

Martyrdom in the Modern Middle East

Sasha Dehghani – Silvia Horsch (Eds.)

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Content

Sasha Dehghani/Silvia Horsch

Introduction 7

I. Continuity and Transformation: Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith

Sasha Dehghani (Berlin)

The Birth of a Monotheistic Religion in Modernity.

On Jihad and Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith 15

Per-Olof Åkerdahl (Gävle)

Martyrdom and Servanthood in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths.

A Struggle to Defend a Cosmic Order 33

Moojan Momen

Between Karbalā' and Tabrīz.

Contested Martyrdom Narratives 43

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

Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin)

Sunni and Shiite Passion Stories Revisited.

On the Superseding of Sacrifice and Its Eventual Re-Empowerment 59

Joachim Negel (Münster/Marburg)

Martyrium als Zeugnis.

Zur Frage nach der theologischen und politischen Valenz
religiöser Zeugenschaft, dargelegt am Beispiel des Martyriums
der Trappistenmönche von Tibhirine/Algerien 73

Faysal Devji (Oxford)

Gandhi and the Sovereignty of Death 91

III. Visual Representations: Ritual, the Arts and New Media

Maryam Palizban (Berlin)

Performing a Massacre.

Murder and Martyrdom in *ta'ziyih* 105

Alice Bombardier (Paris)

The Mystical Notion of the Perfect Man.

Discourses of Iranian Revolutionary Painters

and the Portrayal of Martyrs 117

<i>Silvia Horsch (Osnabrück)</i> Making Salvation Visible. Rhetorical and Visual Representations of Martyrs in Salafi Jihadist Media.....	141
IV. Political Action and Ideological Discourse	
<i>Farhad Khosrokhavar (Paris)</i> Martyrdom in Light of the Arab Spring	169
<i>Lisa Franke (Leipzig)</i> The Discursive Construction of Palestinian <i>istishbādīyyāt</i> within the Frame of Martyrdom	187
<i>Silvia Horsch (Osnabrück)</i> Global Martyr Practices and Discourses. Entanglements between East and West	205
Picture Credits	225

Introduction

Part of the significance of the figure of the martyr in the Middle East is without doubt its long tradition. Not only can it be traced back to the early days of Islam, but it developed out of interaction with older religious and cultural traditions. Martyrdom belongs to the terms and concepts of religion in general, especially the monotheist religions and here in particular Christianity. The Greek term “martyrs”, taken from the judicial sphere and used in the sense of “blood witness”, was coined during the persecution of the Christians in the second century CE. In Islamic history – at least with regard to majority Sunni Islam – readiness to engage in combat became more essential than readiness to suffer due to the different historical situation and subsequent development, beginning with the emigration of the early Muslim community to Medina. For this reason the most influential *shahīd* (again a term denominating the witness in the judicial sphere) became the figure of the fallen fighter, even though anybody dying an untimely death, whether from natural disasters or epidemic diseases, as well as victims of violence, is also considered a martyr. Whereas in Sunni Islam a fully-fledged martyr cult did not develop before the onset of modernity, the case is different with Shiite Islam, in which Ḥusayn’s martyrdom is the pivotal theme.

The respective religious scholars and authorities provide more or less normative definitions as to who is to be regarded as a martyr. But as history has shown, not only the veneration and commemoration of martyrs fails to hold to the line laid out by religious authorities; rather, martyrdom is a highly contested field within the respective religions as well. The historicity of normative concepts is furthermore linked to the competitive position vis-à-vis other religions. As paradigmatic examples for others, the place assigned to the martyrs is the very center of their communities; for that however, they also act in the border areas running between different religions and cultures. As such, martyr figures are not only agents of demarcation but at the same time of entanglement and mediation. This mediation occurs not only synchronously between different religious and cultural traditions but also diachronically between different eras which are, supposedly at least, to be clearly delimited from one another. The hybrid figure of the martyr calls into question the demarcations between pre-modern and modern as well as those between religion and the secular.

The prominent place the martyr occupies in conflicts of modern times is often described as a “recurrence of martyrs”, and perceived as a “backslide” into a pre-modern way of thinking. However, not only have the historical and political circumstances changed due to the modern developments of industrialisation, colonialism and nation-state building, but with the advent of mass media and new techniques of image production the media conditions for the ‘making of martyrs’ have also altered. Hence, the inclusion of traditional cultic, legal or narrative ele-

ments into current discourses on martyrdom can be described more aptly as adaptations or re-stagings. Rhetoric and iconographic forms derived from the religious tradition are re-envisioned or gain a modified function in the respective contexts.

These developments and transformations of the concept, the historic manifestations and the cultural specifics of the martyr figure, lie in the field of interest of cultural studies. In research on martyrdom from this perspective there are no “true” or “false” martyrs but events regarded as martyrdom and individuals seen by their respective communities as martyrs insofar as they are accorded some kind of commemoration or veneration that relates to their death as having taken place for a cause – irrespective of whether it is religious cause. Martyrdom is a powerful concept in part because it can bestow meaning upon a violent and unnatural death. Sometimes there are people who consider themselves martyrs prior to their deaths and who take particular discursive actions designed to prompt their posthumous veneration. Martyrdom can thus be described as a cultural practice and pattern of interpretation, which belongs to the sphere of religion but cannot be fully understood in exclusively religious terms. The role of religion is even more sophisticated in modernity, where we have pointedly secular communities and movements in which martyr figures nonetheless play an important role. Religion, however, not only keeps ready at hand concepts, images and ritual forms on which the martyr cult draws, but at the same offers a critique of ‘illegitimate’ martyrdom which can be used – at least potentially – to keep the phenomenon of martyrdom in check.

The present volume assembles the revised presentations given at the workshop “Traditions of Martyrdom in the Modern Middle East” as well as some additional contributions. It brings together contributions from different academic perspectives (religious and Islamic studies, literary and theatre studies, theology, sociology and history) on modern manifestations of martyrdom in diverse Middle Eastern religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity and the Bahā’i Faith. The latter is considered in some detail since it is often underrepresented in comparative studies on the monotheistic religions. The workshop was conducted at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies (Berlin) in cooperation with the Free University Berlin in October 2011 and was part of the research project “Figurations of the Martyr in Near Eastern and European Literature” sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG), a project conducted under the direction of Sigrid Weigel (Center for Literary and Cultural Studies) and Angelika Neuwirth (Free University Berlin) since 2005. We would like to thank our colleagues at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies for their inspiration, which informed a variety of aspects, and the participants for their readiness to contribute to the workshop and the volume. We also wish to express our appreciation to the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies for providing the funds for the publication of this volume. Furthermore, we owe gratitude to Paul Bowman for proofreading the English, Sarah Anne Rennick for proofreading the article by Alice Bombardier, Jean Sinico for proofreading the

last article, as well as Shahin Misbah for providing the transcription of some Iran-related articles of this volume.

The transliteration of Arabic and Persian terms and names is based on the system for Arabic of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG), with a number of changes due to the English usage of Arabic words (th, j, kh, dh, sh, and gh instead of *t̤*, *ǧ*, *ḥ*, *d̤*, *š*, and *ǧ̇*). The four additional Persian letters are transliterated according to the system for Persian of the DMG. Word endings (such as *tā' marbūṭa* or the *nisba* ending) of Arabic terms used within an Iranian context, have been transliterated according to the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES). Moreover the Arabic article is not assimilated. Names of present prominent figures, authors, artists, organisations and well-known places are in most cases not transliterated, but rendered as they appear in English (or French) bibliographical references and literature. The same applies to terms which are lexicalised in the English language (like Imam, sharia, jihad, Koran, Shiite etc.). A certain inconsistency was unavoidable however, but we trust that this will not bother the patient expert who in any case knows the Arabic and Persian form. Dates are in many cases supplied in both forms, the first being the Hijri year and the second the Christian or Common Era year. Where only one date is given it is according to the Common Era.

I. Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith

The Bahā'ī Faith is in itself inextricably linked to modernity as Sasha Dehghani shows in his contribution. Not only did it develop in the modern age, but it responds in its teachings to some of the major questions of modernity such as the claims of science, world peace and women's rights. Whereas a host of transformative elements results from these links to modernity, among them the abolishment of military jihad, elements of continuity can be found in the concept of martyrdom which has its prototype in early Christianity and mystical Islam.

From mystical Islam stems the ideal of servanthood, which is preferred over a concept of martyrdom that includes physical death. Per-Olof Åkerdahl discusses the aspect of servanthood and also considers the ideological motivations for the persecution of the Bahā'īs in different socio-historical circumstances.

Moojan Momen concentrates on the time after the Islamic Revolution in Iran and discusses two opposed models of martyrdom, that of the ruling elite and that of the Bahā'ī community. He shows that the Bahā'ī martyrdom narrative is closer to the traditional Shiite martyrdom narrative, whereas the modern Shiite martyrdom narrative, designed to keep alive the revolutionary spirit, departs in significant ways from Shiite tradition.

II. *Witnessing and Sacrifice:*

Theological and Philosophical Implications of Martyrdom

Angelika Neuwirth's contribution considers paradigmatic differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam apparent in their respective – elaborated or missing – narratives of sacrifice. In Sunni Islam only a rudimentary sacrificial paradigm developed because of its de-mythologizing tendency; this changed, however, in the 20th century, especially in Palestine, where in reaction to the loss of land a modern myth of martyrdom was created drawing from different religious traditions, nationalist culture and mystic love poetry.

The concept of witnessing is at the centre of Joachim Negel's theological considerations. In the face of the hybrid phenomena addressed as martyrdom, he presents normative criteria for the Christian concept of witnessing and considers a modern incident of martyrdom where he finds these criteria manifested in an ideal way. Inquiring into the existential dimension, he argues for an irreducible meaning of witnessing: the reasons for the readiness for death coincide with the reasons for life.

The question of what it is worth dying for is addressed from a different perspective by Faisal Devji, who starts from the intriguing observation that both Muslim extremists and Ghandi argue that they love death more than life. While they refer, of course, to antithetic actions, the underlying concepts of sacrifice share a critique of the modern concept of humanity and human rights. Whereas the element of murder lends the sacrificial act an instrumental quality, it is not a means to some end but an act of sovereignty in itself in the case of nonviolent suffering promoted by Ghandi.

III. *Visual Representations: Ritual, the Arts and New Media*

Ta'ziyib is the 400-year-old ritualised theatrical performance commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and his family in Iran, practised until today. Maryam Palizban elucidates the features of *ta'ziyib*, the mythological traditions and rituals it draws on and focuses on the distinctive performative processes which affect not only the protagonists but also the audience during the re-enactment of a historical martyrdom.

Alice Bombardier shows how the blending of modern revolutionary Shiite ideology and the old mystical notion of the Perfect Man affects the work of revolutionary Iranian painters as well as their self-conception as artists. In paintings praising martyrdom from the 1980s a parallel is drawn between the process of martyrdom and the spiritual ascent to the model of the Perfect Man.

The Jihadist martyr cult flourishing in contemporary media is the topic of Silvia Horsch's contribution. She focuses on how the two dimensions of salvation, personal and collective, which are central in the thought 'Abdallāh 'Azzām, the

main ideologue of Jihadism, are addressed and put into images. Not only these visual elements, but indeed the Jihadist martyr concept itself, can be described as an amalgamation of classical Islamic traditions and modern discourses.

IV. Political Action and Ideological Discourse

The notion of martyrdom in Islam underwent a number of changes in modernity, as Farhad Khosrokhavar explicates in his contribution. It was turned into a means for generating revolutionary (mass) mobilisation, which has often been violent, but it has also occurred in a nonviolent fashion. The ‘Arab spring’ was accompanied by numerous incidents of nonviolent martyrdom, which he analyses according to different paradigms.

Lisa Franke considers the dimension of gender in martyrdom with regard to the figure of the “self-sacrificer” (*istishbādī*) or “suicide bomber”. She analyses how the female *istishbādīyyāt* of the Second Intifada are integrated into the Palestinian discourse on martyrdom, in which ways its distinctive religious and nationalist elements are applied to them and whether the gender relations in society are affected.

Silvia Horsch considers the global circulation and transformation of two extreme martyrdom practices – self-immolation and suicide bombing – and the accompanying discourse about them as well as the nonviolent martyrs of the Iranian (2009) and Arab (2010/2011) uprisings. Here the focus lies on the relation of religious and secular aspects in the practices and the accompanying discourses, which is a complex one inasmuch martyr figures tend to question the distinction drawn between the secular and the religious.

Sasha Dehghani / Silvia Horsch

The Birth of a Monotheistic Religion in Modernity

On Jihad and Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith

Sasha Dehghani (Berlin)

I. Religion, Modernity and Violence

1. Weber and Goldziher: a classification of the Bahā'ī Faith

At the beginning of the 1920s Marianne Weber edited *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, a posthumously published compilation of research materials written by her husband Max Weber (d. 1920), one of the founding figures of German sociology. In a brief remark at the beginning of this work we learn how he viewed the Bahā'ī Faith. Weber writes: "By harmonising religion with Modernity and reclaiming its place in the modern world, the Baha'ī Faith and the Salafiyya intend to infuse a disenchanted world with a new spirit. In their visions of a future world order based on divine principles, they dream of a return from society (*Gesellschaft*) to community (*Gemeinschaft*)."¹

Weber's statement is multilayered and lends itself to the discussion of two different points with respect to the Bahā'ī Faith. The first relates to Weber's enumeration of the Bahā'ī Faith alongside the Muslim Salafiyya, a comparison which requires consideration of an accurate classification of the Bahā'ī Faith. The second concerns the relationship of the Bahā'ī Faith to Modernity, the context within which the subject of monotheism and violence will be looked at.

Weber's lumping of the Bahā'ī Faith with the Salafiyya would be seriously misleading unless read in light of Ignaz Goldziher's *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, Weber's main source on developments then taking place in the Islamic world.² Goldziher's *Vorlesungen*, which were published in 1910, included a relatively detailed account of the Muslim Salafiyya, strongly focusing on the Wahhābiyya movement formed in the late 18th century on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as some information on the Bahā'ī Faith. During Goldziher's lifetime the Sunni Salafiyya movement had become famous due to the Islamic reformer Muḥammad 'Abduh (1905) and his friend and teacher Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1897), both of whom believed that the Koranic revelation was to be considered

¹ English translation cited in Oliver Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha'ī Faith: A Comparative Study of Muḥammad 'Abduh and 'Abdu-l-Baba 'Abbas*, London 2008, 175. Scharbrodt refers to Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, second edition, Tübingen 1925, 21ff.

² Hans Kippenberg's afterword to Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, Tübingen 2005, 178.

the main source for the happiness of civilisation in every age of humanity.³ Furthermore, al-Kawākibī (1902), another proponent of the Salafiyya, had integrated particular teachings of the Wahhābiyya into the Egyptian Salafiyya ideology,⁴ thereby adding to its publicity. Thus a reader of Weber's comment, who is aware that "Salafiyya" here either refers to 'Abduh and Afghānī or to the pietistic Wahhābiyya movement, could be tempted to classify the Bahā'ī Faith as just another contemporary Islamic reformist movement. Reading Weber's statement in light of Goldziher's *Vorlesungen* however helps to correct such a view.

While the reformation of the Islamic world could be regarded as one goal of the Bahā'ī Faith, its chief objective went far beyond that of a Muslim reformist enterprise. The messianic renewal claimed and envisaged by the central figures of the Bahā'ī Faith transcended Islam and was universal in nature. Consequently, the prophetic claim of Bahā'u'llāh (d. 1892), the central founding figure of the Bahā'ī Faith – as well as the claim of his herald, the Bāb (d. 1850), and the role of his eldest son and authorised interpreter 'Abdu'l-Bahā (d. 1921) – differed immensely from the *ijtihad* of an Egyptian al-Azhar scholar or the conspiring mindset of a pan-Islamic Iranian activist. It left the confines of Islamic doctrine based on the belief of the finality of Muhammad's prophethood and led to the foundation of a new world religion, as Goldziher had discerned in his *Vorlesungen* when he wrote that Bahā'u'llāh had laid down the "design for a new world religion."⁵

Moreover, unlike Weber, Goldziher accentuated another key difference between the Salafiyya and the Bahā'ī Faith. Whereas the Islamic reformers yearned for a return to the classical order of their pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), the Bahā'ī religion offered the idea of a progressively advancing human civilisation. To reach the state of a Golden Age the Salafists looked to the past, while the Bahā'ī vision was oriented on the future.⁶ For the Bahā'ī Faith, the concept of a Golden Age included the construction of a world order in the future – as Weber correctly noted – understood in terms of a world civilisation representing the fruit of a new monotheistic revelation,⁷ a concept that would have been inconceivable for a classical Muslim reformist movement.

Indeed, the extent to which the differences between the Bahā'ī Faith and the Muslim Salafiyya outweighed their similarities became glaringly clear in 1925,

³ Whereas in his *Vorlesungen* Goldziher dealt with 'Abduh in a rather superficial way, in his later work, *Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung*, he analyzed 'Abduh's teachings in greater detail; see Ignaz Goldziher, *Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung: An der Universität Upsala gehaltenes Olaus-Petri-Vorlesungen*, Leiden 1920, 344.

⁴ See Reinhardt Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, London 2002, 24ff. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Oxford 1962, chapters 5-7.

⁵ In German: "[...] schritt Beha zur Entwerfung einer Weltreligion". See Ignaz Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, Heidelberg 1925, 276.

⁶ Ibid. 271.

⁷ For the concept of a Golden Age in Bahā'ī writings, see Ali Nakhjavani, *Towards World Order*, Acuto 2004, chapter 1.

when Egyptian Muftis issued a historical *fatwa* stating that “the Bahā’i religion is a new religion standing on its own” (*dīn jadīd qā’im bi-dhātibi*) with “beliefs, principles and laws” (*aqā’id wa uṣūl wa aḥkām*) differing entirely from those of the Islamic religion. Furthermore: “In the same way as you do not call a Buddhist, a Brahman or a Christian a Muslim and vice versa, you do not call a Bahā’i a Muslim and vice versa.”⁸ Hence, Bahā’is and Muslim clerics agreed on the independent nature of the Bahā’i religion⁹, and, up to a certain extent, Goldziher’s *Vorlesungen* were in line with this classification. Nevertheless, Western academic scholars contemporary to Weber and Goldziher continued to interpret the Bahā’is as a new Muslim reformist group or a new division of Twelver Shiism for some years. It was only after the experience of the Third Reich – during which the Nazi government dissolved the German Bahā’i community – that leading German theologians and professors of religious studies, such as Friedrich Heiler, Helmut Glasenapp and Gerhard Rosenkranz, finally emphasised the independence of the Bahā’i Faith from its Islamic mother religion.¹⁰

2. The matryoshka effect

The second notable aspect of Weber’s statement is the positioning of the Bahā’i Faith in the context of Modernity. But since Weber did not give a substantive explanation of why the Bahā’i Faith should be seen as a religion in harmony with Modernity, intending to infuse a new spirit into a “disenchanted world”, we must move a century forward to the German historian Jürgen Osterhammel. In his impressive study on 19th-century global history, *Die Verwandlung der Welt (The Transformation of the World)*, Osterhammel presents the ‘derivation’ missing in Weber’s work.

Osterhammel maintains that the Bahā’i Faith should be regarded as one of the rare modern religious creations that have lasted to our day.¹¹ He speaks of Bahā’u’llāh as one of the great “lateral thinkers” (*Querdenker*) of his time, who went far beyond the patterns of thought common to his age,¹² and attributes a spirit of Modernity to the religion of Bahā’u’llāh because of its main principles.

⁸ Extracts of the original text are cited in Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqī’āt-i Mubārakib (1927-1939)*, Tehran 1973, 16. I would like to thank Dr. Omid Ghaemmaghami for bringing this letter to my attention.

⁹ See also Johanna Pink, “Deriding Revealed Religions? Baha’is in Egypt”, in: *ISIM Newsletter*, 10/2002, 30.

¹⁰ Fereyduh Vahman, “Baha’ismus”, in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. by Gerhard Krause et al., Berlin 1980, Bd. 5, 130f. Also Udo Schaefer, *Die missverstandene Religion*, Hofheim 1968, 20f.

¹¹ Osterhammel writes: “...eine der wenigen religiösen Neuschöpfungen des 19. Jahrhunderts, die Bestand hat.” See Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2009, 1271.

¹² Ibid.

According to him, the following teachings of the Bahā'ī Faith can be designated as modern:¹³

- acceptance of a constitutional state and parliamentary democracy;
- promotion of women's rights;
- rejection of religious nationalism;
- concern for the idea of world peace;
- annulment of the doctrine of Holy War; and
- open-mindedness toward science¹⁴

Osterhammel's brief reference to the Bahā'ī Faith is significant, and not simply because he connects the Bahā'ī religion to the complex phenomenon of Modernity. Much more important, especially for an examination of the Bahā'ī understanding of martyrdom and *jihad*, is the fact that his portrayal conveys more than just an impression of the nonviolent and peaceful spirit animating the young monotheistic religion. In addition, a glimpse at some of the above-mentioned principles calls into question the assumption, advocated by some antireligious public intellectuals, that the phenomenon of religious monotheism is necessarily violent and intolerant. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the neuroscientist Sam Harris and the late journalist Christopher Hitchens have asserted, time and again, that violence and monotheism are inextricably wedded, indeed, that violence must be seen as a quasi-genetic constituent of all monotheistic religions.

In this context a word about the method of such anti-monotheistic authors seems necessary. These writers often tend to focus on one specific religion and epoch instead of undertaking the extensive and careful research required to adequately address the general phenomenon of religious monotheism. The subject of religion and monotheism is treated like a Russian *matryoshka* – the well-known set of wooden dolls of decreasing size nesting one inside the other. The first and largest doll is usually the focus of an observer's attention, while all the others nesting inside are presumed to be miniature replicas of the first. Similarly, the entire phenomenon of monotheism is judged by the impression of one – in many instances the first – monotheistic religion, while all the other subsequent religions are examined in a cursory way. Such a methodological approach leads to more than just a distorted view of monotheism; it also results in a fixation on the epoch of Early Antiquity, thereby ignoring the possibility that post-Antiquity monotheism might be more than just another echo of an *Urszene*.

Such a *matryoshka* effect can be observed, for example, in Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, which for the most part speaks of all monotheistic religions but predominantly refers to the Bible. His preoccupation with this source is evident when he quotes the American novelist Gore Vidal: "The great unmentionable evil

¹³ Ibid, 1271f.

¹⁴ According to Osterhammel, this final principle is possibly the most important criterion for religious modernity. See *ibid*, 1272.

at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved – Judaism, Christianity and Islam [...]”.¹⁵ And again, only a few lines later, Dawkins admits: “For most of my purposes, all three Abrahamic religions can be treated as indistinguishable. Unless otherwise stated, I shall have Christianity mostly in mind, but only because it is the version with which I happen to be most familiar.”¹⁶

Of course, the presumed connection between monotheism and Antiquity, on the one hand, and monotheism and violence, on the other, is not new. Sigmund Freud’s *Der Mann Moses und der Monotheismus* (*Moses and Monotheism*), for instance, works along similar lines. In his search for the true origins of monotheism, Freud applied his psychoanalytical tools to unearth the truth hidden in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁷ interpreting the post-Jewish monotheism of Christianity and Islam as a miniature repetition of a bygone and repressed past. To him, messianic Christianity and Christ’s martyrdom were to be read in terms of a return of the “violent end” of Moses,¹⁸ who was allegedly killed by the Jewish people¹⁹ guided by Yahweh, “a rude, narrow-minded local god, violent and bloodthirsty.”²⁰ About Islam, similar to Dawkins, but in a more sophisticated way, Freud writes:

The author regretfully has to admit that he cannot give more than one sample, that he has not the expert knowledge necessary to complete the investigation. This limited knowledge will allow him perhaps to add that the founding of the Mohammedan religion seems to him to be an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish one, in imitation of which it made its appearance. There is reason to believe that the Prophet originally intended to accept the Jewish religion in full for himself and his people.²¹

Freud and Dawkins are just two representatives of a class of scholars whose perception of the object of study is distorted by this *matryoshka* effect.²² If such generalisations about monotheism and violence are to be formulated, then not only should the historical context of the classical monotheistic religions be examined more carefully.²³ Of even greater importance is that all monotheistic religions need

¹⁵ Ibid, 37.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses. Endliches und unendliches Judentum*, Frankfurt a. M. 1999, 22f.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Hertfordshire 1939, 59.

¹⁹ Ibid, 139ff.

²⁰ Ibid, 80. Unsurprisingly the English literature professor Jacqueline Rose has described this treatise as “one of Freud’s most violent texts”. See Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, London 2002, 75.

²¹ Ibid, 148f.

²² Influenced by Freud, present academics, such as the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, have located the reality of monotheism in the map of Early Antiquity and labelled it an essentially violent phenomenon. See Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*, Munich 2003.

²³ The German scholar of religious studies Hans Kippenberg emphasised that the relationship between monotheistic religions and violence should be considered as a “contingent” one. In each case the respective situation and context must be taken into consideration.

to be examined. Treating the origins of monotheism might be an important primary step, but it cannot be the final one. To avoid distortions, it is not only mandatory to study the concept of monotheism as articulated and practiced in Late or Early Antiquity, but also to move forward to the Middle and Modern Ages.

A very different view, for example, is offered by the British historian of religion, Karen Armstrong, who notes in her *History of God*:

The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement 'I believe in God' has no objective meaning as such, but like any other statement it only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is not one unchanging idea continued in the word 'God' but the word contains a whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. Had the notion of God not had this flexibility, it would not have survived to become one of the great human ideas.²⁴

Although Armstrong might have put too strong an emphasis on the notion of human subjectivity, her understanding reflects a crucial awareness of time and relativity. Up until now, such a differentiated approach to the phenomenon of religion has proven rare, and in general the examination of post-Biblical monotheistic religions leaves much to be desired. While Islam is treated somewhat superficially, a monotheistic religion emerging in times of Modernity, such as the Bahā'ī Faith, is hardly taken into consideration. This neglect, however, can be seen as a natural consequence of a widespread secular scepticism. After all, Modernity's secular heroes passionately questioned the existence of God and the prophet – to Nietzsche God was dead,²⁵ to Weber the true prophet was regretfully absent,²⁶ while for Carlyle the absent prophet had been substituted by modern men of letters.²⁷

3. *The birth pangs of a new religion*

Be that as it may, the main purpose of the previous discussion was not to create a naive or pacifistic counter-image of monotheism. A differentiated way of looking at the history of religions would surely acknowledge that the main monotheistic religions which emerged in pre-Modernity are familiar with the phenomenon of violence. But they experience it in different ways and contexts. In some periods they engage in violence, in others they endure violence. It is notable that the latter is to be observed in the emerging period of monotheistic religions. In other

See Hans G. Kippenberg, *Gewalt als Gottesdienst. Religionskriege im Zeitalter der Globalisierung*, Bonn 2008, 22.

²⁴ See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God. From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God*, London 1999, 4f.

²⁵ "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York 1974, aphorism 125.

²⁶ Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Stuttgart 1995, 40f.

²⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic of History*, New York 1906, 149ff.

words, it is during the time of birth and infancy that all monotheistic religions have to endure violence, although this situation changes over the course of time.

Reuven Firestone, a scholar of Jewish and Islamic Studies, observes that new monotheistic religions always emerge in a polemical environment filled with “mimetic tension”.²⁸ The established religion feels threatened by the emergence of the new religion, which preaches that the established religions are failing to meet the spiritual and social needs of the current generation. As a result, the established religion is perceived as attempting to delegitimise the new religion. Firestone writes that established religions can never really countenance the new religion and concludes: “They inevitably attempt to do away with them.”²⁹

In a similar vein, Bernard Lewis in *Islam and the West* writes about the tense relationship that exists between the main monotheistic traditions.³⁰ According to him, a major trigger of conflict between these religions is their point of “similarity.” The resemblance of their claims and teachings leads to rivalry between them. Another point to be considered, simple yet of great importance, is the factor of time. Lewis writes that all monotheistic traditions can, at least to some degree, tolerate their religious predecessors, but the same rule is not valid for their subsequent counterparts or successors.³¹ Lewis correctly recognises that Judaism felt threatened by Christianity, while Christianity could integrate parts of Jewish reality but rejected Islam, and Islam, in turn, could tolerate previous religions of the Book (*abl al-kitāb*), like the Jews, the Christians or Zoroastrians, but not post-Islamic book religions such as the Bahā’ī Faith. Lewis concludes that established religions – or more accurately, their particular religious institutions³² – fear the new religion and that their fear generates the urge to discriminate and even persecute the new religious community.³³

At this point the concept of martyrdom comes into play. The newborn religious community, which in the early stage of its history is always in a minority position, has to face up to persecution, and so asks itself how can it deal with the forces of oppression. Since the adherents of monotheistic traditions usually hold the belief that their faith is universally true and valid, the majority of them will not be willing to give up their position. They will accept death rather than deny their belief. The historical examples of pre-*hijra* Meccan Islam³⁴ and pre-Constan-

²⁸ Reuven Firestone, “The Qur’ān and the Bible. Some Modern Studies of their Relationships”, in: *Bible and Qur’ān. Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. by John C. Reeves, Atlanta 2003, 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford 1993, 5f.

³¹ Ibid.

³² As the German constitutional law scholar Carl Schmitt pointed out, a conflict takes place between instances and not between substances. Cf. Silvia Horsch, *Tod im Kampf. Figurationen des Märtyrers in frühen sunnitischen Schriften*, Berlin 2011, 45.

³³ Lewis, *Islam and the West*, 7.

³⁴ Explaining the opposition the newborn Islamic religion had to face, the German Islamicist Marco Schöller describes the Koran itself as “a document that shows the struggle of a new

tinian Christianity,³⁵ as well as the context of the Jewish exodus narrative,³⁶ demonstrate that all major monotheistic religions have to suffer violence at first. In this context martyrdom should be seen as the consequence of the persecution an emerging religious community suffers during its earliest phase. The case of the Bahā'ī community demonstrates that such a phenomenon is not only confined to historical Antiquity or the Middle Ages but also exists in the Modern era.

II. The Bahā'ī Faith: A Case of Nonviolent Monotheism

1. From weapons of war to instruments of peace

Lewis's analysis ends with the emergence of the Bahā'ī Faith, a religion – as Osterhammel has indicated – with a serious concern for the idea of world peace. Certainly, hardly any other subject could provide a more appropriate lens through which to examine the attitude toward violence within the Bahā'ī Faith than its concepts of martyrdom and *jihad*. Since these two concepts, in turn, will be better understood when explained in light of the historical birth process of the Bahā'ī religion, it is necessary to undertake a brief summary of its history, focusing on the different types of reactions to the persecution which the heralding movement of the Bahā'ī Faith had to suffer.

The Bāb, who was a forerunner to Bahā'u'llāh, claimed in 1260/1844 to be a prophetic figure fulfilling the messianic expectation of (Twelver Shiite) Islam. Within a short period many people accepted his claim, among them a number of Iranian Shiite clerics, who had been tutored in Iraq by the two founders of the

faith coming into existence” and interprets the career of Muḥammad as being “very much the story of a man who eventually defeated all odds when shaping the first community of believers.” See Marco Schöller, “Opposition to Muḥammad”, in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al., Leiden 2003, Vol. 3, 576. The late Egyptian Muslim philosopher Abu Zaid states that because of the persecution that Muḥammad and his Meccan community had to endure, the Koran refers to the early Muslims as “the downtrodden” (*al-mustad'afūn*), see Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, “Oppression”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 3, 583.

³⁵ Historian Patrick Collinson emphasises that persecution and martyrdom should be seen as the two main contrapuntal themes of early Christian church history. The persecution of the early Christians was therefore closely linked to the concept of human rights, since the most fundamental human right, the right to live, was endangered. See Patrick Collinson, “Religion und Menschenrechte: Die Rolle des Protestantismus”, in: *Menschenrechte in der Geschichte* ed. by Oliver Hutten, Frankfurt 1988, 36f.

³⁶ The Pharaonic oppression, which Moses and the Jewish people had to overcome through their exodus to the Holy Land, has entered into the collective consciousness of humanity in such a paradigmatic way that it has not only been of importance to all post-Mosaic founders of monotheistic religions but also, as we may assume on the basis of the political theorist Michael Walzer's study *Exodus and Revolution*, the whole of modern revolutionary political philosophy, which in one way or another is modelled on the figure of Mosaic redemption and the deliverance of the Hebrew people from the Egyptian tyrant. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York 1985, chapter 1.

Shaykhī School – Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥṣāʾī and Siyyid Kāzīm al-Rashtī. The Bābī community grew rapidly and its growth, in turn, caused the enmity of some influential ʿulamāʾ, who eventually instigated the Persian Shah, Nāṣir al-Dīn Qājār (d. 1896), to attempt to eradicate this new religious movement from the pages of Iranian history. In less than a decade thousands of Bābīs had been killed, including the Bāb, who was shot by a large firing squad in Tabrīz, in the seventh year of his ministry, leaving the movement almost collectively destroyed and virtually erased.

During this first decade of its existence, i.e. between 1844 and 1853, the Bābī community reacted to the persecution of the Iranian government in at least four different ways. Some individuals withstood the pressure of persecution steadfastly and accepted death without defending themselves. Such a passive form of martyrdom took place, for example, in the case of the first Bābī martyr Mullā ʿAlī Baṣṭāmī, the Bāb himself – whose execution was ordered by the chief Minister Amīr Kabīr (d. 1852) – and his prominent female apostle, Ṭāhīrih Qurrat al-ʿAyn, who was strangled to death about two years after the martyrdom of the Bāb. This type of martyrdom was well known to the early Christians, many of whom accepted being killed during pre-Constantinian Roman persecution.³⁷ But some Bābīs decided to practice dissimulation of their belief, often because they could not withstand the pressure of persecution.³⁸ Such a practice was endorsed in the culture of Shiʿite Islam as *taqīyyih*,³⁹ whereas the early Christian church discouraged this attitude and named those believers who denied their faith in times of persecution *fallen ones* (Lat., *lapsi*).⁴⁰ Other Bābīs fought against the army of the Shah and died in a defensive *jihad*.⁴¹ This type of Bābī martyr resembles the Islamic battlefield martyr (*shahīd al-māʾraka*) of the Muhammadan era in Medina or the Shiʿite martyrs of Karbalāʾ in 680.⁴² And there was also a small number of individuals who actively used violence without being in a defensive situation,

³⁷ For the concept of martyrdom in early Christianity, see Glen Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge 1995.

³⁸ The secretary of the Bāb, Siyyid Ḥusayn Kātib, practiced dissimulation at the time when the Bāb was martyred in Tabrīz in July 1850, but later he accepted to be killed for his belief, see ʿAlī Muḥammad Fayzī, *Hadrat-i Nuqtib-yi Ūlā*, Hofheim 1994, 332ff.

³⁹ On the practice of *taqīyyih* in Shiʿite Islam, see Ethan Kohlberg, *Belief and Law in Imami Shiʿism*, Hampshire 1991, chapter 3.

⁴⁰ See Friedhelm Winkelman, *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, München 2005, 96.

⁴¹ Many of the apostles of the Bāb, including Quddūs and Mullā Ḥusayn, died during an armed conflict while defending themselves against the royal army, which far outnumbered them. Cf. Siyamak Zabihī-Moghadam, “The Bābī-State conflict in Māzandarān,” in: *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Bābī-Bābāʾī Faiths*, ed. by Moshe Sharon, Leiden 2004, 179ff. In the writings of the Bāb the subject of *jihad* is quite complex. Whereas in his early and central *Tafsīr* on the Sura of Joseph the doctrine of *jihad* seems to be of relative importance, in his later and no less central *Persian Bayān*, the same term hardly even appears. In any case, although it is difficult to conclude that the Bāb had explicitly forbidden the doctrine of *jihad*, Saiedi argues that he “effectively eliminated it”. Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Bāb*, Waterloo 2009, 368.

⁴² On the concept of martyrdom in early Islam, see David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Cambridge 2007.

with the awareness that their actions would lead to their death. This occurred after the martyrdom of the Bāb, when a group of Bābīs wanted to take revenge for the death of the Bāb and attempted to assassinate the Shah in 1852. The failed plot led not only to their immediate execution, but also to the unjustified killing of a very large number of Bābīs who had not been involved. To some Western contemporaries this deed bore similarities to the methods of the Ismā‘īlite assassins in medieval Islam.⁴³

Bahā’u’llāh, who in the time of the Bāb was seen as a prominent figure in the Bābī movement and later founded the independent Bahā’ī religion with laws differing not only from Shiism but also from the Bābī religion itself,⁴⁴ strongly criticised those Bābīs who attempted to assassinate the Shah in his *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*.⁴⁵ The first part of the *Epistle* suggests that Bahā’u’llāh not only condemned the instances of violence on the part of members of the contemporary Bābī community, but also went a step further and reinterpreted the concept of *jihad* in favour of a solely ethical and spiritual struggle. Through this *Epistle*, written in 1891 one year before his death, we can reconstruct Bahā’u’llāh’s attitude towards those Bābīs who tried to assassinate the Shah:

Day and night, while confined in that dungeon, We meditated upon the deeds, the condition, and the conduct of the Bābīs, wondering what could have led a people so high-minded, so noble, and of such intelligence, to perpetrate such an audacious and outrageous act against the person of His Majesty. This Wronged One, thereupon, decided to arise, after His release from prison, and undertake, with the utmost vigour, the task of regenerating this people. (...) We exhorted all men, and particularly this people, through Our wise counsels and loving admonitions, and forbade them to engage in sedition, quarrels, disputes and conflict. As a result of this, and by the grace of God, waywardness and folly were changed into piety and understanding, and weapons converted into instruments of peace (*badal gasbt silāh bi-iṣlāh*).⁴⁶

Bahā’u’llāh then explains his vision of converting weapons of war into instruments of peace – a formulation bringing to mind Isaiah’s vision of the *eschaton*, when the nations shall gather on the holy mountain of God and “beat their swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks” (2:4) – to Shaykh Bāqir Najafī, a hostile Shiite cleric of Iṣfahān to whom the treatise was addressed. Bahā’u’llāh cites passages from his earlier writings to prove that the Bābīs’ assassination attempt was antagonistic to the main values of the Bahā’ī Faith and stood in no connection to himself:

This Wronged One enjoineeth on you honesty and piety [...]. Through them man is exalted, and the door of security is unlocked before the face of all creation. Happy the

⁴³ After the attempt on the life of the Shah, Lady Sheil, the wife of a British Ambassador to Persia, compared the Bābīs to Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ; cf. Moojan Momen, *The Bābī and Bahā’ī Religions. 1844-1944 Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, Oxford 1981, 9.

⁴⁴ See Bahā’u’llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, Mona Vale, 1993.

⁴⁵ See Bahā’u’llāh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Wilmette 1988.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

man that cleaveth fast unto them, and recognizeth their virtue, and woe betide him that denieth their station. [...] O peoples of the earth! Haste ye to do the pleasure of God, and war ye valiantly (*jāhidū haqq al-jihād*), as it behooveth you to war, for the sake of proclaiming His resistless and immovable Cause.⁴⁷

Bahā'u'llāh states: “We have decreed that war shall be waged in the path of God (*qadarnā al-jihād fī sabīl allāh*) with the armies of wisdom and utterance, and of a goodly character and praiseworthy deeds (*bi-junūd al-ḥikmat wa'l-bayān wa bi'l-akhlāq wa'l-a'māl*)”. “Revile ye not one another,” he continues,

We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth [...] In the Book of God, the Mighty, the Great, ye have been forbidden to engage in contention and conflict. Lay fast hold on whatever will profit you, and profit the peoples of the world. [...] Beware lest ye shed the blood of any one. Unsheathe the sword of your tongue (*sayf al-lisān*) from the scabbard of utterance (*ʿan ghamd al-bayān*), for therewith ye can conquer the citadels of men’s hearts. We have abolished the law to wage holy war (*rafʿanā ḥukm al-qatīl*) against each other. God’s mercy hath, verily, encompassed all created things [...] Every cause needeth a helper (*nāsir*). In this Revelation the hosts which can render it victorious (*junūd-i manṣūrih*) are the hosts of praiseworthy deeds and upright character. The leader and commander (*qāʾid wa sardār*) of these hosts hath ever been the fear of God [...].⁴⁸

We can see how the term *jihad* appears in the writings of Bahā'u'llāh: the entire passage is infused with pre-modern warfare imagery, the sword, the scabbard, the shield, the citadel, the hosts of an army that fights for victory (*naṣr/nuṣrat*).⁴⁹ Yet none of these terms is employed to encourage a militant *jihad* or a real holy war. Instead, they symbolise the willingness of a believer to struggle through an ethical and spiritual fight. In Bahā'u'llāh’s *Epistle* the concept of *jihad* is intentionally divorced from its aspect of militancy and physical fighting, that is, the doctrine of *jihad* is separated from the notion of *qitāl* as found in the Koran and entirely transformed into a nonviolent and spiritual concept.⁵⁰

2. The annulment of militant *jihad* and the sword

This transformation can be seen as the necessary consequence of the annulment of militant *jihad* – a principle that Bahā'u'llāh had explicitly abrogated a few years earlier in his *Lawḥ-i Bishārāt* (Glad Tidings). There Bahā'u'llāh writes that “the law of holy war hath been blotted out (*maḥw-i ḥukm-i jihād*) from the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 22ff.

⁴⁹ For the importance of the notion of victory (*naṣr/nuṣrat*) in the writings of Bahā'u'llāh, see Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization. Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh*, Bethesda 2000, 243.

⁵⁰ For the Koranic connection of *jihad* to *qitāl* and the difference between these two terms, see Tariq Ramadan, *The Messenger. The Meanings of the Life of Muhammad*, Oxford 2007, 97f. See also Bassam Tibi, *Der Wahre Imam. Der Islam von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 1996, 93ff.

Book.”⁵¹ This abrogation⁵² in itself should be seen as the amplification of an earlier statement that Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed during the time of his residency in 1863 in the garden of Riḍwān in Baghdad. It is reported that during the days of his disclosure to some of his companions of his claim to be the one foretold by the Báb, he announced three main principles of the new religion to the Bahá’í community, the first of them being that “the use of the sword is abolished in this revelation” (*sayf dar īn zhubūr murtafi‘ ast*).⁵³ Hence, in the Bahá’í writings the physical sword can be read as a synonym for religiously motivated militant *jihad*.

Commenting on the detrimental effects of the physical sword, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, in his *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, also emphasised that humanity has entered a modern era wherein salvation of the human race at the point of the sword must be seen as an antiquated idea. He writes that “in this day and age the sword is not a suitable means for promulgating the Faith (*dar īn ‘aṣr sayf wāsiṭib-yi tarwīj nab*), for it would only fill peoples’ hearts with revulsion and terror.”⁵⁴ Addressed to the radical believers willing to propagate their religious conviction violently, he explains that neither Islam nor Christianity – even though their Holy Scriptures did not explicitly prohibit the exercise of violence – won their main victories through coercion or the sword. “According the Divine Law of Muḥammad,” he continues, “it is not permissible to compel the People of the Book to acknowledge and accept the Faith. While it is a sacred obligation devolving on every conscientious believer in the unity of God to guide mankind to the truth, the Traditions ‘I am a Prophet by the sword’ (*anā nabī bi’l-sayf*) and ‘I am commanded to threaten the lives of the people until they say, ‘There is none other God but God’ referred to the idolaters of the Days of Ignorance, who in their blindness and bestiality had sunk below the level of human beings. A faith born of sword thrusts (*bi-ḍarb-i sayf ḥāṣil*) could hardly be relied upon, and would for any trifling cause revert to error and unbelief. After the ascension of Muḥammad, and His passing to ‘the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent

⁵¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Chatham 1978, 21. For the original see Bahá’u’lláh, *Majmū‘a min Akwāb Hadrat Bahá’u’lláh*, Brussels 1980, 37.

⁵² In the Bahá’í writings the principle is upheld that all major prophets and founders of monotheistic religions function as lawgivers who are permitted to cancel or alter the legal enactments of previous religious dispensations. This can be deduced when ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, for example, states that Jesus *abrogated* (*naskb nimūd*) the religious law of the Jewish people that had lasted up to his time for about a millennium and half. See ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Wilmette 1984, 16. For the original, see ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Muṣāwwidhāt*, Karachi, n.d., 13. This concept is similar to the Islamic understanding which holds that abrogation (*naskb*) can either be “internal”, pertaining to one and the same revelation, or “external”, implying that the younger monotheistic religion can substitute the laws of the older ones. See John Burton, “Abrogation”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 1, Leiden 2001, 11-14.

⁵³ Fāḍil Māzandarānī, *Asrār al-Āthār*, vol. 4, Tehran 1973, 22f. See also Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization*, 242.

⁵⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Wilmette 1990, 43. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Risālib-yi Madaniyyih*, Hofheim 1984, 51.

King,' the tribes around Medina apostatised from their Faith, turning back to the idolatry of pagan times." Then he turns to the example of early Christianity and states that "after the ascension of Jesus to the Realm of Glory, these few souls stood up with their spiritual qualities and with deeds that were pure and holy, and they arose by the power of God and the life-giving breaths of the Messiah to save all the peoples of the earth. Then all the idolatrous nations as well as the Jews rose up in their might to kill the Divine fire that had been lit in the lamp of Jerusalem (...). Under the fiercest tortures, they did every one of these holy souls to death; with butchers' cleavers, they chopped the pure and undefiled bodies of some of them to pieces and burned them in furnaces, and they stretched some of the followers on the rack and then buried them alive. In spite of this agonizing requital, the Christians continued to teach the Cause of God, and they never drew a sword from its scabbard or even so much as grazed a cheek (*bidūn-i sill-i sayf wa kharāshīdan rūy-i nafsi*). Then in the end the Faith of Christ encompassed the whole earth (...)." He then concludes:

It has now by the above irrefutable proofs been fully established that the Faith of God must be propagated through human perfections, through qualities that are excellent and pleasing, and spiritual behavior. As for the sword, it will only produce a man who is outwardly a believer (*bi-ḍarb-i sayf bi-zāhir muqbil*), and inwardly a traitor and apostate.⁵⁵

Such texts undoubtedly had a huge impact on the Bahā'ī community and ultimately how the concept of martyrdom was deeply transformed, especially when compared to the notion of martyrdom as it existed in the first decade of Bābī history or in the history of Twelver Shiism.

3. *The greater martyrdom: al-shahādāt al-kubrā*

Of the four above-mentioned reactions of the early Bābī community, only the first – to die a passive and nonviolent death in a situation of persecution – was considered acceptable in the Bahā'ī writings.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Bahā'u'llāh seems to

⁵⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 43ff and 51ff.

⁵⁶ Through the writings of Bahā'u'llāh and his successors the Bahā'ī community gradually learned to abandon the practice of *taqiyyih*. See for example Bahā'u'llāh's dissuasion of "the fearful who seeketh to dissemble his faith" (*khā'if-i mastūr*) or his praise of Ashraf's mother encouraging her son not to back down because of the threats of the enemies and to offer up his life for the new religion in Bahā'u'llāh, *Muntakhabātī az Ātibār-i Haḍrat-i Bahā'u'llāh*, Hofheim 2006, no. 64:4 and no. 69. See also Bahā'u'llāh's emphatic denial of press reports falsely stating that out of fear he had fled from Tehran to Baghdad in order to "conceal" (*pinbān*) himself. Only a few passages later Bahā'u'llāh rebukes Mirzā Hādī Hādī Dawlatābādī, who converted to the Bābī religion yet arbitrarily changed his religious identity whenever he deemed it necessary (*Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh Revealed after the Kitāb-i Aqdas*, 40-44). Already in the Persian *Hidden Words* we find the general attitude of concealing or dissembling (*mastūr* or *pinbān*) being discouraged by Bahā'u'llāh. See Bahā'u'llāh, *The Hidden Words. Persian-Arabic-English*, Bundoora 2001, nos. 59, 60, 72. Also see 'Abdu'l-Bahá's praise of Siyyid Muṣṭafā Baghdādī, who—in the early years of Bahā'u'llāh's exile in Bagh-

have preferred yet a different type of martyrdom. In one of his letters to an early believer named Kāzīm (possibly Shaykh Kāzīm Samandar), we come across the term “Greater Martyrdom” (*shabādat-i kubrā*): a form of martyrdom not necessarily involving the physical death of the believer for the sake of his religion, but rather demanding that the individual strive to submit one’s own will to the higher will of God and dedicate one’s life entirely to the service of God’s cause and to humanity.⁵⁷ Similarly, in another letter Bahā’u’llāh writes that “today the greatest of all deeds is service to the Cause,” adding: “martyrdom is not confined to the destruction of life and the shedding of blood. A person enjoying the bounty of life may yet be recorded a martyr in the Book of the Sovereign Lord.”⁵⁸

Thus, although passive and nonviolent blood martyrdom (*Blutzeugnis*) is acceptable in the Bahā’ī religion, one might reasonably argue that the nobler form of martyrdom is the living martyrdom of offering up one’s self in the path of service.⁵⁹ Indeed, during his early years of exile and banishment in Baghdad, Bahā’u’llāh had already alluded to modes of self-sacrifice more commendable than physical death in the path of God. In the last of the Arabic *Hidden Words* he writes:

O Son of Man! Write all that We have revealed unto thee with the ink of light (*midād al-nūr*) upon the tablet of thy spirit (*‘ala lawḥ al-rūḥ*). Should this not be in thy power, then make thine ink (*al-midād*) of the essence of thy heart (*min jawḥar al-fu’ād*). If this thou canst not do, then write with that crimson ink (*al-midād al-aḥmar*) that has been shed in My path (*sufika fī sabīlī*). Sweeter indeed is this to Me than all else, that its light may endure forever.⁶⁰

This passage reveals that physical martyrdom, i.e., to write with the red ink that has been shed in the path of God,⁶¹ is not the only way to bear witness. This *Hidden Word* even suggests that physical martyrdom could be seen as the lowest act of

dad—did not try to hide his belief, though many Bābīs preferred to practice *taqīyyih* and *kitmān* (*Tadbkirat al-Wafā*, Hofheim, 2002, 131). Additionally see Shoghi Effendi’s letter to the Iranian Bahā’ī community written during the early period of his own ministry, in ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamīd Ishrāq-Khāwārī, *Ganjīnīh-yi Hudūd wa Ahkām*, New Delhi, 1980, 456ff. However, one might argue that if *taqīyyih* is conceived along the lines of prudential wisdom (Gr., *phronesis*) rather than as denying one’s faith, then such a principle was not discouraged. On the contrary, Bahā’u’llāh repeatedly warns the members of the Bahā’ī community not to disregard the cardinal virtue of wisdom (*ḥikmat*). See Susan Maneck, “Wisdom and dissimulation: The use and meaning of *ḥikmat* in the Bahā’ī writings and history”, in: *Bahā’ī Studies Review*, vol. 6, 1996, 11ff.

⁵⁷ This letter is published in Bahā’u’llāh, *Lā’ālī al-Ḥikmat*, vol. 3, Rio de Janeiro 1991, 406ff.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Janet Khan, *The Heritage of Light: The Spiritual Destiny of America*, Wilmette 2009, 39.

⁵⁹ For the concept of martyrdom and servitude, see the article of P.O. Akerdahl in this volume.

⁶⁰ See Bahā’u’llāh, *The Hidden Words*, 48f, 55.

⁶¹ The passive form of the Arabic verb *sufika* implies that the shedding of one’s own blood is intended, not the shedding of someone else’s blood. Thus the Bahā’ī concept of martyrdom differs completely from the type of self-inflicted martyrdom observable in the recent phenomenon of suicide bombers. See Khan, *The Heritage of Light*, 35ff.

bearing witness. According to Bahā'u'llāh, two higher testimonial acts of witnessing exist, which we can associate with the concept of *al-shahādāt al-kubrā*. In this regard it is worth mentioning that a relationship between blood and ink is already familiar from Shiite traditions, for example, the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, is reported to have said that the ink of the scholars (*midād al-ʿulamāʾ*) will outweigh the blood of the martyrs (*dimāʾ al-shuhadāʾ*) on the Day of Judgment.⁶²

In accordance with the three alternatives of written testimonies mentioned in the *Hidden Words*, some decades later, during the earliest years of the ministry of Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957), a short commentary on the multiple aspects of the concept of martyrdom was published in the leading international Bahā'ī magazine *Star of the West*. The first aspect described was “to stand bravely and meet death unflinchingly in the path of God, as those wonderful souls have recently done in Persia, without wavering for an instant in constancy nor for a single moment denying their faith.” The second aspect was “to little by little detach one’s heart entirely from this world, laying aside, deliberately, all vanities, worldly seductions, and devoting oneself to the vineyard of God in whatever capacity he is fitted to serve, letting action, word and deed become a telling monument, a fitting praise and an everlasting glory for His Holy Name.” The third aspect was portrayed as “doing the hardest and most difficult things with such willingness and self-sacrifice that all behold it as your pleasure”; accepting one’s lot, be it poverty or wealth, with the same attitude; seeking the company of those who suffer rather than that of the frivolous and pleasure-seeking; dressing simply and plainly such “that your appearance becomes a comfort to the poor and an example to the rich”; accepting “the decree of God” and rejoicing “at the most violent calamities, even when the suffering is beyond endurance” – the fulfilment of the last of these conditions qualified one to become a true martyr.⁶³

Although the commentary is a personal opinion and not an authoritative Bahā'ī statement, the threefold concept of martyrdom helps us to reflect on the aforementioned *Hidden Word*, and also to understand why the title of “martyr” could be bestowed on Bahā'īs – in the time of Bahā'u'llāh on Eastern believers⁶⁴ and in the time of Shoghi Effendi on Westerners⁶⁵ – who were not physically killed by enemies of the Bahā'ī community and had obviously died a natural death.

⁶² See Angelika Neuwirth, “Blut und Tinte – Opfer und Schrift”, in: *Tinte und Blut. Politik, Erotik und Poetik des Martyriums*, ed. by Andreas Kraß et al., Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 25ff.

⁶³ See *Star of the West*, vol. 8, Oxford 1978, 377 (vol. 14, January 1924, No. 10).

⁶⁴ In the years after the martyrdom in 1869 of Badīʿ, a young Bahā'ī who was killed after he personally delivered a letter of Bahā'u'llāh to the Persian Shah, Bahā'u'llāh wrote to another Bahā'ī known as Ibn Aṣḍaq, who yearned for martyrdom, that he should not actively seek physical martyrdom in the path of God. It would be better to strive for the station of the Greater Martyrdom. Since Ibn Aṣḍaq’s wish to die for his religion was judged as pure in its motivation, Bahā'u'llāh gave him the title of “martyr, son of a martyr” (*shahīd ibn shahīd*). See Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh*, vol. 4, Oxford 2000, 303.

⁶⁵ Shoghi Effendi bestowed the title of martyr also upon Bahā'īs of the West. Keith Ransom Kehler was titled “the first martyr” of the American Bahā'ī community. She died in 1933

The Greater Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith may be said to find its religious prototype in early Christianity and in mystical Islam. To be sure, early Christianity was dominated by passive blood martyrdom, a phenomenon that early Christians called “red martyrdom.” Nonetheless, they also held a concept of “white martyrdom” imparting the idea of an almost unreservedly ascetic life dedicated to service to Christ and the needs of the Church.⁶⁶ Since the submission of one's lower carnal self was intended, the Christians' white martyrdom can be compared to the station of a human soul's annihilation (*fanā'*) as we know it from mystical Islam. At the same time, it resembles to some extent the *al-shahādāt al-kubrā* of the Bahā'ī writings, a term that in turn evokes the notion of *al-jihād al-akbar* (*the Greater Jihād*) – Sufi Islam's fight against the lower ego and hence its main tool to achieve the elevated station of *fanā'*.⁶⁷

4. *Munā and the crucifixion of Christ*

With regard to similarities to Christianity, it may be of importance to add that in Bahā'ī scripture the crucifixion of Christ – setting aside his bodily resurrection⁶⁸ – is seen as a historical event,⁶⁹ whereas the majority of the leading Sunni and Twelver Shiite Koran exegetes do not accept it as such.⁷⁰ Therefore the “red martyrdom” of the Bahā'īs not only finds its paradigmatic role model in the martyrdom of the Bāb and the tragedy of Imam Ḥusayn, but also in the sacrificial death of Jesus. Christ's sufferings surely encouraged many Bahā'īs to accept a nonviolent “red martyrdom” in the face of the severe persecutions that afflicted the Bahā'ī community during the late Qājār and Pahlavi eras⁷¹ and which, with the establishment of the Islamic state of Iran,⁷² have intensified in varied ways.⁷³

in Iran (cf. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, Wilmette 1947, 3). The Canadian Bahā'ī May Maxwell also was seen as a martyr of the Faith. She died in 1940 in Argentina (see *ibid.*, 38). Moreover, the German Bahā'ī Adam Benke can be mentioned, who was named “the first European Bahā'ī martyr.” He died in Bulgaria in 1932 (see Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 1, Hofheim 1982, 263).

⁶⁶ See Sasha Deghani, *Martyrium und Messianismus*, Würzburg 2011, 70f.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8f.

⁶⁸ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, chapter II: 23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter I:6.

⁷⁰ Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an. A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*, Oxford 2009.

⁷¹ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet. Religion and Politics in Iran*, Oxford 2000, 238ff.

⁷² For the situation of the Bahā'īs since the beginning of the Iranian revolution, see the article of Moojan Momen in this volume.

⁷³ Some people have become victims of the chimera that the Bahā'ī community is nothing else but an invention of Western imperial powers to subvert the Islamic world. Even Bahā'u'llāh's prohibition of religiously motivated violence and militant *jihad* has been interpreted by a few people in terms of subversion: the annulment of *jihad* would only intend the weakening of the *dār al-islām* and support foreign powers, who desire to rule the Islamic world. See for example ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Gharīb's entry “Al-Qādiyāniyya wa'l-



Fig. 1 Photograph of Munā's bedroom

Appertaining to Christ's example for persecuted Bahā'is, it is notable that a short time ago a set of photographs appeared on the worldwide web. These pictures show the apartment of the family of a young Iranian woman named Munā Maḥmūdnižād. The then seventeen-year-old Munā was one of more than two hundred Bahā'is killed for religious reasons during the first years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.⁷⁴ Some of these photographs show that Munā and her family had images of Christ in their apartment.⁷⁵ In the photograph of Munā's bedroom below a drawing of the crucified Christ can be seen on her bed (see. fig.1).⁷⁶

Munā and many other Bahā'is practiced, as did the early Christians, an entirely nonviolent form of religious belief, willing to die but not to kill for their

Bahā'iyya" on Manbar al-Tawḥīd wa'l-Jihād: URL: <http://tawhed.ws/r?i=xszmcb4> (retrieved on 05.05.2012).

⁷⁴ She was hanged for giving Bahā'ī children classes that were regarded by the Islamic government of Iran as propaganda activities of a "dangerous sectarian movement". For more information about her life, see the webpage: "Omid: A Memorial in Defense of Human Rights" a project of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, URL: <http://www.iranrights.org/english/memorial-case-2990.php>, retrieved 15.04.2012.

⁷⁵ URL: <http://media.photobucket.com/image/mona%20mahmudnizhad/> (photos no. 11-13) (retrieved 15.04.2012).

⁷⁶ See *ibid*, photo no. 11. Mina Yazdani, who knew Munā's family personally, informed me that the Maḥmūdnižād family had these images of Christ in their home because to Munā's father the unity of religions was one of the essential principles of the Bahā'ī Faith and he made no distinction between Bahā'u'llāh and the divine messengers of the past.

religion. However, in view of Lewis's analysis and with reference to a thought-provoking statement of Christoph Bürgel, a professor emeritus of Islamic Studies from Switzerland, one could argue that the nonviolent character of the Bahā'ī religion is due to its own historical stage of early childhood. Bürgel states that while the peaceful character of the Bahā'ī Faith is admirable, its real attitude towards violence can only be manifested when the Bahā'ī community leaves the stage of being an oppressed minority and finds itself in a majority position.⁷⁷ Should such a day arrive it is assumed that the Bahā'ī community will have learned the lessons of religious history, as abundantly reinforced within its own scriptures, and will not follow the example of post-Constantinian Christianity or post-Şafawīd Shiism, both religious confessions which – after becoming majorities and subsequently state religions – turned from nonviolent and oppressed to violent and oppressing religious cultures.

⁷⁷ See Christoph Bürgel, "Die Bahā'ī-Religion und der Friedensgedanke", in: *Iran im 19. Jahrhundert und die Entstehung der Bahā'ī Religion*, ed. by Christoph Bürgel et al., Olms 1998, 30f.

Martyrdom and Servanthood in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths

A Struggle to Defend a Cosmic Order

Per-Olof Åkerdahl (Gävle)

I. The Bābī and Bahā'ī Concepts of Martyrdom and Its Relations to Other Religions

For a long time martyrdom has been included within the general study of each of the Abrahamic religions. It has particularly been treated as a central subject within the study of Shia Islam, Church history, and the Bahā'ī Faith. The importance for Shia Islam stems from the central importance of Imam Ḥusayn and 'Āshūrā'. In Church history the study of martyrdom is connected to the period of persecution of the early Christians. Martyrdom is also of great importance in the study of the Bahā'ī Faith, due to the persecution of the Bahā'īs in Iran.

The concept of martyrdom has been used in a number of religions – including the Bahā'ī Faith – in such a way, that I would like to refer to the study of martyr ideals in different religions as comparative martyr studies. My point is that in order to understand how this concept was taken up in different situations in the history of religion, it is not enough to study it in isolation within a single religion. While the idea of martyrdom has been developed within different religions, a process of exchange between these religions always existed, leading to sufficient similarities between these concepts to discuss their development in a comparative context. One such example is the Bahā'ī Faith, where the idea of martyrdom has its roots in Shia Islam in Iran, but has taken a unique direction in the specific Bābī and Bahā'ī context.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam the idea of martyrdom was developed over centuries. In Islam two separate martyr ideas emerged: a general idea of the martyr and a concept specific to Shia Islam. Though distinct in its development, the idea of martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith is so strongly rooted in Shia Islam that it is basically – in the first instance at least – the same idea. This can to some extent be seen as a parallel to the way the Tamil Tigers started to use the concept of martyrdom. The Christian concept of martyrdom was adopted by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, influenced by the presence of the British colonial system, a background recently illuminated by Peter Schalk.¹ Other ideas have circulated which reveal parallels, referring to similar phenomenon though certainly not

¹ Peter Schalk, *Cavilum valvoo. Auch im Angesicht des Todes werden wir leben*, Dortmund 2006, 180-181.