I 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

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[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.

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

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[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).

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]

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[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.

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* (स्मर) 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).

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

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

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

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,

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[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.

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 rein-
scribe 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.

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

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