself with ease – is anathema to the martyr's logics. Those who offer their own life in

[21] Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2002) 7, n.1

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hoped-for martyrdom operate wholly within the social norms and expectations of the cultural group to which they belong. To understand them, we should not attempt to discover how they come to mistake the play as real, but rather unpack the logics that guide their performance within this world.

These performative logics amount to scripts for action, behavioral outlines constructed through the *habitus* of the agent. They are situational strategies, embedded in narratives and traditions seen to provide the model of right behavior. Their selection depends on the framing of the situation by the contemporary community and even the individual's reading of their own history. Hans Kippenberg's *Violence as Worship* placed this insight at the core of his comparative investigation into the dynamics of religious violence, stating "the situation of one's own religious community is defined with the help of traditional eschatological scripts. In keeping with this, believers were told that they must find orientation for their action in scripts about how to acquire salvation and in exemplary fighters for the faith."[22] His articulation is apt, though his emphasis on the eschatological – those elements connecting to a final conclusion of humanity or reality – results in an argument limited to traditions with corresponding mythic discourses.[23] This is an unnecessary condition, and Kippenberg's discussion tends to rely on the belief in an afterlife or afterexistence as a driving force. It is rather the need for orientation in the moment when death threatens that determines the choice and construction of scripts, and a variety of future hopes could serve the same purpose.

Anthropologist Victor Turner likewise employed the concept of scripts, labeling them "root paradigms" of action. In analyzing moments of social upheaval (which he terms times of "anti-structure"

[22] Hans Kippenberg, *Violence as Worship: Religious Wars in the Age of Globalization*, trans. Brian McNeil (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 98 and 200.

[23] See also John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe and Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2000) which carries similar ideas regarding eschatology.

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or "communitas" following Arnold Van Gennep),[24] Turner argues we can discover not only when actors will look to these scripts but also the function they aim to serve. In doing so he offers a statement that sounds very much like his contemporary Pierre Bourdieu:

> [A]ctors nevertheless guided by subjective paradigms – which may derive from beyond the mainstream of socio-cultural process with its ensocializing devices such as education and limitation of action models in stereotyped situations ... Actors who are thus guided produce in their interaction behavior and generate social events which are non-random, but, on the contrary, structured to a degree that may in some cultures provoke the notion of fate or destiny to account for the experienced regulation of human social affairs.[25]

Reference to notions of fate and destiny move the register of discussion to the symbolic realm and point to the way subjective interpretations of existence can dictate action.

These related discussions all see cultural scripts housed in sacred narratives, which provide both the framing for action and transcendent models of behavior.[26] Such scripts help determine how situations are understood and what the appropriate reaction is, while also making them culturally recognizable actions that resonate with others. Where the appropriate response is to choose death over life, such narratives are reaffirmed by a powerful public sentiment that interprets the current moment in terms of a sacred past. Approaching martyrdom as a culturally structured performance, and seeing martyrs as ultimately defined by roles and guided by scripts based in their cultural heritage and

[24] See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), and Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

[25] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 67.

[26] I use the designation sacred narratives over scripture intentionally. Scripture is an important and inherently religious conception, though all of the narratives under examination cannot be classified as such (considering the implications of orthodoxy and canon, which some traditions exceed, and some do not recognize at all), but the role of such tales in influencing self-understanding cannot be understated.

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brought on by their social, political, and cultural contexts, will bring to light the practical ways they dealt with the conflicts they experienced, and what they hoped their deaths would accomplish. With this in mind, I will use the category of *performative suffering* to acknowledge circumstances where pain and death are mobilized in service to a goal by orienting the conflict through symbolic frames and making a statement about the reality of the interpretive frames through which they perceive the world. The goals, the forms of pain and death, and the frames all vary with context, but this dynamic consistently appears in all types of martyrdom under examination. Martyrdom's performativity speaks to the ways behavior is constructed in line with cultural norms and expectations that simultaneously construct, follow, and interpret actions in line with a professed identity.

MARTYRDOM AS (SELF-)SACRIFICE

Martyrdom is commonly approached through the lens of self-sacrifice. Employing the frame of sacrifice affirms that martyrdom is deeply connected to the socioreligious life of the martyr, as it marks a loss as meaningful, as worthwhile. It construes individual loss as group gain, making the loss sacred in keeping with the term's Latin origin as *sacrificium*, to make holy or sacred.[27] While the category of the sacred is ambiguous, in their well-known treatise on the subject Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss argued that sacrifice sets the sacrificed apart from the everyday, making what is lost a symbol for the greater social framework.[28] What is removed from our material resources is put to use towards transcendent ends.

[27] By "sacred" here I mean to highlight what Emile Durkheim argued in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]), namely that religion itself functions as a symbol for the collective, and those things that serve the collective are marked as sacred in contrast to those that serve the individual and are thereby classified profane. A fuller analysis of Durkheim's discussion and how this study contributes to that understanding can be found in the chapters that follow.

[28] Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

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Comparative religion scholar Kathryn McClymond has shown how sacrificial systems serve to reclassify death, marking a sacrifice as a sacred rather than a worldly death.[29] Deaths earn sacrificial authority when they are performed in the context of other sacred activities that reinforce the sacrificial status.[30] That is to say, the perception of the death and its meaning is entirely dependent on the context wherein it occurs. Participating in sacrificial activities has long been seen to connect one to their community, demonstrating their commitment to engaging with others and behaving as expected of a community member.[31] Surrendering something of value in a ritualized scenario confirms social relationships; in self-sacrifice, it is the *self* that is made holy. The individual who undergoes the sacrifice is in turn marked as special by the group, as they are seen to have given up that of greatest value and utility to serve the collective.

Suffering is the cost of a person's sanctification. Be it material loss or physical injury, sacrifice includes a negative individual experience. The natural inclination against suffering opens the space for social impact since pain marks a person's most intimate relation, that between the self and the body.[32] Our sheer physicality is both necessary and bothersome, as we are embodied beings often required to put aside the body's wants in order to exist peacefully with others. Living with others necessitates some degree of willing suffering, sometimes in small ways and sometimes in large.[33] Martyrdom is the highest expression of that axiom.

[29] Katherine McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 61–62.
[30] Ibid., 33. [31] See ibid., 163.
[32] I am aware that a distinct separation between body and spirit reflects certain Western religious categories, but my point throughout will be that a strict distinction between "body and soul" misconstrues the relationship between self and body, and that the self is always seen as utterly anchored in the body. That connection is precisely what all these political religions play upon. What is important is not how the connection is envisioned, but the mere fact that all people have a desire for physical wholeness, and the body can be afflicted in ways that direct the decisions a person makes and therefore the person they become.
[33] A point made by many analysts of sacrifice. See for example Ivan Strenski's *Contesting Sacrifice*, Bruce Lincoln's *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology*

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Through this same dynamic, the martyr dies to reaffirm the group's existence. Hubert and Mauss argued the sacralization of the sacrifice created a conduit between the sacred and profane realms, where the sacred was made visible in the destruction of the sacrificial gift. By giving themselves in sacrifice, the martyr becomes that link to the sacred, allowing people to bask in its inspiring and terrifying light. Where the act is recognized in service to the society, the sacrifice regrounds the society by demonstrating the apex of group belonging. Onto the martyr's physical body is projected the social body, which when in danger requires the loss of the individual rather than the loss of the society. This framework will consistently reappear in the case studies to follow.

Interestingly, a number of martyrdom studies highlight the promised individual benefits of martyrdom to the near exclusion of social concerns. Some go as far as to argue that the potency of belief in an afterlife leads to irrational actions.[34] The oft-repeated promise (coming out of a fourteenth-century *tafsir* or commentary)[35] that seventy-two virgins await Muslim martyrs in the afterlife aims to do the same, articulating martyrdom as an ultimately selfish pursuit. Formulating martyrdom as a self-serving act delegitimizes it as a morally commendable act; if one dies to gain heaven (or virgins), aiming to trade momentary pain for eternal pleasure, the act is unworthy of respect. But the martyr's value is based in their perceived altruism, raising them above all precisely because their actions are at odds with inclination but in line with duty.[36] Two possibilities are

and Practice (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), McClymond *Beyond Sacred Violence*, Hubert and Mauss' *Sacrifice.*

[34] Examples are not difficult to find, though one of the most strident is certainly L. Arik Greenberg, *"My Share of God's Reward": Exploring the Roles and Formulations of the Afterlife in Early Christian Martyrdom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

[35] The promise of seventy-two houri awaiting the martyr in paradise is generally attributed to Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) and his tafsir on verse seventy-eight of Surah Al-Rahman (55) where it recounts the pleasures of heaven.

[36] Here is Immanuel Kant's understanding of morality in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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therefore created: If the act of giving up is motivated by personal interest, it cannot be a sacrifice, and should not be celebrated. On the other hand, if the surrender of an individual's good is for the welfare of the group, it is a laudable act and deserving of the label martyrdom. Martyrs are not celebrated because they adequately balanced their resources and goals; they are celebrated because duty to the community exceeds individual utility.[37] Intention becomes the deciding variable. The question then becomes, how can we determine the martyr's intention? In this study, the martyr's own words will be used to determine their intent. While critiques of brainwashing, coercion, or outright dishonesty are impossible to fully refute, interrogating the words left behind or attributed to martyrs can reveal how the significance and utility of death and suffering is constructed.

The question of purpose and intention connects to the experiences of pain common in martyr discourses. As anthropologist of religion Talal Asad noted, pain is not experienced passively, but "can be an active, practical relationship inhabiting time," the outward manifestations of which becomes culturally legible.[38] Consider a context where pain is accepted as a necessity, perhaps even a good: health. In service to our health we may push our body in uncomfortable ways, or willingly suffer hunger towards a physical goal. When we are taken by sickness, we seek out doctors and surgeons who may poke, prod, press, and cut our bodies toward the goal of health. If we see suffering as in service to this goal, it changes our experience of the pain. We may not look forward to it, but we do not flee from it either. Sometimes, we recognize, pain is necessary.[39]

[37] Catalina Kopetz and Edward Orehek reorient ideals of goal-oriented behavior by examining martyrdom not as self-defeating behavior but rather as a form of self-realization that requires an accurate appraisal of ideas of the self. See Catalina Kopetz and Edward Orehek, "When the end justifies the means," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24:5 (October 2015): 386–391.

[38] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 83.

[39] There is reason to dispute the analogy between health and martyrdom. If nothing else, martyrs die, so any correlation with dynamics serving the extension of life

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Ariel Glucklich's work on experiences of pain helpfully distinguishes between disintegrative pain like torture – which aims to disrupt life and its associations – and the integrative pain of an experience like childbirth – pain that strengthens connections to the natural, social, and spiritual world.[40] There is no objective criteria to distinguish the two; it is a matter of how pain is experienced by those suffering or how it is made meaningful by witnesses. The martyr's pain is distinguished by both the practices within which it occurs, and the discourses that articulate its social meaning. Pain holds a different place in the variety of martyr forms considered here, but some general understandings of the place of pain in martyrdom are evident: Pain appears as an obstruction to appropriate behavior, something to be endured by the worthy, and the overcoming of which is part of what marks the death as special.

It is understandable, then, that while sacrifice is traditionally seen as a religious category, secular ideologies also hold a special place for sacrifice and self-sacrifice. So-called "religious" and "secular" ideologies both employ means of justifying individual suffering towards group ends, differing only in the way they articulate the "fundamental nature of humanity and the cosmos," in the words of Bruce Lincoln.[41] Lincoln uses the language of "meso-cosm" to refer to

seems inappropriate. One supports life while the other voluntarily cuts it short. One enjoys general approval while the other often finds dispute. However, approval or opposition is based on an evaluation of the end relative to its painful means. Few seek pain as its own end, but all see certain goals worthy of some extent of suffering. That decision is ultimately up to each individual, made amidst familial, societal, cultural, and political pressures. Others can approve or disapprove, but that approbation is likewise based on an estimation of the relative importance of the ends. (This may be done without rational reflection, and simply as a means of following the general sentiments of a society. Still, that itself is the result of an internationalization of another's means of evaluation, even if implicit.) In cases of suicide, the pain of daily existence is seen to be too heavy a price for perpetuating existence. We may rightly disagree, especially when that pain is temporary (and agree when not, as in end-of-life considerations), but the evaluative dynamic is still relevant.

[40] Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33 and following.

[41] Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice*, 173.

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the human society that exists between the microcosm of the individual and the macrocosm of the divine realm. Political institutions aim to order this meso-cosm, basing their political institutions on concepts held as sacred, be they the history and value of a particular ethnic group or the promises of reason and equality. Therefore I contend that martyrdom must be approached as both *fully religious and fully political* to attend to the fact that the boundaries between the religious and secular spheres are unstable and often untenable.[42]

ON SUICIDE

Concerns around intention raise the relationship between martyrdom and suicide. Part of the conceptual contours of martyrdom includes the martyr in some way embracing their death, choosing it either directly through their action or indirectly by their inaction. Scholar of religious violence Margo Kitts offers the useful label of "elective death" to describe an act that includes an intention to bring about of one's death, even if they could not be said to *cause* their own demise.[43] There is a choice deferred, a choice denied in the martyr's death. Friderike Pannewick is certainly right when he notes the "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."[44] The elective nature of martyrdom has led many scholars to approach it exclusively as a form of suicide. Carole Cusack and James L. Lewis, the

[42] For examples of studies using this approach, see Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[43] Margo Kitts, "Introduction: On death, religion, and rubrics for suicide," in M. Kitts (ed.), *Martyrdom, Self-Sacrifice, and Self-Immolation: Religious Perspectives on Suicide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–17.

[44] Friederike Pannewick, "Introduction," in Friederike Pannewick (ed.), *Martyrdom and Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity* (Berlin: Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden, 2004), 11. See also Thomas Scheffler, "Helden, Märtyrer, Selbstmordattentäter: Zur religiösen Semantik des Heldentods," in A. Hamzawy and F. Ibrahim (eds.), *Religion, Staat und Politik im Vorderen Orient*. (Munster: Lit, 2003).

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editors of a volume entitled *Sacred Suicide*, argue that martyrdom is a species of the genus suicide, and Kitts herself treats martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and self-immolation as various forms of "religiously sanctioned suicides."[45] While I believe there is reason to challenge such formulations, it has proven popular among analysts.

These apparent associations have led some to treat martyrs as mentally ill, an approach exemplified by historians like G.E.M. St. Croix and Glen Bowersock, who see pathology and abnormality in the actions of martyrs, or W.H.C. Frend, who characterized martyrs' apparent zeal for death as a kind of "mania."[46] Psychologist Rona Fields' work sought the "psychodynamic engine that drives" self-sacrifice, asserting that the martyr's level of commitment "obscures [the] perception and sensation of noxious experience."[47] In a related

[45] Carole M. Cusack and James R. Lewis (eds.), *Sacred Suicide* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 3. Kitts, "Introduction," 1.

[46] See G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. by Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, esp. 6–7; W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Cambridge: James Clark and Co. Ltd., 1965), 197. Others using the framework of mental instability include Beit-Hallahmi, "The return of martyrdom," 11–34; S. Byman, "Suicide and alienation: Martyrdom in Tudor England," *Psychoanalytical Review*, 61:3 (1974): 355–373; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Trading pain for knowledge, or, how the West was won," *Social Research*, 75:2 (Summer 2008): 485–510; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, "The making of a martyr: Chechen suicide terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29 (2006): 429–492; Donald Riddle, *The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931) bases itself in social analysis but serves to return to the question of how mental attitudes are manipulated. This argument is revisited in Ramona Houmanfar and Todd Ward, "An interdisciplinary account of martyrdom as a religious practice/Una Vision Interdisciplinaria del Martirio Como Practica Religiosa," *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicologia*, 44:1 (2012): 65–75.

[47] Rona Fields, *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology and Politics of Self-Sacrifice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 25, 36. This resonates with the focus of Eugene and Anita Weiner in *The Martyr's Conviction.* Yuval Neria and his colleagues rely on the social psychological construct of the Authoritarian Personality to explain martyrs' behavior, which includes a set of motivational needs and a cognitive style in which feelings of being threatened, intolerance for ambiguity, dogmatism, and religiosity are determinants of individual beliefs. See Yuval Neria et al., "The Al Qaeda 9/11 instructions: A study in the construction of religious martyrdom," *Religion*, 35 (2005): 1–11. Similarly, J.J. Belanger and her colleagues, who sought to create a psychometric tool that could appraise the willingness of potential martyrs,

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vein, anthropologist Madawi Al-Rasheed and sociologist Marat Shterin hold that martyrdom is merely a category used to "glorify acts of suicide and homicide" in an attempt to disguise these naturally repellent acts.[48] Such studies often resign religious language, affect, and symbolism to a means of overcoming a person's innate opposition to violence and self-preservation. Martyrdom becomes a problem to be solved, rather than an expression of a "normal" human activity.

Worth special mention in this context is criminologist Adam Lankford's *The Myth of Martyrdom*, where he contends that the language of martyrdom provides a cover for those who *want* to die.[49] Focusing on the "suicide attacks" or "martyrdom operations" of some Islamist organizations alongside "rampage shooters" and other "self-destructive killers," Lankford contends that all who undertake such acts were already seeking a way to end their life and simply latched onto a socially approved means of doing so. Using a technique he refers to as "psychological autopsy," which examines the mental states of the deceased after they have already died, he argues that those considered martyrs were in fact merely mentally ill. Consider his diagnosis of Mohammed Atta, one of the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks: "[P]sychological autopsy has revealed that Atta's struggles with social isolation, depression, guilt and shame, and hopelessness were very similar to the struggles of those who commit conventional suicide and murder-suicide."[50] Martyrs have fooled everyone

with measurements based on "readiness to self-sacrifice" and a "passion scale," along with "depression" and "suicidal ideation." J.J. Belanger et al., "The psychology of martyrdom: Making the ultimate sacrifice in the name of a cause," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107:3 (2014): 494–515. While the desire for such an isometric is certainly understandable, *saying* you are willing to die for a cause is a long way from *actually* dying for a cause. Knowing the high value placed upon the willingness to sacrifice for something – in essence the very significance of martyrdom – would likely result in over reporting to a significant degree.

[48] Al-Rasheed and Shterin, *Dying for Faith*, xviii.

[49] Adam Lankford, *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[50] Ibid., 83.

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according to Lankford, and simply found a way to serve their own self-destructive tendencies without incurring disapproval from others.

His selection of cases to a large extent predetermines his conclusions, and his reliance on psychological factors alone disregards sociocultural factors, but perhaps most telling is his reliance on the liberal demand to place the individual in their isolation at the core of any research.[51] If the good begins and ends with the physical life of an individual, no good can possibly come from the extinguishing of that life. Lankford's reasoning ultimately appears tautological: Suicide bombers are mentally ill because seeking one's death is in all cases evidence of mental illness.

The sheer volume of settings where the discourse of martyrdom finds traction, I would contend, is reason enough to challenge these reductive assumptions. While mental illness and self-destructive tendencies are undoubtedly evident in all cultures, the dynamic of martyrdom is consistently celebrated within a wide diversity of communities. To simply dismiss it as a form of mental deviancy or manipulation is to implicitly aver that any who see something laudable in martyrdom are fools. If we can imagine a scenario where our own death would appear to us as a viable – even preferable – option to continuing life, we must attend to the perceived power and benefit attributed to martyrdom, not dismiss it solely on its misalignment with modern liberal mores.

Emile Durkheim's classic sociological treatise on suicide pursued a similar normative vein in its approach to martyrdom. Durkheim labels as suicide "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result."[52] He outlines a three-fold

[51] Ibid., 22. Zubair Qamar provides an excellent overview of the methodological problems, such as his convenience sampling and projected conclusions, and Lankford's work suffers in Qamar's review of Lankford's book in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7:1 (February 2013): 152–166.

[52] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Sociological Analysis* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1951), 44.

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typology: Anomic suicide, which stems from a loss of purpose; egoistic suicide, which springs from "excessive individualism" on account of an individual's lack of integration into their society; and altruistic suicide, coming from the opposite pole where the individual is so deeply integrated into their society that they do not adequately appreciate their own self-worth apart from the group.[53] These categories stem from his attempt to establish "productive causes" of suicide separate from their individual instances: "Disregarding the individual as such, his motives and his ideas, we shall seek directly the states of the various social environments (religious confessions, family, political society, occupational groups, etc.), in terms of which the variations of suicide occur. Only then returning to the individual, shall we study how these general causes become individualized so as to produce the homicidal results involved."[54] Societal forces are primary, eclipsing the agent's own assessment and judgment which is reduced to the "apparent." Durkheim's study seeks to understand the act of self-killing solely through an assessment of the individual's degree of incorporation into their social group, which must be judged against an implicit "normal" level of integration. Suicide is therefore impossible for those "appropriately" integrated into society. For Durkheim, suicide is ontologically a deviant act.

Durkheim and those who follow his work frame martyrdom as a kind of egoless suicide that springs from altruistic roots, embedded in a "collective conscience." But martyrdom is not deviant, at least not in the same way as the tragedies of suicide brought on by depression or social isolation. Durkheim's argument relies on an opposition between social embeddedness and self-worth which limits the conception of self to material concerns of the body. It therefore operates on similar principles of psychological approaches that stress the need

[53] Interestingly, Durkheim focuses this last discussion largely upon socially and economically successful members of the group for whom there are no more goals to pursue and are thus led to despair. See ibid. book 2, Chapter 5.

[54] Ibid., 151.

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for a particular kind of reasoning that upholds physical existence as the *telos* of the mentally healthy.

Durkheim composed his text within a liberalist French society that demanded individuals participate fully in the social project but remain free individuals. Losing oneself in the group is therefore no better than not integrating into society at all.[55] For such constructions, our existence is the only thing we fully possess, therefore discarding it cannot align with our nature. Any thoughts of valuing a group or ideology over oneself are missing from these approaches, but it is precisely that which is commemorated in martyrdom. As we will see, the martyr is inextricably embedded in an idea of being self-grounded in social orientations and existing on a transcendent continuum that exceeds this mortal existence, which opens up space for practical usages of life that do not depend on life/self-perpetuation alone.

The focus on the individual that pervades political and psychological discourse in the modern West makes it difficult to deal with self-destructive activities, leading to the assertions of deviancy that are rampant in psychological treatments.[56] Literary theorist Terry Eagleton offers a way out of the pitfalls identified by the approaches of Durkheim or Lankford. Eagleton contends, "the martyr rejects the world out of love for it, which is where he or she differs from the suicide … The suicide discards a life that has become worthless, whereas the martyr yields up what he or she regards as precious."[57] Martyrs do not relinquish their existence because it no longer holds value (part of Lankford's contention), rather, the martyr cherishes their existence but desires only to live in a world where life can be

[55] The work of Ivan Strenski in his *Contesting Sacrifice* on the changing concept of sacrifice through Durkheim and his famous students Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss supports this interpretation, as he sees them instituting a Protestant understanding of giving some up as opposing the traditional Catholic interpretation of giving all.

[56] Georges Bataille was one theorist that acknowledged this concern. See his *The Accursed Share*, Volumes I–III (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

[57] Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), chap 3.

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lived in the way dictated by the divine order.[58] Where that is not possible, concluding a pious and committed life is preferable to living in a world where one would be forced to transgress against the requirements of right living.

Martyrdom is not alone in ascribing a positive valence to self-killing. The eighteenth-century Romantic Movement in European literature swooned at the starry-eyed suicide, while the ritualized self-execution known as *seppuku* in seventeenth-century Japan held it to be an honorable action. The contested practice of *sati* – widow self-burning – in some Hindu cultures likewise valorized the wife's devotion to the husband that would bring about her "voluntary" decision to end her life on her husband's pyre. Identifying these cultural forms is not to approve of them, just as understanding the rationale behind martyrdom does not equate to promoting the practice. It is simply to recognize that constructions of self-killing differ between cultures and historical periods. Allowing modern liberal sentiments to determine our treatment of such diversity is to accept the hegemony of certain conceptions about the appropriate ends of life.

Indeed, the same religious traditions that valorize martyrdom roundly condemn suicide. The demand to preserve life marks suicide as aberrant in Buddhism and Judaism; the proscription against all forms of violence labeled *ahimsa* marks it as transgressive in Hinduism and Jainism; Catholic Christianity portrays it as a violation of the biblical commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13), while the Qur'an is clearest in its condemnation: "[D]o not kill yourselves, surely God is most Merciful to you" (4:29). The idea that taking one's own life rejects the great gift of life resonates with many other traditions besides. Within each, however, dispensations are allowed for certain deaths determined by context. Martyrdom is one such dispensation. Therefore treating martyrdom as a species of the broader genus of suicide is a taxonomic misconstruction. The readiness of religious traditions to condemn suicide in the same breath that

[58] Ibid., 8.

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celebrates martyrdom shows that they perceive these deaths as fundamentally different. The phenomenon of a self-induced death *becomes* suicide or martyrdom through an interpretive act. Two people commenting on the same death can and do assign radically different labels.[59] Scholarly analyses themselves in some cases let the question of violence dictate the terms of the discussion spawning an implicit acceptance of nonviolent/passive/defensive martyrdoms and a discrediting of violent/active/offensive ones.[60] Martyrs are not really martyrs, these contend, if they kill others, especially noncombatants and civilians. Not only does such a move impose normative categories upon the discussion, it also creates a hierarchy of action that can be typologically useful but can obscure the overall significance of martyrdom by discounting certain forms.

[59] The similarities between suicide and martyrdom have led several scholars to approach the latter through an ethical lens, seeking to determine the conditions for a *moral* self-killing. Of the many that could be referenced here, noteworthy are David C. Rapoport and Yonah Alexander (eds.), *Morality of Terrorism: Religious Origins and Secular Justifications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); George Kateb, "Morality and self-sacrifice, martyrdom and self-denial," *Social Research*, 75:2 (Summer 2008): 353–394; Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); N. Verbin, "Martyrdom: A philosophical perspective," *Philosophical Investigations*, 35:1 (January 2012): 68–87.

[60] See Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison,"; Farhad Khosrokavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Ami Pedahzur (ed.), *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Domenico Tosini, "A sociological understanding of suicide attacks," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26:4 (2009): 67–97; Leonard Weinberg, "Suicide terrorism for secular causes," in A. Pedahzur (ed.), *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Neil L. Whitehead and Nasser Abufarha, "Suicide, violence, and cultural conceptions of martyrdom in Palestine," *Social Research*, 75:2 (Summer 2008): 395–416; Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The making of a martyr," 429–492. Many of these discussions often only touch peripherally on understandings of martyrdom and I need not go into them here; I will simply note that in *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Mark Juergensmeyer explores these ideas of military stratagems and shows that they are often ineffective or counter-productive to the causes of the attackers. I follow his lead in arguing the focus must be placed on the symbolic worlds of the attackers to gain an understanding of their actions.

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Like its etymological siblings, homicide, regicide, or genocide, suicide inherently denotes criminality. Joining the Latin suffix –*cida*, indicating a killer or cutter (and related to *caedō*, *caedere*, to slaughter, strike, or cut to pieces, with connections to sacrifice), to the reflexive *sui* references an *inappropriate* killing of self. The full weight of suicide is better understood as a *murder* of oneself, which places the death within a moral and juridical structure. When it is seen as acceptable to end one's life the preferred descriptor changes to euthanasia, suicide, mercy killing, or martyrdom. Suicide, then, is not wrong because it results in the loss of life, it is wrong because it results in an *unsanctioned* loss of life. Suicide transgresses against the obligation to preserve life and therefore against those institutions – statist and religious – charged with that preservation.

Martyrdom, on the other hand, is a label for an elective death that is justified, even endorsed, by the guiding system of valuation. Such appellations necessitate judgment, a taking of sides to determine a) whether these deaths ought to be sanctioned at all, and b) who has the ability to make such determinations. The language we use reveals our own biases around who has sovereignty over the life in question, which necessarily inculcates us into issues of power. As Paul Middleton recognized, choosing whether or not to call an elective death a suicide seeks to orient a "true" understanding of martyrdom that requires a "very selective approach" to the materials.[61] The role of judgment points to the fact that a hermeneutic distinction lies at the core of martyrdom, a conflict around how to categorize the person, determine the person's obligations, and above all who is empowered to make such decisions.

THE POLITICS OF MARTYRDOM

The discourse of martyrdom elevates certain deaths as special. In doing so it highlights and employs a system of knowledges about the world and the right way to live, formed through and reasserting

[61] Middleton, "Creating and contesting Christian martyrdom," 14.

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power relations. The contexts of these discourses – diverse as they are – share a perception of living in a time of crisis where it is believed to be difficult, if not impossible, to live as a certain kind of person. Martyrs are made during conflicts where the martyr's group finds itself beset by the deployment of overwhelming force from another regime or group.[62] At the same time, the martyr's group bases their opposition and their very constitution in an imagined cosmic authority seen to wield the true power of life and death through codified ethical systems defining sanctioned and forbidden behavior. They understand themselves as subjects of a different sovereign power, and it is from this space that they launch their resistance. The language of sovereignty coupled with martyrdom's dual religious and political character prompts us into the world of political theology.

The identities claimed by martyrs are never resigned to religion alone but are formed through the interpretations of religious traditions responding to the social flows wherein individuals exist. Following those models and acting in ways promoted by the group connects martyrs to a particular identity, a self-labeling whereby one affirms themselves as a member of a group. It is how they respond to the question "who are you?" Critical theorist Louis Althusser refers to this dynamic as interpellation, where one is required to give a statement of themselves in response to a call from an Other who demands knowledge about the person. Their response determines their publicly avowed identity. Christianity again has provided the model: Christian martyrs die because they are Christian. What kind of Christian, and how their Christianity was shaped in their specific time, is ignored to press the essence of their being – their religiosity – to the fore. We will see that a religious identity permeates the

[62] Not only does not appreciating martyrdom within its political context risk radically misunderstanding martyrdom, but as Daniel Gilman has shown it may result in a reaffirmation of the status quo, serving those who want to celebrate the act of self-sacrifice as an ideal but not recognize it as laudable in its instantiations. See Daniel Gilman, "The martyr pop moment depoliticizing martyrdom," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 80:5 (December 2015): 692–709.

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statements and reasoning of martyrs in each of the cases under scrutiny, however, the expectations of those religions and what it means to be a member of that religion are formulated through political experiences.[63]

The martyrdoms under examination here all stem from a crisis. They are contextualized in political struggles where a set of self-understandings are at issue, usually (though not always) due to a powerful political institution's conquest. Jürgen Habermas has labeled such as "legitimation crises," when a potential systemic change threatens the core values and self-understandings of a society resulting in social disintegration.[64] Understanding the significance of martyrdom therefore requires an appreciation that it is not merely a matter of *who* rules, but who can *legitimately* rule. As power networks enter into new territories, they carry incentives to reject old self-understandings and embrace new ways of thinking about self, community, and authority. Backed by regimes of imposed suffering, these institutions demand a new subjectivity, that individuals think about themselves in novel ways that accommodate the new political power. Greater force does not equate to legitimacy, as it can only ever be a temporary measure hoping to coerce through fear, which always risks anger, opposition, and revolt.[65]

A new subjectivity obliges the rejection of prior allegiances and self-definitions, often through public performances. This commonality between martyr contexts is what Elaine Scarry called the fundamental political situation, "one in which two locations selfhood are in a skewed relation to one another or have wholly split apart and have

[63] The labels of identity they proffer should not be taken reductively to exclude the other forms of belonging they are involved in.

[64] See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), esp. part I.

[65] Max Weber asserted that the economy of power is depleted by constant recourse to force; any institution seeking stable domination, Weber points out, requires voluntary obedience through the evocation of hope and an acceptance of the ideological structures supporting claims to authority. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), especially volume II.

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begun to work, or be worked, against one another."[66] A self embedded in religious and cultural existence is no longer possible without suffering as a consequence, requiring a decision: Relinquish the now forbidden forms of life and adapt to the new regime, or suffer.

That decision is often accentuated by the perception that the group and its guiding core is in danger of being wholly eradicated. The imposing power may be threatening to kill every practitioner, or merely attempting to reshape ideologies and traditions. Either method could be seen to functionally eliminate the group and its guiding ideology as it exists. Political collectives rely on individuals willingly acting in ways that perpetuate the perception of its existence. The machinations of political entities apply force to the body to induce such actions, with the potential of death looming at its extremities. It imposes physical risks as the consequence for behaving in ways deemed unacceptable in hopes of instilling an identity that embraces the regime's construction of community and structures of authority.[67] Martyrdom reveals that those strategies are limited by their focus on physical survival. If belonging exceeds the physical realm, spaces are opened for using the body towards political ends.

Martyrs undertake what political theorist Banu Bargu calls necroresistance, "an emergent repertoire of action that is based on the appropriation of the power of life and death into the hands of those who resist."[68] Refusing to allow material existence to determine the contours of political life is a means of pushing back against an institution which holds the maintenance of life as its purpose. At the same time, the martyr bases their opposition and their very constitution in an imagined cosmic authority that is perceived to have the true power over life and death. An attempt is made to recapture control over life

[66] Elaine Scarry, *The Body and Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 37.

[67] On the concept of imagined communities, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

[68] Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 272.

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by rejecting political structures that base themselves solely on the ability to affect the body. As Bargu explains, necroresistance:

> [O]pposes the valorization of survival over political existence, thereby defying the logic of the production of life by sovereignty. This approach criticizes the politics of survival associated with bare life while it also contests the equation of vulnerability with powerlessness. It puts forth the argument that, in contrast to embracing pure existence and its vulnerability and activating it, these agents actively seek to avoid and refuse it by sacrificing their biological existence in the name of their political existence. It sheds light on the self-destructive technique of these practices not as the mimicry of sovereign violence through the politicization of life but as the politicization of death. This move separates these self-induced deaths from ordinary acts of violence and attributes to them political and spiritual meaning.[69]

Her analysis of Turkish hunger strikers revolves around the conception of biosovereignty, which joins sovereignty and biopolitics. In biosovereign assemblages, Bargu asserts, the willful destruction of life opens a space for resistance to dominant regimes of power that are charged with the care of the same lives being intentionally lost. Martyrs assert that suffering is at times acceptable and even required when it is the natural (if unfortunate) consequence of embodying a certain identity. These acts of religio-political self-sacrifice reference an alternative sovereign order by challenging claims of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence.

The state as the institution that claims the monopoly on legitimate violence was first articulated by sociologist Max Weber and has since been reaffirmed in innumerable scholarly treatments of institutional violence. Too often, however, scholars omit that Weber saw this as a *claim* made by the state, not an inherent attribute of statist institutions. The state does not *possess* this monopoly, it *declares*

[69] Ibid., 81–82.

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that it alone can legitimately wield violence, an assertion buttressed by that same violence. That claim is contested in martyrdom. The associations that define the martyr's identity have at their core assertions about who can impose suffering in what situations, leading to a disagreement about the ends towards which force could be an acceptable means. They are contests of sovereignty.

In his work on political self-sacrifice, conflict scholar Nicholas Michelsen asserts that "acts of self-sacrifice become political inasmuch as communities use them to create a space by which to engage in constructive political conversation about the rules by which they live, and so seek to restore sovereignty in conditions where it is perceived as lost."[70] This perspective on martyrdom is elaborated upon by K.M. Fierke, an international relations scholar who understands martyrs as engaged in the attempt to recapture a lost sovereignty. While Fierke's approach to the topic is fruitful in many ways, martyrdom language is not restricted to those groups which at one time were able to boast of self-determination. The historical reality is not required; what is required is the perception that they follow an authority which has the right and the ability to dictate the terms of life and death. As she notes, martyrs may "sacrifice themselves on behalf of justice for these communities," but that justice is not a righting of wrongs as much as it is allowing the right modes of life to be practiced unencumbered.[71] The act of martyrdom makes evident a conception of right order in the bodies of those devoted to it unto their deaths.

At the core of martyr-producing conflicts and crises lies a dual challenge around a) the institution who can legitimately claim power over life and death, and b) the extent to which physical life is the limit of that claim. In his well-known work on the *homo sacer*, Giorgio Agamben argued that the limit of sovereignty was the one who could

[70] Nicholas Michelsen, *Politics and Suicide: The Philosophy of Political Self-Destruction* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 62.

[71] See K.M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body, and Emotion in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 36.

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be killed but not sacrificed.[72] The figure of the *homo sacer* marked the edges of sovereign power as they were exempt from the sovereign ban on violence which protected subjects who accepted the state's sole right to injure. Unprotected by that implicit arrangement, the *homo sacer* was included in the political imaginary through its exclusion from the benefits that political life offers, becoming a limit figure defining the boundaries of sovereign power. Just as a state can condemn a prisoner to death for breaking the laws of the land, it can also eject individuals from its bosom, exiling them into spaces where no law protects them.

The issue of sovereignty also lies at the center of a pair of articles by Matthew Recla, whose insistence that martyrs be allowed agency in their own deaths is as compelling as his assertion that the martyr should be understood as *homo profanus,* a complement to Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*.[73] The *homo profanus* confronts the Roman power structure with a symbolic interpretation of their death as resistance to sovereign power according to Recla, refusing to relinquish the individual's right to determine their own modes of life and death. Such work is not only welcome for his engagement with political theology – which has too long neglected the figure of the martyr – but also in its advancement of our understanding of the ways individuals relate to structures of power. That said, in his zeal to show the opposition of the martyr, Recla did not expound on how the martyr speaks truth to power by speaking the truth of *another* power.

The political contests that create the grounds for martyrdom are framed by particular institutions of power, but more centrally revolve around ideological structures supporting authority. As Fierke has it, martyrdom "does not authorize the powers that be but, instead,

[72] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[73] Matthew Recla, "*Autothanatos*: The martyr's self-formation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 82:2 (June 2014): 472–494; "*Homo Profanus*: The Christian martyr and the violence of meaning-making," *Critical Research on Religion*, 2:2 (2014): 147–164. See also Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, esp. part 2 chap 1.

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potentially delegitimizes dominant power structures in favour of alternative forms of community."[74] As it is a matter of ultimate authority, political theology offers a useful lens to analyze how the symbolic provides the imagined structure through which to understand and act within the world.[75] The framework of political theology has a complicated history. Modern interpreters have resuscitated the discussion of Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt (shorn of its particular context) in trying to understand our commitments to national governments.[76] Michel Foucault famously contended against sovereignty as an appropriate label for our modern experiences of state authority, and more recently Dmitris Vardoulakis outlined three separate forms of sovereignty operative throughout history.[77] This last text contains an axiom that I will also rely upon in this work: Sovereign power consists

[74] Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice*, 39.

[75] Symbolic frames that provide the meaning for experiences in the world have been approached in a number of ways, from Peter Berger's concept of *nomos* to Mark Juergensmeyer's "ideologies of order" to Ninian Smart's "worldview." On *nomos* see Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) and his and Thomas Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966). On ideologies of order see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). On worldviews see Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). All look to a manner of perceiving the world and our place within it that includes aspects both secular and religious. These categories have been roundly shown to be co-constituting, where the secular is constructed through an intentional exclusion of religion. While I refer to these as distinct categories, the frame of political theology will repeatedly complicate any such distinctions. On these concepts see Asad, *Formations of the Secular* and the edited volume by Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and vanAntwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism*. While I am in line with the need for such a perspective, the term *nomos* is not especially descriptive, ideologies of order place the emphasis on mentality over activity, and worldviews lack any relationship to the legal structures of power and authority that are central to the cases under discussion.

[76] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[77] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), and Dmitris Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

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of the ability to justify the imposition of suffering.[78] If we change the discussion from the *imposition* of suffering to its *acceptance*, we can underscore the agents' role in acquiescing to sovereign power over the attempt to enforce a perception of ultimate authority. When the justification of suffering is centered in the discussion, martyrdom appears as a space of political contest based in what we might call "theological" frames (if we understand theology to encompass both the ways of thinking and acting that are founded upon particular sacred sources with transcendental value). Sovereignty relies on ways of perceiving oneself in relation to others under an authority whose power is derived from the perceived nature of cosmic order.

For that reason, I will use the phrase *sovereign imaginary* to refer to an imagined, coherent framework that gives meaning and shape to experiences by providing ethical guidelines for right action in the world based on a conception of ultimate authority.[79] These

[78] His actual quote reads "sovereign power consists in the justification of violence," however as I have argued based in part on the work of Georges Bataille, violence should be understood as a transgressive force, and the determination of what force can be seen as sanctioned and transgressive is precisely the distinction here at issue. See Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other*, 1 for his citation, Bataille, *The Accursed Share* Vol. III, and my own "Violently peaceful: Tibetan self-immolation and the problem of the non/violence binary," *Open Theology*, 1 (2015): 146–159, as well as Chapter 6 here.

[79] Beginning with Charles Taylor's explanation of a social imaginary in his *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), through Paul Kahn's recent analysis of political imaginaries in his *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), to the work of Mark Juergensmeyer and Manfred Steger in exploring the development of global imaginaries in various entries of the *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, Helmut Anheier and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), the focus on an imagined conception that gives shape to life has become academically in vogue. Such a category not only reminds us that concepts outside the realm of economic exchange are important, but also that such structures are fundamental for any understanding of how people determine their action in the world and the ways they are related to others. Manfred Steger and Paul James have rightly identified the "pre-reflexive" nature of imaginaries in that they are the grounds upon which reflexivity occurs (see their "Levels of subjective globalization: Ideologies, imaginaries, ontologies," in *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 12:1–2 (January 2013), 23). They also provide the ideal to which reality is held against and found wanting, which inspires actions that promise to bring around such an ideal. This dynamic is especially evident in the discourse of second-

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imaginaries offer a vision of order – social, political, and cosmic – believed to result in a world of peace, stability, and fellowship if enacted. It is always an unfinished project that must be actualized through human activity, but it serves as the organizing principle for an authentic life, articulating forms of social existence that marshall suffering towards conformity. These imaginaries disclose how people should act and why, coming into conflict during periods of imperial conquest and colonization. In these moments, vying imaginaries attempt to determine individual action along their guidelines using coercion, discipline, or inspiration. These are never unitary or singular, as the character of the imaginary is constantly being worked out as individuals use the ideology to make decisions about their world. There is no objectively "right way" of living, but a host of interpretations colliding and morphing under a common label. Those who die as martyrs do so through an act of resistance shaped by their sovereign imaginary against another sovereign imaginary. Understanding the rationales that led martyrs to die in service to one imaginary necessitates investigating how these imaginaries are constructed within particular settings, how they come to be perceived as legitimate, and why the norms they espouse exceed the drive for self-preservation.

The imagined nature of these sources of action often leads to approaching martyrdom as a matter of belief – how much someone *believes* in an ideology. But belief can only be substantiated by action. Publicly declaring a political identity signifies adherence but requires aligned action in order to have that assertion be considered "true." In other words, one can claim a political label, but without actions backing that assertion it could be rejected as mere lip service. This is certainly what Eugene and Anita Weiner had in mind when expressing their view that "the martyrological contest can be viewed as a contest about what is true, or, more exactly, what should be true. It is about the questions: who defines what people should regard as

century Christians and jihadist Islamists, and inherent in the ways Tibetan Buddhists frame their situation.

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truth."[80] Martyrs answer that question in their flesh, willingly taking on suffering because it is seen to be appropriate for someone committed to their sovereign imaginary.

At a moment where two different political realities seek to claim death as a font of their power, martyrs establish the truth about who they are by acting in ways consistent with what *they* perceive as their ruling sovereign imaginary. As religious studies scholar Daniel Boyarin has it, martyrdom is a "ritualized and performative speech act associated with a statement of pure essence."[81] The martyr dies in a performance that establishes their identity unto death, displaying the fundamental nature and character of the person. When it is seen and approved by the wider group, the label of martyrdom is bestowed to show its acceptance that a) the person was in fact a member of the group, b) they rightly understood their obligations during a crisis, and c) in their death they became a physical instantiation of the group's guiding truth. It is a death that is both witnessed by and bears witness to the reality of a sovereign imaginary.

INTERPRETING MARTYRDOM

Martyrdom relies on and contributes to a number of interpretations. Questions of who one is – that is, how one constructs their subjectivity in relation to conflicting demands – determines whether the martyr benefits or transgresses against a community. Questions of who has legitimate authority to determine right behavior determines whether their act is beneficial or criminal. Questions of the perceived contours of the situation determines what actions are required or approved. Questions of the purpose of and intention behind the death determines if it is best construed as a suicide or a sacrifice. These questions all rely upon the audience taking up a position as to their answer. There is no objective means of establishing a single "reality"

[80] Weiner and Weiner, *Martyr's Conviction*, 58.

[81] Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 95.

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of the event. In their dying, martyrs articulate a stance on their circumstances, and commemorating a death as a martyrdom demonstrates an acknowledgment and amplification of the martyr's perspective. In terms of its social significance, martyrdom forwards a hermeneutic position regarding their self-understanding, social belonging, and responsibilities towards authority structures. Ultimately, martyrdom is a part of a contest over meaning and what agents and institutions have the legitimate ability to determine meaning. The suffering and finally lifeless body of the martyr is used in turn to articulate a conception of order that extends from the individual's identity to the nature and composition of the community to the very limits of sovereign authority.

It is thanks to the shocking and spectacular act of self-killing that martyrdom can contribute to the hermeneutic distinctions within which it is engaged. As Terry Eagleton has it, "death is the ruin of meaning, sheer brute facticity, yet at the same time too earth-shaking an affair for us not to feel that it must harbor some portentous significance."[82] That significance remains an open question, one decided through the label applied to the death. Neither order is fully able to determine how others perceive these deaths, but both look to make of the spectacle an example of their worldview which grounds the struggles of which they take part. During crises wherein martyrs are created, a divergence of worlds and worldviews is at stake. As Eagleton says, "in dying to one world, the martyr bears witness to the possibility of another, and the implacable absoluteness of his or her death marks the discontinuity between the two."[83]

Power is a byproduct of and instrument in these cases. The ability to legitimate violence and suffering is a central feature of martyrdom, which can result in the construction of two different people (e.g. the martyr and the terrorist) upon the same body.[84]

[82] Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, chap. 3 [83] Ibid., 74.

[84] See for example, Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Dominic James and Alex Houen (eds.), *Martyrdom and Terrorism: Pre-Modern to Contemporary Perspectives* (New York:

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Where the nation-state claims to be the only institution that can sanction suffering, rebel organizations engage in attacks condemned by their opponents but seen as legitimate to their allies. At the same time, a person's control over their own body can short-circuit power regimes, which means that self-destructive violence demonstrates the inability of power structures to fully determine subjectivity. The nature and source of true power is at issue in deaths labeled martyrdoms.

At the same time, the nature of the community and its guiding ethos is being worked out through the deaths. The question of whether group life is defined by traditional knowledges and understandings, or if it is subject to a new ruling political authority with its own guidelines for behavior lies at the core of situations that produce martyrs. Perceptions of self-understanding and group character channel the need for martyrs while martyrs serve to construct the collective memory of a group.[85] To approach martyrdom through the vein of collective memory is to seek how social groups constitute their identity by recalling a common past of suffering and relating it to the present. The social memory of a collective becomes the lens through which the present is made meaningful.[86] Martyrdom relies

Oxford University Press, 2014); see also Brian Wicker (ed.), *Witnesses to Faith: Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

[85] This concern is at the core of works like David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); DeSoucey et al., "Memory and sacrifice"; Hall et al., *Apocalypse Observed*; Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs,* esp. chap. 5. The framework for collective memory is most associated with Maurice Halbwachs and echoed in the work of Daniele Hervieu-Leger. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[86] Elizabeth Castelli, for example, argued that early Christians placed their martyrs into a wider framework of meanings drawing upon metanarratives of sacrifice coming from the cultural context of their time. This led her to focus on the retelling of the narrative around the martyr's death, its interpretation, and the meaning-making activities associated with the community. See Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34. Michaela DeSoucey and her colleagues look to the reclamation and use of the martyr's physical remains, by what they call "reputational entrepreneurs," who manipulate the history and the body of the

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on the perspective of a constructed sacred past to make sense of their situations and provide models of right behavior within those circumstances.

However, just as collectives are never static, their guiding ethos is constantly being worked and reworked in response to internal changes, external pressures, and new knowledges. In the death of the martyr an argument is made about how the group should look, how it should be directed, and what the appropriate relationship to its past is. Since they are seen as paradigms of the group ethic, their stance carries a great deal of weight, backed as it is by the spectacular nature of their self-sacrifice. What was an invisible guiding imaginary becomes visible before witnesses; the effects of the group and its authority is physically created in the martyr's broken flesh. That ideological instantiation has the potential to shift sentiments. Those who apply the label of martyrdom to the death do so to channel the symbolic capital created by the martyr towards the shaping of the group's ethos.

As the audience has the power to shape the character of the death through its commemoration, collective memory has been effectively employed to understand the construction of martyrdom. Most well-known in this field is perhaps Maurice Halbwachs, whose work on the social nature of collective memorials laid the foundation for the approach that was taken up by Elizabeth Castelli regarding early Christian martyrs.[87] Memories are not limited to our physiology but are produced on an interpersonal level through mechanisms of trauma and remembrance. That remembrance is central not only to the coherence of the society but also in the act of recognition between group members. As historians Jay Winters and Emmanuel Sivan note, "the intermeshing of individual memories creates collective remembrance, feeds it, and maintains its continuity. It is through this

martyr to intentionally create a collective history for the group. See DeSoucey et al., "Memory and sacrifice," 113.

[87] Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, esp. chap. 1.

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remembrance that human societies develop consciousness as to their identity, as located in time. A social group is composed of individuals who enter into an exchange relationship at the level of consciousness."[88] It is not simply an overlapping of individual experiences, but a matrix of remembrance that shapes society. The martyr's death is an effort to guide and shape such social forms while integrating concerns of authority and agency. Our decisions regarding the most effective or appropriate actions are mediated through our cultural memory, particularly our myths. Samuel Hynes has rightly suggested the use of the term myth, shorn of its negative connotation of falsity, as a descriptor of the collective remembrance that we experience vicariously rather than firsthand.[89] The potency of those myths in establishing action and eliciting social and cultural recognition will be a central feature of this analysis.

Whether the public calls the death a martyrdom, a suicide, an act of terrorism, or any other label, the martyr themselves approaches their death with the intention of making a statement and contribution through their demise. The question of *how* the martyr aims to contribute to the situation they face brings back up the difficult question of their intention. What role did they mean for their death to serve? What was the significance they hoped others would draw from their demise? While they do not control how their death will be put to symbolic use by their group, they are agents in their own death. However, it is difficult if not impossible to fully ascertain another's intention. The explanations they give in speech and text are open to the same interpretive contests as the other aspects of their death. Particularly in circumstances where one interpretation can challenge

[88] Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, "Setting the framework," in J. Winter and E. Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.

[89] Samuel Hynes, "Personal narratives and commemoration," in J. Winter and E. Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 206. On the origins and longevity of myth's negative connotations see Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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institutional authority, whether or not one sought to end their own life out of despair, servitude, or even a death drive carries significant importance. As we have seen, even scholarly treatments can claim the way an individual frames their death is disguising other, more personal goals. How can the truth of their intention be established?

Intention is demonstrated where speech is accompanied by aligned action. The possible ambiguity of the action requires that we attend to the words of the martyrs themselves, then evaluate their claims within the larger social, political, and cultural context from wherein they act. This will be the approach of the analysis that follows. There is a surprising lack of such material in many studies of martyrdom, particularly those regarding martyrdom operations.[90] While John R. Hall was certainly correct in noting that any case of self-directed violence "can be regarded as either a testament of ultimate commitment or a demonstration of how far a practitioner has fallen under the sway of psychic coercion," the implicit consensus in scholarship is that statements attributed to martyrs support the latter to the near exclusion of the former.[91] Such an absence highlights certain concerns over the usefulness of such texts, and an implicit belief that such texts do not reflect the "actual" feelings/intentions/understandings of these individuals, but rather regurgitate the language of the group.[92] Charges of brainwashing, scripting,

[90] A few exceptions include Lorenz Graitl's exceptional analysis of the communicative logics of "sacrifice notes," in his "Dying to tell: Media orchestration of politically motivated suicides," in Lewis and Cusack (eds.), *Sacred Suicide*, 190–200, where he derives provocative insights while keeping a critical methodological eye on the difficulties such data presents. Meir Hatina also acknowledges the usefulness of what he refers to as "ego writing" in his *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). There he echoes much of what Castelli does in her *Martyrdom and Memory*, examining the self-writing practices of late antiquity through the martyr acts. See especially 69–78.

[91] John R. Hall, "Religion and violence: Social processes in comparative perspective," in M. Dillon (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 369.

[92] Lankford for one warns against taking these words at their face value. See his *Myth of Martyrdom*, chapter 1.

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coercion, or outright dishonesty are practically taken for granted, minimizing the extent to which we can access "authentic" motivations through such material. Most studies find it sufficient to identify the group that claims the martyr, and implement their purpose as the martyrs, serving to do exactly what they see as disqualifying the martyr's words themselves.

And yet, the question of the martyr's intention is a central concern within frameworks of martyrdom. Anxieties around legitimating suicide raise the need to establish the intentions that led to the martyr seeking, courting, allowing, or embracing their own death. Such a concern appears in Islam under the concept of *niyya* – true purpose – which is ultimately judged by God, who knows whether the individual qualifies for a holy death.[93] The martyrs' communities act as though God *will* agree with their estimation, but also allow for the possibility that they have been deceived, in which case God will know a person's true heart. As we will see, Christians and Sikhs both sought ways to be sure that the martyr died while acting in appropriate ways, while Buddhist concepts of karma are entirely dependent upon mental states that motivate action. For this last, moreover, even to accurately know one's own mental state requires advanced Buddhist training in the right awareness of the world. Lama Sobha, a Buddhist monk who self-immolated in 2012, expressed concern about those Tibetan self-immolators who gave their lives without having such advanced training:

> I am taking this action neither for myself nor to fulfill a personal desire nor to earn an honor. I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress [to stop her from eating her cubs]. All the Tibetan heroes too have sacrificed their lives with similar

[93] See Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practices* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); see also Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers*, who quotes Motahhari demanding a preparatory practice of achieving *agahneh* – the right state of mind – before proceeding on a martyrdom operation.

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> principles. But in practical terms, their lives seemingly ended with some sort of anger. Therefore, to guide their souls on the path to enlightenment, I offer prayers that may lead all of them to Buddhahood.[94]

According to Sobha, if other self-immolators ended their lives with anger they could not hope to achieve their goals, nor would they make any spiritual progress. Only those who have cultivated self-knowledge and self-discipline through Buddhist practices are able to confidently sacrifice themselves because they are fully aware of their true intention.

I argue that the extreme nature of martyrdom marks them as, to some degree, self-verifying in terms of intention, and the willing participation of those not religiously trained demonstrates a diversity of ideas around how to establish intent. Those who apply the label of martyrdom to these deaths are clearly confident about the martyr's intention being righteous, and that what they have witnessed qualifies as a sacrifice. Within that sacrifice the infinite – that which gives form to the collective and the cosmic order – is realized through the destruction of the finite body.[95] The sovereign imaginary is made present in the broken flesh of the martyr, visible to all. Any behavior that explicitly abides by an imaginary's guiding principles makes that ideology apparent, but in spectacles of suffering the lengths of commitment make it more manifest and more widely witnessed. The story they choose to tell about who they are is certainly framed within structures that are meaningful to others, and undoubtedly shaped to gain positive regard from those they respect. Such interestedness does raise questions as to the "authenticity" of the statements given. However here, their words are supported – proven – by the most

[94] Lama Sobha, quoted in International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), *Storm in the Grasslands: Self-Immolations in Tibet and Chinese Policy* (Washington D.C.: International Campaign for Tibet, 2012), 16.

[95] See Paul Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 134.

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extreme actions conceivable. While we can never fully ensure that their words and the way they are interpreted align with their mindset at their death, the very application of the label of martyrdom intimates an evaluation of their intention. As this study seeks to understand the significance of martyrdom as a concept, the words of martyrs will not only provide a fundamental piece of evidence in understanding the practice of martyrdom but will be analyzed within the context of the wider discourses of the religio-political groups and in tandem with the uses to which the death is put by those who claim the dead as a martyr.

COMPARATIVE APPROACH AND INTRODUCTION TO CASES

To better understand the ways the practice and discourse of martyrdom contributes to hermeneutic decisions around dueling sovereign imaginaries, in what follows I will investigate the deployment of martyrdom language in four distinct cases. In order to avoid universalizing tendencies, each case study will attend to a specific time, place, and tradition. The insights gleaned from these analyses will then be comparatively examined in the final chapters. Taking into consideration the tension between martyrdom as a goal sought in ways conditioned by cultural understandings and practices, and as the ultimate attribution of martyrdom relies on a social group that extends beyond the martyr, I will employ a dialogical reading between the ways martyrs themselves orient their action and the ways the group gives its approbation within shifting contexts of power. Attending to these issues means considering a series of interrelated questions about our conception of martyrdom and its deployment in various contexts. Why do martyrs choose to die? How is the category of martyrdom constructed symbolically and socially? What criteria is used to determine martyrs? What situations see recourse to the discourse of martyrdom, and what are some common attributes of those contexts? How are these deaths structured by cultural ideas, and how do they structure those systems in turn? What family resemblances

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can be discovered within deployments of martyr language, and what insights can those relationships yield? The answers to these questions will offer a more robust understanding of what is meant when someone is called a martyr. Through four closely contextualized case studies I hope to reveal the consistencies in how the symbolism of martyrdom is deployed.

The four cases that will occupy me are: 1) Christian martyrs from the area of Asia Minor during the second century CE, the period and place from which the concept of martyrdom is first articulated; 2) those engaged in "martyrdom operations" (a.k.a. "suicide bombings") around West Asia during the last decades of the twentieth century, when this tactic first appeared in groups inspired by a reignited Shi'i political fervency and reconstruction of the concept of jihad; 3) Sikhs who fell in the ranks of the British Indian Army as well as those who lost their lives in an attempt to oust the imperial power from the Indian subcontinent in the early twentieth century; and 4) the self-immolations that have been occurring throughout the traditional lands of Tibet since 2009, an area with no culture of martyrdom as such, but where the term is widely used in reference to these individuals. These cases were intentionally selected for their religious diversity and not due to any chronological concerns of transmission or related development. Rather, approaching a multiplicity of generally unrelated cases promises to broaden our understanding of how martyrdom discourses and practices share congruencies amidst radically different social, political, historical, cultural, and religious contexts. My goal will not be to mark chronological connections in a singular, direct evolution of martyrdom as a concept, but instead to highlight conceptual congruencies between diverse historic and geographic circumstances.

The current English rendering of "martyr" certainly has developed over time to hold its current understanding, and the decision to begin with the ancient case of Christian martyrs was based on that recognition. As the dominant ideological frame for many Western experiences, understanding how the term evolved from

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within this tradition is essential for understanding the concept. While Muslim and later Sikh forms may stem from a common lineage, the historiographical processes are less interesting to me than how the deployment of martyrdom language serves as a common strategy amidst differences in forms of death and power structures. In addition, Buddhist lineages of self-sacrifice can sensibly be rendered using the language of martyrdom without any clear line of transmission. Again, this variety was intentional to test whether those in these settings meant the same thing by labeling a death a martyrdom. I believe the analysis that follows will show they do, and that their resonances are demonstrative of similar approaches to identity, tradition, community, and authority.

Still, the reader will notice a substantial chronological leap from the ancient to the modern. Examining a set of modern constructions of martyrdom after exploring the spaces where the term first gained its technical meaning can reveal common hermeneutic operations between ages while delineating commonalities of those constructions themselves. Availability of materials was a salient consideration in the selection of cases, as was my desire to address cases that seem markedly dissimilar in terms of culture and historical context. On their face, the only consistency between cases is their use of terms that are reasonably translated into English as "martyr." (The linguistic nature of terms employed will be taken up in their place within each case study.) After beginning where the concept seems to have first developed, I move to engage contexts where the application of the term is contested. Modern human bomb attacks have raised the question of whether martyrdom is a singular model requiring universal consent. Rather than reject so-called "suicide bombers" as not "true" martyrs, I approach the historical period where the tactic originated to better understand why some see it as an appropriate label while others would judge the same actors as terrorists. Considering the post-colonial situation in West Asia in tandem, the conceptual development of martyrdom throughout Islamic history allows insight into why the term found applicability rather than categorical rejection.

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The third case provided an opportunity to examine how two different strands within the same religious tradition could deploy the language of martyrdom in explicitly opposing ways. Sikhs fighting for the British Indian Army during World War I saw loyalty to the British as the marker of the true martyr, while contemporary anti-colonial Sikhs in North America and elsewhere rejected such appellations, saving the term instead for those who died fighting *against* the British. Even within the same spiritual tradition and same historical moment, no agreement on what constitutes a martyr is immediately evident. The final case not only explores a tradition separate from the Abrahamic lineage but examines a form of death that might horrify onlookers who would simultaneously approve the goal pursued. Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet itself has long staked a claim in the Western imagination, and many celebrate the XIV Dalai Lama as a model of justice and peace. Those same ideas inspire Tibetans who have claimed their lives in fiery spectacles. If a common structure or sensibility of martyrdom could be discovered amidst such apparent miscellany, it may reveal a potent structure of human social behavior.

Early Christianity has had the greatest impact on the conception of martyrdom in Western culture, so I begin with what has been called the cradle of Christian martyrdom: The province of Asia Minor during the second century of the Common Era. As much as Christian ideology pushes for a single and eternal Church, early Christianity was far from a unified theological field, better understood as what historian of Christianity Peter Brown has called a network of "micro-Christianities," each boasting its own philosophical nuance and authority structure.[96] Existing on the margins of power during the early Roman Empire, the Christian communities in what is today Turkey found themselves facing increased centralized pressures from Rome. The center was taking up greater space in the periphery, resulting in friction with communities that had long enjoyed relative autonomy

[96] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 1.

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amidst nominative Roman rule. This place and time found Christian communities still engaged in socially and culturally distinguishing themselves from their Jewish contemporaries, leading to a precarious social position. Christians found themselves ostracized and (to some extent) outlawed for their idiosyncratic and isolationist practices. In response, Christians articulated a vision of authority that challenged imperial hegemony based on the "true" sovereign power of the world, Christ.

This stance would spawn martyrs like Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch, who provided the model for *accepting* martyrdom during Christianity's formative years which shaped in turn how contemporary Christian communities made meaning from these acts of state-sponsored persecution. Orienting their response on the model of their savior's suffering, Christian martyrs boldly confronted authorities with their determination to maintain their identity as Christian by refusing to perform the requisite sacrifices no matter the consequences. The fervency with which they admitted to the very crimes that would bring about their end shocked Roman audiences while inspiring Christian audiences to greater levels of ostentatious devotion and resistance.

Data for this period comes from the quasi-historical *Acta Martyrum* – short accounts of the trials of martyrs before Roman authorities. Though such texts are of dubious historical accuracy, they shaped the Christian perception of history as they spread through the networks of Christendom. Together with Ignatius of Antioch's letters written on the way to his own martyrdom in Rome, a particular shape was given to the relationship between Christians and Rome, one that still echoes today. The portrait they paint of the powerless few unyieldingly confronting the antagonistic power structure would become the template for the Christian martyr. Martyrs in these stories accept their martyrdom as a product of both their current political situation and as the promised reward for those who follow the path laid out by Jesus.

It is not the only pathway to martyrdom, however, and in Chapter 3 I turn to a dramatically contested form and examine the martyrdom operation – or "suicide bombing" – that became infamous in West Asia during the 1980s and 1990s. *Istishhadi* are those who die

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a martyr's death by carrying out attacks against enemies, factoring the death of the agent into the tactic of warfare. The most well-known such attack took place on September 11, 2001, perpetrated by the transnational terror organization al-Qaeda. However, by that terrible day the strategy of "martyrdom operations" had already been firmly established. This stratagem originated in the Shi'i Islamist context of the mid-twentieth century,[97] first employed by Hezbollah (whose name translates as "Party of God") against Israeli soldiers invading southern Lebanon. Soon after a number of other groups, most notably Hamas and later the so-called Islamic State, began routinely employing human bombs as a strategy toward their political goals on national and supranational levels.

The Islamic doctrine of *shahid* was invoked regarding the self-sacrificial nature of such attacks, which was in turn linked to a larger reimagining of the doctrine of jihad, a term meaning "striving in the path of God" but is often oversimplified as "holy war."[98] The twentieth century saw a reimagining of those terms in some Sunni Muslim circles, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan. It was the Shi'i Islamic context of twentieth century West Asia, however, that served as a crucible for these new imaginings

[97] Islamist is used intentionally here, meant in reference to groups who seek to remake the world under the banner of Islam. Such a drive can appear in radically different contexts, and those examined here will be based both nationally and transnationally. The use of this word is inspired by the excellent work of Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman in their *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), where they designate this category on the basis of the common core of jurists and "new religious intellectuals" that form a genealogy for a wide spate of groups formed on the basis of an Islamic character. Euben and Zaman define Islamist as "contemporary movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the Muslim community, excavating and reinterpreting them for application to the present-day social and political world" ("Introduction," 4). I will rely on their designation, and even in places where I will use the more general "Muslim" or "Islamic" it should be very clear that such groups do not possess the sole ability to determine what counts as Islam.

[98] Asma Afsaruddin's discussion in her *Striving for God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) is certainly the best in exploring the issue.

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following the rise of Ruhollah Khomeini to power following the 1979 Iranian revolution. At the same time Hezbollah was deploying human bombs, Iranian soldiers during the first Iran-Iraq War were engaging in a different kind of self-sacrificial warfare known as "human wave attacks," where scores of young men marched unarmed into enemy forces in an attempt to overwhelm with numbers and sacrifice. Hezbollah and the Basij forces of the Iranian Army share deep ideological relationships and a common recognition of Khomeini as God's representative on earth, and both faced off against an enemy they understood as foreign invaders come to destroy traditional ways of life and eliminate divinely installed authority.

Here we find what has been called a more "active" form of martyrdom, or what we could describe as a culture of *seeking* martyrdom. (Early Christian history too saw explicit attempts of people to seek a martyr's death by offering themselves to the Roman authorities, and as Christian theology developed in a shifting power context it delegitimated such attempts as prideful and therefore not worthy of the martyrdom label.) Opportunities were sought by men and women to demonstrate the extents of their commitment by carrying out an attack on an enemy from which they would not return. Prior to leaving on such attacks, many young men and women left wills and videotaped testaments before their deaths speaking of their hopes for their families, their people, and Islam itself. For a time, Hezbollah's media wing *Al-Manar* offered a collection of these videos on their website for public consumption. Most testaments followed a similar script, blending scriptural passages and slogans with personal entreaties into a distinct genre of martyr videos. In Iran, collections of wills written by those who embarked on human wave attacks were compiled into the *Vasiyyat-namehha-ye Shuhada* – Testaments of the Martyrs – which were circulated within the community. Both sources provide insight into the perspectives of the would-be martyrs at the time of their activity, particularly when correlated with the statements of contemporary religious and political leaders. Together they shaped an ideal of martyrdom that highlighted the willingness to give all in the pursuit of a righteous existence.

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Chapter 4 remains in the military context but leaves the Abrahamic context by considering the deployment of martyrdom discourse by Sikhs during the years of World War I. Like Islam, Sikhism boasts a developed martyr tradition that sacralized certain deaths. The first decades of the twentieth century provided an opportunity to inquire into that dynamic, as the period saw the term applied to those who fell fighting in the British Indian Army (BIA) as well as those attempting to overthrow the British colonial government in India. As the term "martyr" found such purchase in both contexts, investigating the circumstances of its deployment promises to reveal how contrasting ideological stances can simultaneously use the label to validate their opposing pursuits.

After years of violent confrontations between Sikh armies and the British East India Trading Company, decisive victories by the British resulted in the creation of Sikh auxiliary forces used for peacekeeping within the Indian subcontinent. Over time – due in part to the British "martial races" theory which ascribed militant virtues to certain ethnic groups – Sikh forces would be increasingly enlisted in the BIA, peaking during World War I. Sikhs were given preferential recruitment and served in companies comprised only of Sikhs (overseen by British officers), which helped construct an agreeable relationship between Sikh communities and the British. The colonial rulers were seen by some to be beneficent supporters of the Sikh panth, worthy of respect and due recompense for the benefits they gave to Sikhs in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Sikhs who had left Asia to seek their livelihood in North America were coming face to face with virulent racism and xenophobia. Experiences in the subcontinent led to expectations of unfettered movement within the British Empire and the embrace of other subject races, but the reality was widespread anti-Indian sentiment. For these Sikhs, Britain was not a benevolent supervising power but an exploitative and oppressive institution. The answer to their predicament was revolution. Exemplified by the Ghadar Party whose virulent magazines were sent

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monthly throughout North America and central India, a group of Sikhs and other natives of the subcontinent began to rally for the overthrow of the British, using the Great War as an opportunity to effect change while the British focus was elsewhere. Though their attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, their use of martyr language proved persuasive for many who followed their understanding of Sikh identity. In both circumstances, Sikhs engaged in activities that *courted* martyrdom, attempting to shift situations on the ground while recognizing that losing their lives in the pursuit would seal their testimony on what is right and good.

The period also provides a surfeit of data for analysis. In 1910, the BIA implemented a screening system filtering letters to and from Sikh soldiers through a central censor bureau. Intended to identify and weed out anti-British sentiment, the army amassed a stockpile of transcribed letters stored in the British Library's India Office. This correspondence paints a picture where dying in the Great War was seen as a sacred duty for the Sikhs who would be "true to their salt," a routinely used phrase referencing the appropriate relationship of Sikhs to their governing authority. Simultaneously, the writings of emigrant Sikh communities in North America have been preserved in collections like the South Asian American Digital Archive. In contrast to the writings retained by the BIA censors, these employ self-sacrificial language towards protecting India and Sikhism, a responsibility incumbent upon "true" Sikhs and others who must be prepared to give their lives to ensure freedom and independence in the coming centuries. Martyr faced off against martyr, both using their bodies in support of their vision of right existence.

The final case study chapter investigates the rash of self-immolations that have taken place in the lands of Tibet in the twenty-first century.[99] Beginning in 2009, over one hundred and fifty

[99] These are sometimes referred to as auto-cremations rather than self-immolation (see for example, James Benn, "Political self-immolation in Tibet: Causes and influences," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 25 (December 2012): 41–64) in order to recognize the specific form of death, since self-immolation generally means self-

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men and women (at the time of this writing) have set themselves on fire throughout the Tibetan plateau while denouncing the Chinese state. Most shout slogans demanding the return of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama from exile where he has languished since 1959, and a number have left written and recorded testaments that echo such calls while lamenting the suffering experienced under Chinese rule. Self-immolators are referred to as *pawo*, a word consistently translated into English as "martyr." Tibetan Buddhism has no tradition of martyrdom as such, but their act has widely been recognized by Tibetans as being altruistically performed on behalf of Tibet, thereby giving the term purchase.

The act of self-immolation does not have a significant tradition within Tibet, but it is what Tibetans have repeatedly turned to in hopes of righting what they see as a significantly out of order situation. While exiled, the Dalai Lama has remained the de facto political and spiritual head of the Tibetan people. Moreover, the Dalai Lama is an incarnation of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara in Tibetan Buddhist thought, whose teachings and presence are crucial for all life in the world. His absence from Tibet is seen to pose an existential threat to the people, the country, and the very existence of Buddhism.

Though the acts of these Tibetans have received relatively little attention globally, several international non-profit organizations have kept running lists of *pawo*, including recordings and images of their acts, interviews with witnesses, and a number of written final statements. News agencies like Voice of America have run stories with similar information, offering a base data set to work with. The Dalai Lama has been notably reticent to speak upon the self-immolations due to his precarious position vis-à-vis the Chinese Communist Party, but other notable members of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile, along with leading members of the Buddhist sangha, have given their opinions

destruction, not necessarily via burning. I will here use the more widely employed term self-immolation but may resort to other such designations without asserting any interpretive commentary about the form of the act.

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about the dire conditions facing Tibet and the despair that impels these acts. Together a picture emerges of a people *creating* martyrdom as a means of desperately holding on to their cultural and religious identity in the face of Chinese programs of re-education aimed at extracting any Tibetan cultural identity. *Pawo* take dramatic steps to correct the situation by using their own flesh towards the preservation of Tibet.

Recorded first person statements by martyrs in each of these contexts come with challenges. Early Christian studies rightly takes as given that we cannot trust the words attributed to martyrs in the *Acta Martyrum*, considering the millennia of redrafting and translation they have undergone.[100] Constant filtering erodes historical reliability. For Shi'i Muslim martyrs we have precisely the opposite case, in that we possess the filmed statements where we can see and hear their words firsthand. Concerns here revolve not around alterations after the fact, but rather prior procedures that homogenize such statements, resulting in accusations of the organization speaking through the individual. The critique is the same however: In both cases we cannot take for granted that the words accurately reflect the inner mental states of the individual. Letters written by and to Sikh sepoys were certainly authentic, but the missives were intercepted and translated by censors charged with rooting out seditious communiques, resulting in the possibility of a skewed sampling. Tibetan *khachem* do not suffer from such concerns in the scholarship (an uncritical acceptance which suggests an orientalist perception of "naturally trustworthy" Tibetan Buddhists), though political attacks by the People's Republic of China echo accusations of brainwashing and see these self-immolators as victims of the Dalai Lama's separatist programs.

[100] See for instance Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*; or Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies and Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). Even in studies that take these texts seriously, such as Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* or Moss' *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), they are used to delineate the construction of a collective memory rather than seen as accurate representations of the individual.

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In a variety of ways, the words of the martyrs are delegitimated, but they remain important data points for understanding the mentality of martyrs leading to their death. Each difficulty will be addressed in its place, but their words will be a core piece of data for analysis.

By taking seriously the words ascribed to martyrs within their social, cultural, political, and religious context, I will seek to bring to light the *performative logics* behind self-sacrifice; the rationales by which such extreme acts appear as reasonable and appropriate to their agents, guided by interpretive moves that read a current situation in terms of a sacred past. Delineating the imaginative landscapes that anchor the identity affirmed by martyrs in the face of death, I will look to the social and symbolic significance extracted from these deaths, by which I mean the ways these acts draw on symbolic systems and in turn structure the experiences of others, contributing to the same hermeneutic frame that shaped the logics of action.

Dealing with these issues means understanding the interplay of social, cultural, political, and symbolic realms, which necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. At the same time, to have explanatory power beyond their particular contexts requires a comparative framework that can speak to similarity without obfuscating difference. The comparative endeavor has a troubled history in the academic study of religion. While the earliest attempts can be traced back at least as far as James G. Frazer's nineteenth-century *Golden Bough*, the process of comparing religious beliefs, rituals, and myths often served to promote the superiority of Christianity in service of missionizing and colonial campaigns. Reducing cultural expressions to common characteristics often resulted in fostering cultural hierarchies that reinforced political structures. In the words of Wendy Doniger, "essentialized difference can become an instrument of dominance,"[101] where members of the theorist's culture are thereby coded

[101] Wendy Doniger, "Post-modern and –colonial –structural comparisons," in K.C. Patton and B.C. Ray (eds.), *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 66.

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as appropriate ruling agents, seen to represent a "better" way of life.[102] Detaching phenomena from their particular contexts resulted in studies that ignored power structures and took religious ideologies as monolithic and stable over time, overriding specifics in favor of surface similarities. And as Doniger warns, "to assume that two phenomena from different cultures are 'the same' in any significant way is regarded as demeaning to the individualism of each, a reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude that 'all wogs look alike'."[103] Claims to universalism must therefore be avoided while at the same evading the nihilism of absolute cultural particularity.[104]

[102] Theorists who took over the comparative mantle leveled three standard critiques: Insufficient attention to difference, insufficient attention to change over time, and insufficient attention to the particular contexts wherein these phenomena were embedded. Barbara Holdrege lays out these three critiques, as well as giving suggestions to correct them methodologically, in her "What's beyond the post?: Comparative analysis as Critical Method," in K.C. Patton and B.C. Ray (eds.), *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 63–76.

Scholars like Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln were both able to acknowledge these shortcomings while demonstrating the continuing usefulness of comparison. In his groundbreaking "In comparison a magic still dwells," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), Jonathan Z. Smith interrogates the project of comparison, broken down under four headings: The ethnographic, the encyclopedic, the morphological, and the evolutionary. While he admits these all fall short in the ideal of comparison, he believes only the morphological has created lasting comparisons and holds continued promise.

By looking at processes of change over time in lieu of creating ahistorical, apolitical, general constructs, the dynamics of difference have become central to comparative work. At the same time, the theoretical reflection brought about by these critiques has led to a much more effective reflexivity on the part of the scholar who undertakes them. Aspects of comparison must come organically from the material engaged, but at the same time be employed towards a theory that is the decision of the scholar. Jonathan Z. Smith is most well-known for this insight, not only pressing on the need for scholars to be clear on the theory their comparison serves, and moreover that religion itself is a creation of the scholars. What they choose to extract from the wider cultural context to be held up to a likewise selected phenomenon determines what counts as religion.

[103] Quoted in Corinne G. Dempsey, *Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth: Adventures in Comparative Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

[104] David White makes this point nicely in his "The scholar as mythographer: Comparative Indo-European myth and postmodern concerns," in K.C. Patton and B.C. Ray (eds.), *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 47–54.

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Comparison requires what Gavin Flood described as a dialogical approach, attending to "the particularity of voice while acknowledging what is common for the theoretical, moral or political task at hand in a specific comparative study."[105] Only by holding both the general and particular in tension can comparison yield the kind of mutual understanding sought. To do so, I approach martyrdom through the lens of religious violence, as a death performed with reference to cosmological understandings and engrained in questions of power. Studies in religious violence have long wrestled with the phenomena of martyrdom, usually through the frame of cosmic warfare made popular by Mark Juergensmeyer.[106] Juergensmeyer developed the idea that religious people engaged in conflict link their current political situation to a sacred history, resulting in the perception of a political engagement as the latest battle of a war of good versus evil that has raged since the dawn of time, and likely will continue beyond the warrior's life.

Cosmic war provides Juergensmeyer and others the frame for understanding the martyr's sacrifice; as he says, "war is the context for sacrifice."[107] The worldview of the martyr creates a sharply divided world of good and evil, and those who are evil have brought about the current unacceptable situation, which in some cases is construed as reflecting the end of the world. Through these symbolic alignments, those who commit religious violence partake in a Manichean existence, demonizing their opponents and accepting that, though they may die in the attempt, their side will ultimately be victorious. However, there are

[105] Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 21.

[106] Cosmic war was explored in Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*. For others that employ the framework of cosmic war in regards to martyrdom, see Christopher Catherwood, *Why the Nations Rage: Killing in the Name of God* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); William R. Garrett, "Religion and the legitimation of violence," in J.K. Hadden and A. Shupe (eds.), *Prophetic Religion and Politics* (New York: Paragon, 1986), 103–122; Jennifer Jefferis, *Religion and Political Violence: Sacred Protest in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Al-Rasheed and Shterin, *Dying for Faith*, chap 2.

[107] Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 172. See also his "Martyrdom and self-sacrifice in a time of war," *Social Research*, 75:2 (Summer 2008): 417–434.

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also cases where the language of martyrdom appears outside contexts of war, and those need to be given equal consideration and held in comparison to those that do find meaning through the war paradigm.

Modern interpreters of comparative religious violence attend to these concerns by firmly anchoring such phenomena within their sociopolitical context.[108] Their studies derive common dynamics about how religious symbols and practices interact with, support, and oppose power relations through the legitimation of violence against self and other. Politics and religion are considered in their ongoing interaction; religious sentiment channels political action, and politics can determine the context for religious voices. The practice of placing religious actors within their interaction with political, social, and historical context has been called "neo-Weberian" by Cecelia Lynch, who argues that to understand acts of religious violence "we must first assess what religious guidelines suggest for particular situations, and then look more deeply into how religious actors interpret those guidelines and how they bridge the gap between religious rules and particular situations to decide how to act."[109]

The idea has been developed further in the work of Hans Kippenberg, who looks to the idea of "situation" to argue that in order

[108] Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* is perhaps the model of this type of scholarship, looking at the ways religious symbols uphold and make possible terrorist activities. By comparing the dynamics supporting violent action, he is able to see both a common experience of cosmic war, which inspires acts of violence to be perceived not as transgressive but valorous and aligned with divine laws. Kippenberg's *Violence as Worship* looks to a series of modern expressions of religious violence to show the way an individual and group perceives the situation they encounter. Using the Thomas-Theorem – which contends that the way people define their circumstances thereby makes them real in their consequences – Kippenberg's comparison resulted in a new understanding of the ways violence becomes experienced as religious.

[109] Cecelia Lynch, "A neo-Weberian approach to studying religion and violence," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:1 (2014): 280. See also her "A neo-Weberian approach to religion in international politics," *International Theory*, 1:3 (2009): 381–408. While Lynch separates herself from the sociotheological turn by encouraging a need to deal with "particular temporal and spatial contexts" (289) in order to appreciate the particularities of interpretations that lead to violence, such is not excluded from sociotheology and I would argue is essential to and implicit in Juergensmeyer and Sheikh's discussion.

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to understand an act of religious violence, we must both recognize the model by which it is engendered, and the way the situation is understood by the actor.

> Every action presupposes a definition of the situation. This is not generated of necessity by the situation itself, however, but is "imposed" on the situation by the subjects. If they then act in accordance with this definition, this "imposition" has real effects ... When the actors create a definition, they rely on established concepts of action and choose one of these as binding. The choice of an "action" can be oriented to purposive rationality, to tradition, or to feelings. The framework can also be established in accordance with values whose validity is based on its opposition to a completely different reality, as it happens above all in the constitution of individual or communal identity.[110]

The multiple models available to any social actor can spring from religious texts, histories, or legends; Ivan Strenski calls these "cosmic dramas," stories that contain sacred models of action.[111] These narratives encode appropriate modes of behavior by offering imaginative settings where the ethical values of a tradition are played out. We are never confined to a single interpretation, but rather choose our path based on a number of considerations, including political context and chance of success, which serve to promote one form of action. In Lynch's words, "people's ongoing development of phenomenological and hermeneutic understandings – their melding of experience and consciousness, and interpretation of sacred texts and text-analogues – becomes an integral part of the process of deciding what is required to

[110] Kippenberg, *Violence as Worship*, 16–17.

[111] Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice*. Bruce Lincoln has shown that such tales not only encode hierarchies, leading to his assertion that myths are ideology in narrative form, but also that reference to such tales are essential in establishing the boundaries of social groups. See his *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and *Theorizing Myth*. Both will be crucial for understanding how martyrs use such tales as determinants of action and are themselves used to call up and bolster particular social configurations.

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do for the common good."[112] Actions and significance are only made sensible through an appreciation of the way the actor understands their situation, their goals, and the symbolic world they inhabit.

I approach these cases in a "sociotheological" mode, a methodology outlined by Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona Sheikh.[113] This method understands social reality through religious eyes, moving the level of analysis from the specific people, actions, or beliefs to their epistemic worldviews, the structures that form the basis for an understanding of – and perspective on – reality.[114] Epistemic worldviews blend Foucault's idea of an *episteme*, a set of understandings about the basis of true knowledge, and Bourdieu's *habitus*, those structured structurings that shape the interpretive frames through which we perceive the world.[115] In sociotheology, "an epistemic worldview is a framework for thinking about reality and acting appropriately within a perceived understanding of the world."[116] For a study that looks to comprehend how an imagined structure can be seen to hold a legitimate claim over life that individuals willingly seek

[112] Lynch, "Neo-Weberian approach to studying religion and violence," 282.

[113] Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona Sheikh, "A sociotheological approach to religious violence," in M. Juergensmeyer, M. Jerryson, and M. Kitts (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 620–644.

[114] Sheikh and Juergensmeyer identify five aspects of a sociotheological approach: 1) demarcating an epistemic worldview, 2) bracketing assumptions about the truth of a worldview, 3) entering into an epistemic worldview and conducting informational conversations, 4) identifying narrative structures, and 5) locating social contexts. The first step will become evident through my description of the cases, and the second step is crucial to any investigation into such actions (as Ninian Smart pointed out with his discussion of the need for *epoche* in religious studies, discussed in his *Dimensions of the Sacred*). I will alter and expand upon the final three conditions to broaden their gaze and make them appropriate for this particular study which looks to understand those already deceased without easy access to their communities in order to hold in-person conversations.

[115] Juergensmeyer and Sheikh, "A sociotheological approach to religious violence," 642. See also Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

[116] Juergensmeyer and Sheikh, "A sociotheological approach to religious violence," 642.

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their own destruction, looking to the structures that frame experience and guide behavior must be central.

At the same time, both method and subject require genealogical inquiry into the nature of each group's operative concept of self-sacrifice and the narratives that contain models of such action. Historical and anthropological inquiry must be combined with a social scientific analysis of the modes of power operative at the moment of martyrdom. Those who become martyrs see themselves obliged to absolute resistance, while those in the opposing camp see these acts as unconscionable and even wasteful. The job of the analyst of martyrdom is to try to comprehend the meaningfulness of these actions, even where we may vigorously disagree with the act itself.

In what follows I will look to the last statements given by, or at least attributed to, martyrs prior to their death, where they explain in their own words their reasons for dying, seeking insight into how they made sense of their situation. To ground that perspective, I will begin each case study by examining the historical trajectory of the conflict wherein these deaths take place in order to appreciate how these individuals constructed their sense of identity, and how death appeared as a reasonable choice. At the same time, the language martyrs use in these statements are heavily laden with symbolism, which requires understanding of the symbolic complexes that they – and those who claim them as martyrs – use to make sense of their decision to die. To understand how these specific complexes are selected and mobilized towards an understanding of their situation, I will analyze the statements of contemporary religious and political authorities in parallel to the circumstances of the martyrdoms. These complexes include but are not limited to mytho-historical narratives, ethical imperatives, and understandings of cosmic dynamics, along with bases for legitimate authority that are both political and theological.[117] Doing so will show

[117] While theological etymologically retains a relationship with theistic thought, I will here take theology to refer to the internal structures of any order considered divine, cosmic, metaphysical, or other such categories.

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how the martyrs were operating within a broader interpretive framework, and how their decisions to die were made sensible and significant.

Each of the next four chapters excavate a case study, before I turn to a comparative analysis in the last two chapters where I articulate a new theoretical understanding of martyrdom as an act of performative suffering aimed at giving testimony to the sovereign imaginary that guides action in the world. My hope is that the insights revealed will lead to a greater appreciation for why martyrdom appears as nearly ubiquitous in human history, and will further our understanding of how we construct ourselves as members of a social group and the extents to which that association commits us.

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