A Subtle Difference: On Ending One's Own Life in Muslim Religious Thought[1]



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Abstract

In the focus of this article is the complex problem to validate the deliberate disposal of a Muslim's own life for an Islamically sustained cause – popular modus operandi *in the contemporary religiously inspired militant contexts – from a range of religious perspectives. While the general tenor suggest that such an action constitutes deliberate suicide* (qatl nafsah) *and is to be firmly rejected, the eschatological concept of 'martyrdom'* (istishhād) *adds an alternative interpretation that allows for a positive and even commendable appraisal of such an act.*

It is shown here that, from the formative period of Islam onwards, Muslim exegetes, theologians, jurists and philosophers have struggled to come to some kind of agreement over what delineates 'suicide' from 'martyrdom'. Underlying all those attempts is the question what constitutes 'life': it appears that the substantial differences in the appraisal of a Muslim's disposal of her or his own life are, in fact, rooted in different conceptions of 'life' itself. It is shown how the dismissal of such acts as 'suicide' or endorsement as 'martyrdom' was, and is, sustained by complex theological and philosophical arguments, including those of volition versus predetermination, as well as such on vegetative growth versus the eudemonistic 'good life'. Depending on which view is being adopted, one and the same act of disposing one's own life can either be consistently denounced as religiously reprehensible, or equally consistently as religiously commendable.

Every other day we hear of so-called 'suicide attacks' (*'amaliyyāt istishhādiyya*) in Iraq and Syria, as well as other places in the Muslim and increasingly also the non-Muslim world, which seem to have increased in number since the acceleration of asymmetrical military involvement by multiple forces in Muslim majority countries. Almost all these attacks appear to be religiously motivated. The confusing array of groups in the Middle East, mostly under the umbrella of the infamous *Islamic State*, initially *of Iraq and the Levant* (*al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya*

[1]This essay is a substantially revised and enlarged version of an earlier one in German, published as '»Und tötet Euch nicht!« Martyrium im Islam zwischen Heilversprechen und Heilserwartung', in *Leben und Sterben für Gott? Martyriumsvorstellungen in Auseinandersetzung mit dem Gebot der Lebensbewahrung in Antike und Mittelalter*, (ed.) R. Grundmann and S. Fuhrmann (Leiden, 2012), pp. 275–305.

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[*fi'l-ʿIrāq wa'l-Shām*]),[2] all use religious rhetoric to legitimise suicide attacks against military and even civilian targets. Especially where Western forces are directly involved, we hear of 'defensive war', of the technological dominance of invading troops that require alternative counter-strategies, of 'arrogant crusaders' in the lands of Islam;[3] and finally we also hear that the 'brave attackers' will enter paradise as martyrs without delay. This kind of rhetoric, of course, is not new and has been heard again and again over the last couple of decades. During the war between Iran and Iraq from 1980–88, for example, the then 'Leader of the Revolution' (*rahbar-i inqilāb*) Āyatallāh Ruḥallāh Khumaynī used it to inspire young Iranian front-line soldiers.[4] In the 1990s, representatives of various Palestinian Islamist groups, such as *Ḥamās*, the *al-Aqsa Brigades* (*Katāʾib Shuhadāʾ al-Aqṣá*) as paramilitary wing of the rather nationalist *Fataḥ*, and the *Islamic Jihad in Palestine* (*Ḥarakat al-Jihād al-Islāmiyya fī Filasṭīn*), as well as the Lebanese *Ḥizballāh* justified suicide missions against Israeli targets with a similar rhetoric.[5] Finally, after the attacks of 11 September 2001 it was widely disseminated in Muslim circles worldwide that the assailants around Muḥammad ʿAṭṭā have returned as martyrs to the gardens of paradise.

Statements like these have increasingly led to the media-fuelled public perception of the religiously-motivated voluntary surrender of one's own life as an integral part of Islamic belief and practice. Renowned Muslim theorists, like the Qatar-based influential Egyptian scholar Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926), seem to sustain such a perception even further when they do not cast any doubt about how to class such violent acts.[6]

Whether or not such somewhat simplistic rhetoric can withstand a more thorough enquiry will be the question underlying the following investigation. Much of the recent scholarship on the matter appears to take on the rather apologetic perspective of such Muslim theorists and activists and, as a consequence, does not ask the question whether such acts could be regarded as something other than 'martyrdom'.[7] This, however, is the very objective of the present essay: on the premise that the actual empirical fact is nothing more than that a human being voluntarily gives up her or his life, a variety of perspectives will be assumed in

[2]Here belongs also the *Jamāʿat al-Tawḥīd wa'l-Jihād*, previously led by Abū Musʿab al-Zarqāwī (killed 2006) and today better known as *al-Qāʿida in Iraq* (*Qāʿidat al-Jihād fī Bilād al-Rāfidayn*), as well as the Kurdish-Arab *Jaysh Anṣar al-Sunna*, or *Anṣar al-Islām*, led until his capture in 2010 by Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Shāfiʿī (b. unknown). See M. M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, 2007), especially pp. 243–249 and 257f.

[3]See, for example, the infamous declaration of "Just War against Jews and Crusaders" by the *World Islamic Front* (*al-Jabha al-Islāmiyya al-ʿĀlamiyya*), spearheaded by the then leadership of *al-Qāʿida*, Uṣāma bin Lādin (assassinated 2011) and Ayman al-Ẓawāhirī (b. 1951): 'Naṣṣ bayān al-Jabha al-islāmiyya al-ʿālamiyya li-jihād al-yahūd wa'l-ṣalībiyyīn', *al-Quds al-ʿArabī* 9: 2,732 (26 Shawwāl 1418/23 February 1998), p. 3. For a similar rhetoric from around the *Ṭālibān* movement in the Afghan-Pak borderlands, see ʿIrfān al-Ḥaqq Ḥaqqānī, *Ṣalībī dahshat-gardī awr ʿālam al-islām: Ṭālibān-i Afghānistān ke tanāẓur meṇ* (Akoṛah Khaṭṭak, 1425/2004).

[4]See E. Butel, 'Martyre et sainteté dans la littératur de guerre Irak-Iran', in *Saints et héros du Moyen-Orient contemporain*, (ed.) C. Mayeur-Jaouen (Paris, 2002), pp. 301–317, here pp. 302–313.

[5]See, for example, M. Kramer, 'Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad', *American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 47:8 (1994), pp. 20–43, here especially pp. 32–38; E. Alshech, 'Egoistic Martyrdom and Ḥamās' Success in the 2005 Municipal Elections: A Study of Ḥamās Martyrs' Ethical Wills, Biographies, and Eulogies', *Die Welt des Islams* 48:1 (2008), pp. 23–49, here especially pp. 32–38.

[6]See A. Asfaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God:* Jihād *and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (New York, 2013), pp. 231–235.

[7]Besides the mentioned work of Asfaruddin, other recent studies in this regard are M. Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics* (Cambridge, 2014), and L. M. Franke, *At the Doors of Paradise: Discourses of Female Self-Sacrifice, Martyrdom and Resistance in Palestine* (Würzburg, 2015).

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which this empirical fact is interpreted in different way, appraising it as 'martyrdom' as well as condemning it as suicide, depending on various circumstantial factors.

While this article cannot be claimed with a clear conscience to answer this question exhaustively and conclusively, it will nonetheless be a rewarding undertaking to outline this complex field of manifold and oftentimes contradictory approaches to the tense relationship between 'suicide', or at least 'the acceptance of being killed' on the one hand, and the 'imperative to preserve life',[8] as developed by Muslim jurists, theologians and philosophers from the early Islamic times onward, on the other. At the core of this whole complex lies the problem of how 'life' as such can be defined. Depending on how the question is answered, general theological and philosophical problems arise against this backdrop, such as the fundamental capacity of humans to autonomously decide over their fate, especially in the light of the dichotomous relationship of the promise and the expectation of salvation. The considerably differing responses to such issues were, and are, ultimately responsible for the establishment of variant legal praxes, as shall be illustrated in places below. Finally, an attempt will be made to link the insights derived from these at times highly specialised discussions in previous centuries to the contemporary practice of suicide attacks, and this way to tie back the initial observation to fundamental discussions on Muslim belief and practice that have traversed many centuries of Muslim religious thought.

"Those Who Believe Kill in the «Path of God»" [9]

On a cursory viewing, the argument of Islamist ideologues seems perfectly plausible: after all, and this is perhaps the smallest common denominator of all Muslims whatever their denomination, it is imperative to testify to God's fundamental Oneness (*tawḥīd*) and the prophethood of Muḥammad. How could this be done any more emphatically than by sacrificing one's own life in the Path of God? Already a link between the two can be established etymologically to support this hypothesis, at least ostensibly. After all, the terms for the Islamic creed (*shahāda*) and for martyrdom (*istishhād*) are derived from one and the same verbal root (*sh-h-d*). Over and above, this etymological nexus touches very much upon

[8]These phrases (trans. JPH) were used to frame the problem by the organisers of conference 'Leben oder sterben für Gott? Martyriumsvorstellungen in Auseinandersetzung mit dem Gebot der Lebensbewahrung in Antike und Mittelalter' at the University of Münster, Germany, in June 2010, from which the present considerations have been developed. See the conference flyer URL: www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/religion_und_politik/aktuelles/2010/05_2010/programm_tagung_leben_oder_sterben_fuer_gott.pdf (last accessed 22 May 2017).

[9]Qur'ān 4 (al-Nisā'): 76: *alladhīna āmanū yuqātilūna fī sabīli 'llāh*. The verb 'yuqātilūna' is usually rendered in translations of the Qur'ān as 'fighting'. This is also the preferred understanding of Asfaruddin, *Striving*, 35-43, based very much on the initially possible reading of it in active (*yuqātilūna*) or passive voice (*yuqātalūna*), as discussed by numerous commentators of the Qur'ān in reference to 22 (al-Ḥajj): 39f. The current standard edition of the Qur'ān (Cairo, 1923), however, has the verb vocalised in active voice and thus enshrined this meaning against the eventual intervention of classical commentators.Especially in the contexts under review here, the semantics of 'fighting' can be narrowed down even further to the physical act of engagement, e.g. in battle. Moreover, considering the basic meaning of the verbal root 'q-t-l' (to kill), as well as the fact that the third form derived from it can also be used reciprocally, however, I have decided to translate it perhaps bluntly as 'killing one another', as this would indeed be the ultimate result of an active engagement in hostilities. Classical Arabic dictionaries seem to support this view: see al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-ʿayn: murattaban ʿalá ḥurūf al-muʿjam*, (ed.) ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Handāwī, 4 vols. (Beirut, 1424/2003), vol. 3, pp. 358f; Abū 'l-Faḍl ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab* 20 vols. (Cairo, 1300-7h), Vol. 14, pp. 64-69, especially pp. 66f.

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the promise of salvation: has not the Prophet himself held out the immediate prospect of paradise to the true martyrs, the *shuhadāʾ*? Is, therefore, to put it pointedly, the voluntary surrender of one's own life in the path of God not the most certain way to attain salvation? Are therefore the ʿAṭṭās, Zarqāwīs, *et cetera* indeed not the firmest among the believers?

Of course, the case is by far not as simple as it would seem from these few deliberations. Indeed, religiously motivated self-annihilation in whatever Muslim context is a most complex legal and theological matter. The relevant passages in the authoritative texts — Qurʾān, Prophetic *ḥadīth* and the collected traditions of the Shiite Imams — are by no means entirely unequivocal,[10] a fact that is hardly suitable for bringing about clarity. This is made even more complicated when we recall that the Qurʾān had not been fundamentally codified before the first two decades following the death of the Prophet, his statements (*aḥādīth* and *akhbār*) only in the third century, and those of the Shiite Imāms not before the seventh century after the Hijra. This is of utmost significance already with regard to the Qurʾān. Because of the historical haziness for the formative period of Islam, which, as repeatedly indicated by Michael Cook and others, resulted for a long time from a lack of contemporary Arabic textual material,[11] it cannot be rightfully assumed that the current understanding of the standard Qurʾānic references to the matter of 'martyrdom' is identical with that during the lifetime of Muḥammad. Even a look into the numerous Qurʾānic commentaries, some of which assumed canonical status quite early,[12] is of little help as soon as we allow for a historically determined semantic shift in the process of textual comprehension: the understanding of the commentators would then be that of their respective time, and not necessarily that of the time of the actual revelation.[13] For the commentators of the Qurʾān, therefore, the verbal statements of the Prophet appear to have played a significant role in their attempt to better understand the text of the divine revelation. After all, they usually relate to concrete historical occurrences and may have therefore substantially impacted the understanding of the Qurʾānic passages in question. On the other hand — and this perhaps as a kind of disclaimer — even here we need to allow for an uncertain relation which results from the fact that again we are confronted with already quite standardised texts.[14]

A core-event to which we owe an important Prophetic tradition on the issue of 'martyrdom' is the Battle of Badr in 624 CE, in which the Muslims, who under the leadership of the Prophet had migrated to Medina only one year earlier, achieved their first important

[10]See Asfaruddin, *Striving*, pp. 95-148.

[11]See, for example, M. Cook and P. Crone, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977); M. Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 61–76. Meanwhile, however, new epigraphic evidence, as well as the analysis of the seventh century CE fragments of Qurʾānic manuscripts has led reputed academics in the field to view the traditional Muslim narrative with much lesser suspicion.

[12]Here belongs not least the *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-qurʾān* of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and the Imāmite *Majmaʿ al-bayān li-ʿulūm al-qurʾān* of Faḍl ibn Ḥasan al-Ṭabarisī (d. 548/1153).

[13]On Qurʾān 3 (Āl ʿImrān): 138-42, see, for example, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-qurʾān*, (ed.) ʿAbdallāh ibn Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, 26 vols. (Cairo, 1322/2001), Vol. 6, pp. 73-92, especially p. 88; ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿUmar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1330h), Vol. 2, pp. 44f; al-Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-mushtahir bi'l-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32 vols. (Beirut, 1401/1981), Vol. 9, pp. 12-20, especially p. 18.

[14]For instance, see Abū Bakr Abdallāh ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (Cairo, 1986), especially p. 19; R. Sellheim, 'Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte. Die Muhammed-Biographie [*sic*] des Ibn Isḥāq', *Oriens* 18 (1965-6), pp. 33–91; J. Brown, *The Canonization of Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2007).

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military victory over a numerically much superior Meccan force. The social implications of this event must not be underestimated, all the more so for a tribally organised society such as the Arabian one. After all, on the battlefield at Badr the Muslims were meant to engage for the first time ever with armed force against members of their own tribe; their initial reluctance which is mentioned even in the Qurʾān (2:216)[15] is therefore hardly surprising. In fact, this points to a fundamental conflict within the early Muslim community-cum-society, namely that to bear testimony to the Islamic faith and, thus, to the new community of Muslims, necessitated that the principle of tribal loyalty be subordinated thereto.

The Prophet himself, so we read in the standard biography of Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (d. 151/768) in the redaction of ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) as well as in the canonical *ḥadīth* collection of Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261/875), promised paradise in the name of God to all those who lost their lives on the battlefield.[16] The effectiveness of this promise was corroborated by the victory of the Muslims: only the one who is firm in his belief can be assured of God's support. This idea refers already to the following skirmish between the two warring parties at Uḥud, which ended for the Muslims in defeat, not least because in their ranks were allegedly numerous sceptics, or 'hypocrites' (*munāfiqūn*),[17] that is to say, those whose faith was only an outward profession, while on the inside they remained weak-minded or even without belief altogether.[18]

What can be hypostatised here is, though, that the confluence of righteousness and martyrdom had initially been a strategic move of the Prophet in his desire to overcome the traditional tribal solidarity in exchange for the religion of Islam as new socially cohesive force in the Arabian peninsula. In this pursuit allegiance to the young Muslim community was put in a soteriological context: loyalty against the community reflects unconditional trust in, and submission to God, remunerated with eternal bliss in the Hereafter. Therefore, so the widespread understanding, God leads, in more or less regular intervals, the community into temptation in order to test the firmness of its belief (*fitna*).[19] Herein, in turn, lies another step in the development of Islamic conceptions of martyrdom, that is, their relationship with apocalyptic conceptions. After all, right after the death of the Prophet one calamity followed upon another, until for the first time, in the so-called 'Great *fitna*' between 656 and 661 CE, Muslims took to arms against other Muslims and the community, once unified in belief (*umma wāḥida*), fell irrevocably apart into denominations.

[15] *kutiba ʿalaykumu 'l-qitālu wa-huwa kuruhun lakum. wa-ʿasá an takrahū shayʾan wa-huwa khayrun lakum wa-ʿasá an tuḥibbū shayʾan wa-huwa sharrun lakum. wa-allāhu yaʿlamu wa-antum lā taʿlamūna*. This verse is also oftentimes referred to in commentaries of the Qurʾān with regard to the ethics of war, including the constraint in fighting out of patient forbearance (*ṣabr*) and the peaceful resolution of conflict. See Asfaruddin, *Striving*, pp. 65–70 *et passim*.

[16] See ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, (ed.) Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā *et al.*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 2nd edition, 1375/1955), Vol. 1, p. 627; Abū Ḥusayn Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, (ed.) Ṣidqī Jamīl al-ʿAṭṭār (Beirut, 1424/2004), pp. 962f (Kitāb al-imāra, bāb thubūt al-janna li'l-shuhadāʾ; especially ḥadīth 3, no. 4,808); also *ibid*., p. 906 (Kitāb al-jihād wa'l-siyar, bāb ghazwat Uḥud, ḥadīth 1, no. 4,533).

[17] See Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1,368 (Kitāb ṣifāt al-munāfiqīn wa-aḥkāmihim, ḥadīth 8, no. 6,925).

[18] Extensively on this term, see C. P. Adang, 'Hypocrites and Hypocrisy', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, (ed.) J. Dammen McAuliffe, 6 vols. (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2001–6), Vol. 2, p. 468.

[19] See, for example, Qurʾān 8 (al-Anfāl): 28, 64 (al-Taghābun): 15; on these the commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 11, pp. 126f, Vol. 23, pp. 18f; Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 3, p. 48, Vol. 4, pp. 135f; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 15, pp. 156f, Vol. 30, p. 27.

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For Whom the Bell Tolls

The events around the 'Great *fitna*' seemed to correspond with the state of the world on the eve of Judgement Day, as described in the seventy-fifth *sūra* of the Qurʾān: men and women will surrender to sin, will assign more significance to worldly matters than to the otherworldly ones, will turn away from God and renounce Him openly; on Judgement Day they will therefore be sufficient witnesses against themselves.[20] Already Muḥammad had, in a *ḥadīth* that is most frequently referred to in contemporary Salafist[21] circles in the arguments for and against a Sunnite orthodoxy, predicted the disintegration of the Muslim faith community (*umma*) into numerous groups, of which only one will be righteous and therefore not subject to eternal doom in the fires of hell.[22] The question that inevitably rose from this was which one of the various groups would attain salvation; it is therefore emphatically a question regarding the criteria of righteousness. The time to prove oneself as true believer was running short, because, after all, all signs pointed towards Judgement Day being imminent: the unity of the *umma* had been destroyed once and for all, tyrants had usurped power in the name of Islam and erected pagan temples, while the scholars — guardians of the *sharīʿa* — had let themselves be corrupted by tyrannical rulers and, thus, openly mocked the revealed law.[23]

That such apocalyptic thought had developed most emphatically in Shiite circles is not really surprising. After all, the Shiites have always understood themselves as true retainers of the male descendants of the House of the Prophet, the only ones who were able to rightly guide the community in the succession to Muḥammad.[24] From their perspective, tyrannical rule set in immediately after the death of the Prophet — something that found its ritualised expression in the formulaic cursing (*laʿnat allāh*) of the first three Caliphs —; its culmination however was only reached in the course of the 'Great *fitna*' and the first two Muslim ruling dynasties of the Umayyads and Abbasids. Even religious architecture was not spared from the criticism of the early Shiite apocalyptics. Thus, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, erected by orders of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 685–705 CE), was considered an equally illegitimate structure as the enlargement of the pilgrimage site at Mecca by the

[20] See Qurʾān 75 (al-Qiyāma): 5, 14, 20f and 31f.

[21] For a very considerate discussion of this label, see J. Nedza, '«Salafismus» — Überlegungen zur Schärfung einer Analysekategorie', in *Salafismus: Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam*, (ed.) B. T. Said and H. Fuad (Freiburg i.B., 2014), pp. 80–105.

[22] See al-Ḥāfiẓ Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, (ed.) F. Abd al-Bāqī, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1373/1954), Vol. 2, p. 1,322 (Kitāb al-fitan, bāb iftirāq al-umam, ḥadīth 3, no. 3,993); Muḥammad ibn Īsá al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ wa-huwa Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, (ed.) M. F. Abd al-Bāqī, 5 vols (Cairo, 1938–58), Vol. 5, pp. 25f (Kitāb al-īmān, bāb mā jāʾ iftirāq hādhihi 'l-umma, aḥādīth 1f, nos. 2,640f); Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath al-Sijistānī, *al-Sunan*, (ed.) M. Muḥyī 'l-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1983), Vol. 4, pp. 197f (Kitāb al-sunna, bāb sharḥ al-sunna, ḥadīth 1, no. 4,596). Extensively on this important *ḥadīth* especially for the Muslim heresiographical tradition, see J. van Ess, *Der Eine und das Anderes: Beobachtungen an häresiographischen Texten*, 2 vols. (Berlin and New York, 2011), Vol. 1, pp. 7–64.

[23] See D. Cook, 'Moral Apocalyptic in Islam', *Studia Islamica* 86 (1997), pp. 37–69, here pp. 40–42, 44–46 and 54f.

[24] This claim was very soon supported by a complex theology, according to which God would never leave the community of believers without an infallible (*maʿṣūm*) leader: "Indeed, since the death of Prophet Adam—Peace be upon him!—God has never left this earth without an Imam to guide [the people] towards Him. This Imam is His Proof for His servants [*wa-huwa ḥujjatuhu ʿalá ʿibādih*]; and the earth will never be devoid of a proof of God for his servants". Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, (ed.) ʿA. Akbar Ghaffārī, 3 vols. (Qom, 1384sh/2005), Vol. 1, pp. 94f (Kitāb al-ḥujja, bāb anna 'l-arḍ lā takhluw min ḥujjatin, ḥadīth 8, no. 452).

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Abbasid caliphs al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75 CE) and al-Mahdī (r. 775–85 CE), because in the eyes of these critics these structures served only for the glorification of the unjust rule of their respective patrons and not, as they were supposed to, for the praise of God alone. Likewise, in the incipient attachment of religious scholars to the court of the caliph especially at Baghdad these early Shiite apocalyptics saw clear signs of a growing corruption of religious scholarship.[25] Because of the elevated role of the scholars in society as trustees of religious knowledge, their abuse of this position could only serve as indication for the general decline of the Muslim community as a whole.

The righteous believer, in the reverse conclusion, would therefore necessarily be persecuted and a sufferer; the model here are the Prophet and the first few Muslims who had to endure massive hostilities by the Meccans prior their immigration to Yathrib, the later Madinat al-Nabī.[26] Accordingly, such a righteous belief qualified in the first few Islamic centuries only very few among the non-Shiites, among them the patronymous founders of two of the canonical orientations in Sunnite jurisprudence Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/796) and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).[27] The majority, however, of those who would hold fast to their faith despite persecution and suffering to the final consequence, that is, the death for firm religious convictions, were, at least according to their self-perception, the Shiites. Martyrology therefore consistently plays a central role in Shiite apocalyptic scenarios; all their Imams, at least in the tenor of the later canonised doctrine of the Imamate, did not meet, and necessarily could not have met a natural end, because, after all, they were be foremost among the righteous in a hostile environment. This, however, appears slightly problematic in some particular cases such as that of the grandson of the Prophet, al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī, because he had abdicated from his right to the caliphate in favour of the usurper Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (r. 661–80 CE) and retreated to Medina where he is said to have led a not entirely spotless life. When the Shiite account let him fall victim to an assassination instigated by Muʿāwiya, al-Ḥasan was rehabilitated for posterity as a martyr.

While almost all the Imams are regarded to have fallen prey to malicious attacks, the fate of the third Imam al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī stands out significantly, and thus became styled the paradigm of Shiite conceptions of martyrdom. After all, according to the Shiite narrative al-Ḥusayn, unlike his elder brother al-Ḥasan, had not recognised the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliph, and subsequently set out with a small party of about thirty companions towards Kufa, in order to lead there the community of his faithful followers.[28] Before the group was able to reach the city, however, it was stalled at Kerbala by an overpowering Umayyad force for a couple of days until, on the 10th of October 680 — the 10th of

[25] See D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton, 2002), pp. 232f and 247-254.

[26] See Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, Vol. 1, pp. 264-269, 289-291, 317-321, 350-364 and 395f.

[27] See M.Q. Zaman, 'The Caliphs, the ʿUlamāʾ, and the Law: Defining the Role and Function of the Caliph in the Early ʿAbbāsid Period', *Islamic Law and Society* 4:1 (1997), pp. 1–36, here pp. 6f; J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols. (Berlin and New York, 1991-7), Vol. 3, pp. 446-502; J.-P. Hartung, 'Enacting the Rule of Islam: On Courtly Patronage of Religious Scholars', in *Court Culture in the Muslim World. Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries*, (ed.) *idem* and A. Fuess (London and New York, 2011), pp. 295-325, here p. 309.

[28] See *ibid.*, pp. 199-201. The model for this has been with great likelihood Lūṭ ibn Yaḥyá Abū Mikhnaf, *Taʾrīkh Abī Mikhnaf fī maqtāl al-Ḥusayn – ʿalayhi al-salām* (Bombay, 1311h), pp. 6-8.

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Muḥarram of the 61 AH — they were almost completely annihilated by the Umayyad troops, and their corpses severely mutilated.[29]

Much more clearly than the assassination of his two predecessors and eventual nine successors, the death of al-Ḥusayn and his companions on the battlefield of Kerbala signifies the apocalyptic constellation: very few righteous believers, who remain steadfast and attain therefore salvation, stand in opposition to an overwhelming majority of tyrants and misguided ones, who will consequently be subject to eternal doom.

In the complex formative period of Islam, the Shia were one of the first groups to claim the exclusive trusteeship of orthodoxy for themselves.[30] Consistently, all actions performed or endured by a Shiite are to be understood as testimonies of righteous belief; necessarily this also includes death at the hands of a non-Shiite. Not too much later however, that is in the early Abbasid era, the Sunnites emerged as the numerically largest denomination which, quite analogous to the Shiites, claimed an exclusive monopoly on orthodoxy, and even tried to enforce this during three successive reigns by way of caliphal decree.[31]

Because martyrdom also here became the litmus test for righteousness, the underlying concept did not remain confined to Shiite expressions of Islam, but began to play an increasingly important role within an emerging distinct Sunnite eschatology. In that context the martyr assumes an important position in a number of ways. In this world he, or she, is a reminder and example for the living, and constitutes, in fact, the paradigm of the righteous believer. In another way the martyr relates for the living of this world to the one to come: after all, before this world comes to its end the living are called upon to avenge (*naghma*) the death of the martyrs in the course of the Battles of the Final Days (*al-malāḥim*). Finally, the martyrs will, so it was imagined by the early Muslim apocalyptics, intercede with God on behalf of the true believers.[32]

Such an extraordinary role that has been ascribed to martyrs within the Islamic eschatology was not limited to its formative period, substantially characterised as that was by manifold apocalyptic thought. Responsible for this was the Qurʾānically sustained view that "those who are killed in the Path of God [are not] dead; they are rather alive with their Lord, receiving provisions".[33] This passage, revealed in the context of the Battle of Badr, is fortified

[29]See *ibid*., 33–52; also Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-Ṭabarī: taʾrīkh al-umam wa'l-mulūk*, 6 vols. (Beirut, 2nd edition, 1426/2005), Vol. 3, pp. 1,031–1.059.

[30]The chronology here remains slightly problematic, because already from the 'Proto-Shia', that is, the partisans of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the group soon to be known as 'Khārijiyya' had split off, which claimed even against the 'Mainstream Shiites' an exclusive monopoly of safeguarding orthodoxy. However, despite the acknowledgement of the problems that may result from such a simplification of extremely complex processes in the formation of religious traditions, the Khārijiyya shall here, for pragmatic reasons, nonetheless be regarded as part of the early Shia. This is even supported by the fact that the religious-political worldview of that group has originally fed on the understanding of the legitimacy of ʿAlī's succession to the Prophet. See, for example, van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, i. 8 and 20f. That the issue of orthodoxy played, and still plays, a pivotal role in the Shia is indicated by the fact that the authoritative Imāmī collections of *ḥadīth* (*al-kutub al-arbaʿa*) contain substantial chapters on this matter. For instance, see al-Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, Vol. 1, pp. 285–511 (Kitāb al-īmān wa'l-kufr).

[31]See Zaman, *Caliphs*.

[32]See Cook, *Studies*, pp. 202 and 256. Later, the idea of intercession increasingly receded into the background: in the process of canonising the constituents of the (Sunnī) Muslim creed – enshrined in the *ʿAqāʾid* literature – such claims were seen as theologically barely sustainable. See, for example, the various examples of such catechisms in Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh, 1994).

[33]Qurʾān 3 (Āl ʿImrān): 169: *wa-lā taḥsabanna 'lladhīna qutilū fī sabīli 'llāhi amwātan bal aḥyāʾun ʿinda rabbihim yurzaqūna*.

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in the exegetical tradition, however, emphasizing mainly the fact that those killed in the Path of God enjoy the pleasure of proximity with the Divine and "eat from the fruits of Paradise [*taʾkulu min thimār al-janna*]"[34] and explicating where exactly these people will take up abode. In contrast, the fact that their ascent is immediate appears not to have seen by the classical *mufassirūn* as major point of contestation that would require detailed elucidation. Only a theologically and philosophically trained mind, like that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), would ask questions about the nature of death in this special context, thus showing a greater sensitivity to the somewhat mediatory position of those killed in the Path of God between earthly and heavenly existence.[35] For Rāzī, and here he clearly exposed the Ashʿarite proclivities that will concern us more further below, the empirical phenomena usually associated with death do not apply *in esse*, as it would well be in God's capacity to work what, from a human perspective, appears as a miracle.

Be it as it may, the special ontic position of martyrs is ultimately responsible for the special treatment that they have been subjected to in later religious legal thought in the context of the handling of corpses in conformity with the *sharīʿa*. Thus, for example, the bodies of martyrs are exempted from the usual ceremonial regulations, such as the washing of the corpse (*ghusl*) ideally performed immediately at the onset of death, because a martyr is considered to be already in a state of ritual purity and is therefore buried in the clothes that he or she wears. This practice is attributed to the Prophet himself, who ordered the burial of the bodies of those Muslims who had fallen at the hands of the infidel Meccans on the battlefield of Uḥud without having performed the requiescat over them.[36] This custom was even reinforced by the story of Ḥanẓala ibn Abī ʿĀmir who had hastened to battle without performing the ritual ablution required after sexual intercourse. The washing of his body, so the Prophet claimed to have seen himself, was therefore carried out by an angel so that Ḥanẓala, who was thereupon given the epithet 'the one washed by the angels' (*ghasīl al-malāʾika*), could be buried in ritual purity.[37] Therefore, while the Muslim jurists followed the Prophetic precedent and accepted the special status of martyrs by an adequate discussion of the legal regulations, they nonetheless appeared very uneasy with regard to the establishment of definite cognitive criteria for the distinction of martyrs from those who have died otherwise.[38] In practice, it seems therefore that it was left to the discretion of the respective observer to attribute the predication 'martyr' to a deceased person because of his or her conduct in life, and to treat that person accordingly. The complexity of establishing a general legally valid definition of 'martyr' points toward a more far-reaching matter:

[34]al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 6, pp. 227–236, here pp. 228 and 231. See also, for example, al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 2, p. 48.

[35]See al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 9, pp. 90–97.

[36]See, for example, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (ed.) Ṣiddqī Jamīl al-ʿAṭṭār (Beirut, 1425–6/2005), p. 317 (Kitāb al-janāʾiz, bāb al-ṣalāt ʿalá 'l-shahīd, ḥadīth 1, no. 1,343; bāb man lam yara ghasla 'l-shuhadāʾ, ḥadīth 1, no. 1,346; bāb man yuqaddam fi'l-Uḥud, aḥādīth 1–2, nos. 1,347f); Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, Vol. 3, p. 195 (Kitāb al-janāʾiz, bāb fī shahīd yughsal, aḥādīth 2f, nos. 3,134f); al-Imām Mālik ibn Anas, *Muwaṭṭaʾ al-Imām Mālik*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá al-ʿAẓmī, 8 vols. (Abu Dhabi, 1420/2004), Vol. 3, p. 660 (Kitāb al-jihād, bāb al-ʿamal fī ghasla 'l-shuhadāʾ, ḥadīth 2, no. 1,684). Compare al-Qāḍī Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-kharāj li'l-imām ṣāḥib Abī Ḥanīfa* (Cairo, 1302 AH), pp. 131f; Muḥammad Amīn ibn ʿĀbidīn, *Radd al-muḥtār ʿalá 'l-durr al-mukhtār sharḥ tanwīr al-abṣār*, (ed.) ʿĀ. A. Abd al-Mawjūd and ʿA. M. Muʿawwaḍ, 12 vols. (Riyadh, 1423/2003), Vol. 3, pp. 161f.

[37]See Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, Vol. 2, p. 75; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, Vol. 1, pp. 396f; compare Ibn ʿĀbidīn, *Radd*, Vol. 3, pp. 158f.

[38]For example, see *ibid*., Vol. 3, pp. 157f and 164–166.

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Not least because of the privileged position that martyrs obtain within Islamic eschatological thought — and on this point Shiites and Sunnites hardly differ from one another — as well as the promise of immediate heavenly pleasures, the suspicion arises that a Muslim could deliberately seek the death of the martyr. The question that results from here is whether one is actually allowed to get intentionally into situations in which one's own death is inevitable, and thus to generate at least the possibility of being viewed as a 'martyr' by posterity. Strictly speaking, this refers to the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between martyrdom and suicide, a fact that is once again mirrored in the rather ambivalent treatment of this issue in the religious legal literature.

Whether or not the origins of this uneasy relationship between martyrdom and religiously motivated suicide are indeed to be sought in the nascent Shiite *milieu* is most difficult to establish here with certainty. However, it is a fact that in this very context at least one very early and succinct example can be found for what Eli Alshech — even though for a quite different situation — has persuasively called 'egoistic martyrdom':[39] only about three years after the martyrdom of the Imam al-Ḥusayn and his companions at Kerbala, a group of supporters from Kufa gathered together and went out towards Damascus intending to avenge the death of the Imam and prove their loyalty to him, driven by shame that they had not made any effort to run to the battlefield in support. For realists, the whole undertaking was a suicide mission right from the onset, corroborated by the fact that the once again numerically much superior Umayyad troops completely devastated this group, which then became euphemistically known as the 'penitents' (*al-tawwābūn*).[40]

What remained of the legacy of the *tawwābūn* was martyrdom and mourning as Shiite *leitmotif*, enshrined in various rituals especially in relation to the annual remembrance of the Battle of Kerbala. Some of these rituals, in which young men especially inflict bodily pain and open wounds on themselves are considered highly controversial even among learned Shiites,[41] because they stand in clear contradiction to the Islamic legal category of *ḥurma*, the imperative of bodily integrity.[42]

"As Long as the Pitcher of the Body Prevails, We Shall Not Reach the Water of Life!" [43]

The normative basis for the imperative to maintain the integrity of the human body, which *in extremis* includes the prohibition of the religiously motivated abandonment of one's own

[39]See Alshech, *Egoistic Martyrdom*, p. 35.

[40]See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, Vol. 3, pp. 1,102-113. The perhaps earliest and most comprehensive account of the Battle of ʿAyn al-Warda, although from a clearly biased perspective, is the *Kitāb Sulaymān ibn Ṣurad wa-ʿAyn al-Warda*, or *Kitāb akhbār al-tawwābīn bi-ʿAyn al-Warda*, of Abū Mikhnaf Lūṭ ibn Yaḥyá al-Azdī (d. 157/775), which has only survived in references of other works. On the impact of this work on Ṭabarī's *Ta'rīkh* see U. Sezgin, *Abū Miḫnaf. Ein Beitrag zur Historiographie der umaiyadischen Zeit* (Leiden, 1971), pp. 40–42.An interesting further point about the *tawwabūn* in this respect is that their name has been understood as a reference to the Qurʾānic verse 2 (al-Baqara): 54, wherein the Israelites are ordered by Moses to kill themselves in expiation of their sin of worshiping the Golden Calf. See M. M. Dakkake, *The Charismatic Community. Shiʿite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, 2007), pp. 90–91.

[41]See, for instance, W. Ende, 'The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamāʾ', *Der Islam* 55 (1978), pp. 19–36.

[42]See B. Krawietz, *Die Ḥurma. Schariatrechtlicher Schutz vor Eingriffen in die körperliche Unversehrtheit nach arabischen Fatwas des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1991).

[43]This is a paraphrase from the famous *Maṣnavī-yi maʿnavī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273): *sajdah natuvān kard bar āb-i ḥayāt, tā niyābam-i zayn-i tīn-i khākī najāt* (Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad-i Balkhī, *Maṣnavī. Muqaddimah va taḥlīl, taṣḥīḥ-i matn bar asās-i nuskha'hā-yi zamān-i Mawlānā va nazdīk-i zamān-i ū*, (ed.) M. Istiʿlāmī, 7 vols. [Tehran: Zavār, 3rd edition, 1371-4sh], Vol. 2, p. 59).

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life, can only be considered unequivocal if the Prophetic sayings are given preference over the Qurʾān, as from God's final revelation to humankind no absolutely clear judgement can be derived. Even verse 4:29 allows for alternative interpretations: after all, 'wa-lā taqtulū anfusakum' can be understood in a reflexive way, but equally in a reciprocal one. This means that, besides the understanding 'And do not kill yourself', 'And do not kill one another' would be equally possible; in fact, in the classical Qurʾānic commentaries the latter interpretation seems to dominate.[44] The Prophet himself, however, appeared to have not wanted to allow any doubt about how to class suicide when he promised the perpetual recurrence of the chosen way of death of a suicide in hell,[45] or when he refused to speak the requiescat (*ṣalāt al-janāza*) over the grave of a suicide.[46] The practice of the Prophet himself, so it seems, would also support the legal prohibition of the deliberate sacrifice of one's own life even in a quest of martyrdom. In this light, statements like those of the attackers of 11 September 2001, which refer clearly to the desired attainment of heavenly pleasures as reward for their deliberately abandoning their own lives in what they considered to be acts of worship,[47] appear highly questionable in their focussing on a result.

In Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*), however, this matter is by no means conclusively decided, not even within each single one of the canonical orientations (*madhāhib al-fiqh*). Thus, while the early Ḥanafiyya and the Shāfiʿiyya initially advocated diametrically opposed positions,[48] later, for example the Ḥanafite jurist Muḥammad Amīn ibn ʿĀbidīn (d. 1258/1842) in late Ottoman Syria dissociated himself from those of his Ḥanafite predecessors, prominently among them Muḥammad ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Ḥaṣkafī (d. 1088/1677), and drew much nearer to the Shafiʿite view when he specified that the crux of the matter was to be sought in the intent (*ʿamd*) of a suicide;[49] this issue will have to be discussed in more detail below. Generally, within the religious jurisprudence of all canonical orientations of Sunnite Islam, to which the discussion shall be confined here for practical reasons, the dominant interpretation of the Prophet's refusal to perform the requiescat over the grave of a suicide seems to be that he meant to deter others from eventual imitation,[50] and therefore appeared to class suicide as a

[44]See F. Rosenthal, 'On Suicide in Islam', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66:3 (1946), pp. 239–259, here pp. 241f; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 6, pp. 638f; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 2, pp. 81f; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 9, p. 74; A. T. Karamustafa, 'Suicide', in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 5, pp. 159–162.

[45]See al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, pp. 322f (Kitāb al-janāʾiz, bāb mā jāʾ fī qātil al-nafs, aḥādīth 1–3, nos. 1,363–5), 1.475 (Kitāb al-ṭibb, bāb shurb al-samm wa'l-dawāʾ bihi wa-bimā yukhāfu minhu wa'l-khabīth, ḥadīth 1, no. 5,778); Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, pp. 1,319f (Kitāb al-dhikr wa'l-duʿāʾ wa'l-tawba wa'l-istighfār, bāb karāhat tamannī al-mawt li-ḍurrin nazala bih, aḥādīth 1, 3 and 6, nos. 6,709, 6,711 and 6,714).

[46]See *ibid*., pp. 443 (Kitāb al-janāʾiz, bāb tark al-ṣalāt ʿalá 'l-qātil nafsah, ḥadīth 1, no. 2,151).

[47]See A. Fuess, M. Khalfaoui and T. Seidensticker (editors and translators), 'Die «Geistliche Anleitung» der Attentäter des 11. September', in *Terror im Dienste Gottes: Die "Geistliche Anleitung" der Attentäter des 11. September 2001* (ed.) H. G. Kippenberg and T. Seidensticker (Frankfurt/M., 2004), pp. 17–27 [Arabic text in the appendix pp. 1–10], here pp. 18f [3], 22 [7] and 27 [10].

[48]See Abū Yūsuf, *Kharāj*, p. 89. Compare the view of the renowned Shāfiʿite jurist Yaḥyá ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1278), according to which "he who takes his life is to be washed like all others, and to be prayed over". (Muḥyī 'l-Dīn Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyá ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn wa-ʿumdat al-muftiyīn*, (ed.) Muḥammad [ibn] Muḥammad Ṭāhir Shaʿbān [Jiddah, s.t.], p. 158).

[49]See Ibn ʿĀbidīn, *Radd*, Vol. 3, pp. 108f.

[50]Compare *ibid*., Vol. 3, p. 109: "It is clear that with the refusal [of the requiescat] he [i.e. the Prophet] wanted to prevent others from following this example, similarly to [his] refusal to pray over debtors [*imtināʿ ʿan al-ṣalāt ʿalá 'l-madyūn*]". For a Shāfiʿite view on this, see Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī [sic], *Tuḥfat al-muḥtāj bi-sharḥ al-minhāj, māʿa ḥawāshī al-shaykh ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Shirwānī wa'l-shaykh Aḥmad ibn Qāsim al-ʿIbādī*, 10 vols. (Bombay, s.t.), Vol. 3, p. 192: "The *ḥadīth* [, according to which no prayer will be offered over the grave of a suicide,]

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highly reprehensible act. Consequently, *qatl al-insān li-nafsih* became almost instantly classed as one of the greater sins (*kabāʾir*) in works of the eponymous theological genre.[51]

Besides this normative grounding, which in fact was only constitutive for the views developed in religious jurisprudence, there were other theoretical considerations in the early Islamic centuries, which can probably be linked to the above discussed apocalyptic ideas, and could even be applied to what are widely framed as 'suicide attacks' in present times.

The renowned medieval philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), namely, known in the Latin world as 'Avenassar' or 'Alpharabius', came to a quite different conclusion in the course of his interpretation of the two Platonic dialogues *Apology* and *Phaedo*. Suicide, according to al-Fārābī, can well be considered legitimate in situations in which the dignity of a human being is impaired to such an extent that it is hardly possible anymore to speak of humanity.[52]

If this conception is applied, for instance, to the situation that the Shiites found themselves in following the Battle of Kerbala, then the suicide mission of the 'penitents', the *tawwābūn*, might be more explainable. After all, in the early apocalyptic literature — not yet possible to be attributed to distinct denominations — the situation of the righteous was portrayed as almost hopeless; the circumstances appeared to clearly indicate the advent of the apocalyptic age. Humiliated and cornered by tyrants and their accomplices, the truly righteous believers were left with little alternative other than to avow their convictions with their lives, and in this way to testify to their unconditional submission to God, that is, to suffer martyrdom. An attempt could be made to apply a similar line of argument meaningfully to current events. After all, the collective sense of disempowerment, triggered by the establishment of direct colonial rule of non-Muslims over Muslim societies,[53] has perpetuated and, eventually, has revived apocalyptic visions. The spread of unbelief (*kufr*) by the 'Great Deceiver' (*al-dajjāl*), according to the Prophetic tradition one of the core indicators for the advent of the apocalyptic age,[54] has been established by Islamist theorists as a starting point for putting the armed fight against the unbelievers (including the majority of 'nominal' Muslims) into an eschatological continuum.[55] Interestingly, in this regard one could again argue with al-Fārābī

is to be understood as an admonition against such acts. Indeed, Ibn Ḥibbān [d. 354/965] said in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* that the *ḥadīth* had been abrogated [*mansūkh*]." (see also the affirmation of this position by Haytamī's commentators Aḥmad ibn Qāsim al-ʿIbādī [d. 995/1587] and ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Shirwānī [d. 1118/1706] on this and the following page). In his narration of the *ḥadīth*, however, Ibn Ḥibbān said nothing about abrogation, as claimed by Haytamī. Compare Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān bi-tartīb Ibn Balbān*, (ed.) Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ, 16 vols. (Beirut, 2nd edition, 1414/1993), Vol. 7, pp. 361 and 363 (Kitāb al-janāʾiz, faṣl fi'l-ṣalāt ʿalá 'l-janāza, aḥādīth 36 and 38, nos. 3,093 and 3,095).

[51]See, for instance, Abū Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *al-Kabāʾir*, (ed.) Abū Ubayda (Cairo and ʿAyn Shams, 2nd edition, 1424/2003), pp. 240f; Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī, *K. al-Zawājir ʿan iqtirāf al-kabāʾir*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1970), Vol. 2, pp. 100–102. Indicative of the continuation of this characterisation of suicide as a major sin, which is of quite some importance for contemporary radically traditionist Muslim circles, is Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, *K. al-Kabāʾir*, (ed.) Ismāʿīl Anṣārī (Riyadh, 1980), pp. 49f.

[52]See Abū Naṣr [Alfarabius] al-Fārābī, *De Platonis philosophia*, (ed.) Franz Rosenthal und Richard Walzer (London, 1943) [= *Falsafat Aflaṭūn wa-ajuzāʾuhā wa-marātab ajuzāʾihā min awwalihā ilá ākhirihā*], pp. 12–14 (Arabic text pp. 17–19); also Rosenthal, *Suicide*, p. 248.

[53]See, for instance, J.-P. Hartung, *A System of Life: Mawdūdī and the Ideologisation of Islam* (London and New York, 2013), pp. 20–26.

[54]See, for example, Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ, p. 1,435 (Kitāb al-fitan wa-ashrāṭ al-sāʿa, bāb dhikr al-dajjāl wa-ṣifatihi wa-mā maʿayih, ḥadīth 5, no. 8,259).

[55]For instance, see T. R. Furnish, 'Bin Laden: The Man who would be Mahdi', *Middle East Quarterly* 9:2 (2002), pp. 53–59; *idem*, *Holiest Wars: Islamic Mahdis, Their Jihads, and Osama bin Laden* (Westport, 2005).

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that those Muslims who are attracted by this kind of rhetoric and are prepared to sacrifice their own lives out of religious motivation feel deprived of their dignity to such an extent that the loss of one's own life no longer appears as a disproportional sacrifice.[56]

In fact, al-Fārābī raises here a philosophical as well as theological core issue which assumed its pointed emphasis in the Enlightenment question 'What is man?'[57] : after all, in order to approach the Aristotelian quest for the 'good life' (*eu zaō*) one needs first to answer the question of life as such. What, at a glance appears rather trivial is indeed utterly complex, because at its core it relates to the highly problematic and controversial matter of the relationship of body and soul. The text of the Qurʾānic revelation, unfortunately, is rather limited where the creation of the human by God is described:

> Indeed, We created the human from a quintessence of clay [*min sulālatin min ṭīnin*]. Then We made him a drop in a firm place [*nuṭfatan fī qarārin makīnin*]. Then We made the drop into a clot of congealed blood [*ʿalaqatan*], this clot into a lump of flesh [*muḍghatan*], and this into bone [*ʿiẓāman*]. And We clothed the bones with flesh [*laḥman*]. And then We brought it forth as another creation [*thumma anshaʾnāhu khalqan*].[58]

Learned Muslims seem to have already agreed at a quite early point in time that the stages of development from clay to bones clothed with flesh would refer only to the genesis of the material body, while the transformation to 'life' occurs only in the final and not further specified step.[59] However, the shift from pure matter to a living being has been outlined much more clearly in verse 32:9, where it is stated that God, after He has moulded the human, breathes some of His soul (*min rūḥih*) into it.[60] While for our purpose here it is not relevant at what exact point in time the ensoulment takes place, it is nonetheless of utmost importance to investigate whether the inanimate body, which, after all, passes through an embryonic development,[61] is indeed without life, and what happens to an animated body in the moment of death. Is the soul separated from the body or not, and what happens to the soul in either case? It is especially this question in which the medieval Muslim philosophers differed fundamentally from jurists and traditionists.

According to the latter group, the text of the Qurʾān leaves no doubt whatsoever that body and soul will not be separated at the moment of death, which is why the human being will eventually be bodily resurrected, in order to give individual testimony about his or her

[56]See, for example, H. Abdel-Samad, 'Radikalisierung in der Fremde: Junge Muslime in Deutschland', in *Determinanten des Terrorismus*, (ed.) P. Waldmann (Weilerswist, 2005), pp. 189–240, here especially pp. 196–201 and 208–218; Q. Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, 2005), pp. 85–106; also E. Hussein, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left* (London, 2007).

[57]See I. Kant, *Werke*, (ed.) Wilhelm Weischedel, 12 vols. (Frankfurt/M., 1974), Vol. 12, p. 428 (BA 27; trans. JPH).

[58]Qurʾān 23 (al-Muʾminūn): 12–14 (trans. JPH).

[59]See, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 17, pp. 21f; Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 4, p. 63; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23, pp. 214f.

[60]See Qurʾān 32 (al-Sajda): 9; also al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 18, p. 601: "He formed a living being endowed with rationality [*ḥayyan nāṭiqan*]"; Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 4, p. 155; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 27, pp. 101–103.

[61]See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Tibyān fī aqsām al-Qurʾān*, (ed.) Ṭ. Y. Shāhīn (Beirut, 1402/1982), pp. 218–220.

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life in the face of God on Judgement Day.[62] The philosophers, on the other hand, remained clearly within the Hellenist tradition and therefore assumed a separation of body and soul at the moment of death. Only the soul, as the immortal part of the human being, will be resurrected, although already immediately after death.[63] Even stronger than that of al-Fārābī was the view advocated and argued for by his great spiritual successor Abū ʿAlī ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037), in Europe known since the medieval period in the Latinised form 'Avicenna'. For Ibn Sīnā, as well as already for the Hellenic and Hellenist philosophers after Plato, the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*), distinct from the vegetative and animal soul, existed as an immortal substance (*jawhar*) in itself, which is therefore essentially different from any kind of matter. In order to fulfil the practical function that belongs to its essence, that is, to evoke actions based on rational judgements, it needs to necessarily attach itself to a body. This body, however, is accidental (*ʿaraḍī*) in the full sense of the word: it serves only as an instrument for the self-realisation of the rational soul, and when it dies, the soul survives as either a happy or an unhappy one.[64] Therefore, concluded Ibn Sīnā in his rather concise treatise *al-Mabdaʾ wa'l-Maʿād*, can only the rational soul be resurrected after the bodily death, because, after all, it is the sole bearer of the individuality (*dhāt*) of each human being.[65]

Such philosophically quite compelling arguments were fiercely rejected by the representatives of speculative theology (*kalām*). Perhaps the most comprehensive and renowned attempt at a refutation we owe to the medieval polymath Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), also known as 'Algazel' in Europe since the medieval period.[66] While al-Ghazālī did not doubt the rational plausibility of the philosophical argument, he nonetheless pointed to clear contradictions with the text of the Qurʾānic revelation, when he stated that "[H]erein belong: the denial of the assembling of the bodies [on Judgement Day], the denial of physical pleasures in paradise, the denial of corporeal pains in purgatory, and the denial of the existence of paradise and purgatory as described in the Qurʾān".[67]

Yes, the soul is indeed immortal, al-Ghazālī stressed, and in support of this statement, interestingly referred to, among others, the Qurʾānic verse 3:169: "Think not of those who have been killed in the Path of God as dead. Nay, they are alive, with their Lord, and are provided for".[68] However, according to the text of the revelation, 'life', as stated above, is

[62]On this, see Qurʾān 54 (al-Qamar): 7, 70 (al-Maʿārij): 43, 82 (al-Infiṭār): 4, 100 (al-ʿĀdiyāt): 9; also al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 22, pp. 117f, Vol. 23, p. 284, Vol. 14, pp. 175 and 590; Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 5, pp. 105f, 152, 176 and 193; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 29, pp. 34f, Vol. 30, p. 133, Vol. 31, p. 78 and Vol. 32, p. 68.

[63]See M. E. Marmura, 'Avicenna and the Kalām', *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991–2), pp. 172–206, here pp. 194–206.

[64]See Abū Alī ibn Sīnā, *al-Isharāt wa'l-tanbīhāt, maʿ sharḥ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī*, (ed.) Sulaymān Dunyā, 4 vols. (Cairo, 3rd edition, 1968), Vol. 3, pp. 183–196 and 208–240; *idem*, *al-Mabdaʾ wa'l-maʿād*, (ed.) ʿAbdallāh Nūrānī (Tehran, 1363sh/1884), pp. 94–101. The understanding of the body as a mere accident has been greatly emphasised by ascetic Sufism. Its followers aimed at refining the soul in this world (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and to eliminate physical desires as much as any possible.

[65]See *ibid.*, pp. 107f.

[66]By this name he is still known to Hegel in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*: "He was a Sceptic of great ability, with a powerful mind of the Oriental cast; he held the words of the Prophet to be pure truth, and wrote *Destructio Philosophorum*". (G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, (ed.) E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, 20 vols. [Frankfurt/M., 3rd edition, 1996], Vol. 19, p. 523 [translator E.S. Haldane; italics in the original]).

[67]al-Imām [Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad] al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, (ed.) Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo, 5th edition, 1392/1972), p. 287.

[68]Qurʾān 3 (Āl ʿImrān): 169: *wa-lā taḥsabanna 'lladhīna qutilū fī sabīli 'llāhi amwātā bal aḥyāʾun ʿinda rabbihim yurzaqūn*. See al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, p. 299.

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defined as the intentional ensoulment of a however-defined body by God. The autonomy, which the philosophers have attributed to the rational soul, as well as its responsibility for its own salvation would necessarily curtail God's omnipotence (here al-Ghazālī argued entirely as the Ashʿarite theologian that he was) — and take creation somewhat out of His hands; in this, finally, the philosophers had committed a clear act of heresy.[69]

However, theologians like al-Ghazālī, or the late medieval Damascene traditionist Abū ʿAbdallāh ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1349), to whom we owe a quite differentiated discussion of matters relating to prenatal human life,[70] have understood 'life' in their recourse to the text of the Qurʾānic revelation almost exclusively in strictly biological terms. When, in contrast, philosophers like al-Fārābī considered the deliberate abandonment of one's own life as legitimate under certain societal conditions, they employed a significantly different concept of 'life'. For them, 'life' was defined, in good Aristotelian fashion, essentially socially and not solely vegetative; the rational soul can find true happiness (*saʿāda ḥaqīqa*) only within a society that corresponds in the best possible way with the cosmic order.[71] The ethical component that comes into play here and which reflects once again the Hellenic and Hellenist heritage of the medieval Muslim philosopher's pursuit, is of utmost significance in multiple ways. In one regard, they qualified 'life' as an eudemonistic binary of 'worthy' and 'unworthy'. In another, they empowered the human, by way of reasoning and subsequently derived acting, to be the architect of his or her own fortune; in this way they clearly rejected the idea of predestination that was dominant especially in Ashʿarite theology. This way, the socially or religiously motivated abandonment of one's own life, that is, the deliberate separation of body and soul, or accident and substance, becomes generally possible and does not necessarily run counter the attainment of true happiness.

Contemporary militant Islamists, however, do not usually argue with recourse to Islamic philosophy in the Hellenist tradition. Their central reference points are normally rather the text of the Qurʾānic revelation and the collected and canonised statements of the Prophet and — in the Shiite context — of the Imams. It is therefore paramount to look beyond philosophical-ethical or even — although for pragmatic reasons not further discussed here — Sufi arguments in support of a hierarchically structured body-and-soul dichotomy, and to derive answers rather in recourse to the Islamic normative textual framework.

Of Volition, Prowess and Obligation

The pivot of the whole issue remains the intent (*niyya*) of the executor of action: that is to say, is one's own death merely accepted as a consequence of an act, or is it the act's actual goal? Perhaps only the latter case appears questionable, because here we would be confronted with what is commonly seen as suicide (for which the Prophet Muḥammad has predicted eternal

[69] See *ibid*., pp. 299f and 307-310.

[70] See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Tibyān*, p. 219. Ibn Qayyim here undertook a fundamental differentiation of vegetative (*ḥarakat al-numūw wa'l-iġhtidhāʾ ka'l-nabāt*) and voluntary movement (*ḥarakat ḥassiyatihi wa'l-irādatih*), where only the second kind requires the ensoulment of the embryo. This way, movement in itself, which has so far been regarded as a sufficient criterion for life, was subjected to some fundamental reassessment.

[71] For example, see Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*, (ed.) Albīr Naṣrī Nādir (Beirut, 6th edition, 1991), pp. 117-119.

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doom), even though, as has been demonstrated, some philosophers would have considered this rather differently.

It indicates once more the complexity of the whole matter when even here, however, radical Islamists appear to have found a loophole, based on the common traditional understanding that it remains exclusively God's power to bestow life or to take it away. The somewhat fatalist perspective that results from this, according to which the human is an entirely spineless object at God's disposal, is reflected in the two formulas 'God willing!' (*in shāʾ allāh*) and 'God has willed it!' (*mā shāʾ allāh*). Both formulas go back to a Qurʾānic passage[72] and have become prominent indicators of piety especially in contemporary radical-Islamic circles.

Therefore, if we look once more carefully at the statements of suicide attackers, then we are still bound to state a clear desire for martyrdom, however, always with the disclaimer 'God willing!' attached. As a result, the death of a Muslim will only become martyrdom if God so wills, because, after all, it is He alone who equally sees and knows the inner and the outer. Thus, what might *appear* undoubtedly as suicide from a human point of view — and Franz Rosenthal has been able to identify thirty-three such cases in the first seven Islamic centuries[73] — *is* not necessarily suicide from the divine perspective.

The discussion around whether human beings are essentially free to act, or are absolutely determined by the will of God traverses many centuries in the history of Islamic theological thought; in the current inter-Islamic controversies over religiously motivated abandonment of one's own life they seem to reappear only in a slightly different guise. The two extremes in this discussion are represented by the two most influential currents in systematic early medieval Islamic theology, the Muʿtazila and the slightly later Ashʿariyya. The respective arguments of the representatives of both currents for or against a human's autonomous capacity to act (*qādir*) are, again, highly complex, and strongly tied into the problem of theodicy; after all, the question needed to be answered whether the ethical categories 'commendable' and 'reprehensible' apply to acts of God, or whether they are confined to human acts only.

The Muʿtazilites, whose views were declared the binding doctrine in the Abbasid caliphate between 827 and 849 CE [74] and whose thought remains influential in theological debates to this day, emphatically affirmed a human's responsibility for his actions. This view is axiomatically grounded in the understanding of God's essential, absolute and unlimited justice (*al-ʿadl*), which is the reason why God's actions are never subject to a differentiation into 'commendable' and 'reprehensible'.[75] Rather, these are categories of human judgement alone *qua* creation; a human therefore must, by way of rational conclusion (*istidlāl*), evaluate the possible consequences of each of his options for action, and then make a decision

[72]The passage in question is 18 (al-Kahf): 23f. See on this H. Kandler, *Die Bedeutung der Siebenschläfer (Aṣḥāb al-kahf) im Islam: Untersuchungen zu Legende und Kult in Schrifttum, Religion und Volksglauben unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Siebenschläfer-Wallfahrt* (Bochum, 1994), pp. 50f; also al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 15, pp. 223-228; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, Vol. 3, pp. 221f; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 21, pp. 110-112.

[73]See Rosenthal, *Suicide*, pp. 256-259.

[74]See Hartung, *Enacting der Rule*, pp. 308f.

[75]See al-Qāḍī Abū 'l-Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa'l-ʿadl*, (ed.) M. al-Saqqā *et al.*, 16 vols. (Cairo, 1385/1965), Vol. 6.

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accordingly.[76] These ethical categories, finally, which humans use to devise the voluntary causation or omission of an action, correspond with reward and punishment in the Hereafter, which God had His Prophets announce to humankind.[77]

The Ashʿarites, in contrast, whose system has had a significantly greater impact than that of the Muʿtazila on later theological thought in Sunnite Islam, took an almost diametrically opposed position. In their view God alone, because he is not caused in His existence, is truly acting autonomously. Humanity, on the contrary, is the result of an act — the act of creation — and can therefore not act independently, but only in derived way.[78] Therefore, only God possesses an unlimited potential to act (*qādir*); human acts are only performed (*fiʿl*) by her or him, but never caused.

This idea has two important implications, the first of which is ontic in nature. If God creates every act in the human, then either all these acts are — almost in the sense of a Leibnizian monad — inherent right from the moment of creation, or God is permanently creating.

The Ashʿarites advocated the latter model, in which creation is understood as a succession of atoms of time, each one closed in itself.[79] This way, discontinuities, such as Qurʾānic miracles, become more explicable; the illusion of continuity is then only a divine act of mercy, but, because of God's unrestricted and absolute freedom, by no means a necessity.[80] The second implication that results from such an ontology, is rather ethical in nature: insofar as God is the sole cause for any eventual human act, and His intentions behind such an act are not necessarily accessible to humans, its reliable ethical validation beyond human capability. Humankind therefore hardly has any other choice than to trust that its acts are, from the divine perspective, always good and correct. Salvation is nonetheless not a certainty; the conclusive verdict on Judgement Day lies entirely with God.[81]

Both theological positions, those of the Muʿtazila and of the Ashʿariyya, can now likewise be applied to the issue of religiously motivated abandonment of one's own life; both certainly have advantages, but also a number of disadvantages. The Muʿtazilite position, for example, requires a strong reflexive faculty for the respective agents, because, after all, one needs to responsibly evaluate the ethical substance of an intended act in order to achieve the desired result, the salvation in the Hereafter. While such an anthropocentric stance seems to correspond well with the mindset of Modernity,[82] it is quite problematic with regard to

[76] See *ibid*., Vol. 7, pp. 6–12.

[77] See *ibid*., Vol. 7; R. M. Frank, 'Two Islamic Views on Human Agency', in *La notion de liberté au Moyen Âge: Islam, Byzance, Occident. Penn-Paris-Dumbarton Oaks colloquia, IV. session des 12-15 octobre 1982 (Mandelieu-la-Napoule)*, (ed.) G. Makdisi, J. Sourdel-Thomine and D. Sourdel (Paris, 1985), pp. 37–49, here especially pp. 38–42; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 4, pp. 482–534.

[78] See al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb tamhīd al-awāʾil wa takhlīṣ al-dalāʾil*, (ed.) ʿImād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Beirut, 1407/1987), e.g. pp. 145f, 321, 341–348 and 386.

[79] Most comprehensively on this, see D. Perler and U. Rudolph, *Occasionalismus. Theorien der Kausalität im arabisch-islamischen und im europäischen Denken* (Göttingen, 2000), pp. 46–51.

[80] See, for example, al-Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd*, pp. 28f and 437–441.

[81] Parallels to the Protestantism of John Calvin are hard to deny: according to classical Ashʿarite understanding a believer can have only deep faith in Divine providence. Compare J. Calvin, *Institutio christianæ religionis, in libros quatuor nunc primùm dida, certísque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione ut propemodum opus nouum haberi possit* (Geneva, 1559), pp. 60–76.

[82] See, for instance, T. Hildebrandt, *Neo-Muʿtazilismus? Intention und Kontext im modernen arabischen Umgang mit dem rationalistischen Erbe des Islam* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2007), pp. 194–438.

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the eschatological dimension, because the ethical tenability of an abandonment of one's own life (however motivated) is disputable even in borderline cases, such as the ones highlighted above with regard to some philosophical positions.[83] After all, within this very theological system there is no space for disclaimers; the relation of end and means, and therefore the likelihood of death, appears quite obvious and would thus require a solid ethical justification if one wishes to assure oneself of heavenly rewards.

A radical Ashʿarite position, by contrast, would reject any responsibility for such acts, understand the agent merely a tool of God, and, subsequently, defer the ethical justification to God's decision on Judgement Day. This has certainly the advantage of not needing to morally vindicate oneself towards other human beings, but has also the disadvantage of disabling oneself from assisting one's own salvation in the Hereafter by way of the power of judgement that God has bestowed upon humankind by way of creation. Now, it could be argued that God Himself has created precedents, such as those in the aforementioned Qurʾānic verse 3:169. The Ashʿarite ontology, however, does not under any circumstance allow for the establishment of causal links, which leaves little else but unconditional trust in God's custom (*ʿādat allāh*) and grace (*raḥmat allāh*), alongside the unquestioning (*bi-lā kayfa*) acceptance of the Qurʾānic wording.

Ultimately, the problems inherent in the two theological positions with regard to the religiously motivated abandonment of one's own life refer, as was already the case with early Islamic apocalyptic thought, to the role and significance of society for the Islamic path to salvation. From here emerges the question of the intersubjective validity of ethical standards and, derived from it, codes of conduct. Here, it seems as if the collective dimension holds a much greater significance for the Muʿtazilites than for the Ashʿarites. After all, the discussion of socially sanctioned values becomes obsolete the very moment that acting-in-itself, because it is not derived from own motivations, is understood as value-free, or to comply with individually established ethical standards at best.

However, the tension between the two contrary early medieval theological positions that has been painted here is not inescapable, even though it seems as if both positions have been carried almost unaltered into the present. An attempt at harmonising both positions was undertaken in the late twelfth century CE, when above mentioned Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who initially came from a clear Ashʿarite background, began in his endeavour to integrate Ashʿarite theology with the thought of the Muslim philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition.[84] This overall endeavour helps to explain why, in his exegesis of the aforementioned Qurʾānic verse 4:29, al-Rāzī allowed in principle for the possibility of the deliberate abandonment of one's own life, when he wrote that

> even the righteous believer could, despite his belief in God and Judgement Day, suffer from grief and distress [*min al-ghamm wa'l-adhiyya*] to such an extent that, in contrast, death seems

[83]In this context one is reminded of the contemporary controversies on euthanasia and induced abortion of pregnancy, as have ignited not least around the provocative theses of the Australia-born Utilitarianist philosopher Peter A. D. Singer (b. 1946).

[84]See Perler and Rudolph, *Occasionalismus*, p. 109 n. 9. In more recent past, Hassan Wassouf (Marburg), Ayman Shihadeh (London) and Heidrun Eichner (Tübingen), for example, have presented studies on the relationship between Ashʿarite *kalām* and philosophy in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, which have begun to close the gap in research on this matter, as still identified by Rudolph.

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to be much more bearable. Indeed, we see numerous Muslims who kill themselves [*yaqtulūna anfusahum*] for such reasons.[85]

This anthropology is clearly not consistent anymore with that of the classical Ashʿariyya, which does not know of deliberate decisions; rather it reminds one strongly of the arguments provided by al-Fārābī as vindication for suicide. Rāzī, however, was still enough of a theologian to regard suicide as fundamentally incommensurable with the divine plan of salvation, and therefore not ethically sustainable under any condition. Despite the consensus of the exegetes that verse 4:29 would refer to the prohibition of the mutual killing of Muslims, a view that al-Rāzī actually shared, he even recommended regarding this verse for practical reasons as the prohibition of suicide:

> This is so, because it is clear that one should abstain from it [i.e. suicide] because of the great harm and mighty condemnation in this world. To abstain from it, however, is also clear with regard to the Hereafter where [the suicide] will face terrible punishments. [. . .]
> Last but not least, there is the possibility [to understand this verse] as if He has said 'Do nothing that deserves death, such as for instance killing, apostasy and adultery [*al-qatl wa'l-ridda wa'l-zinā*]'. This way, the Almighty has made it clear that He is merciful towards His servants and that, in His mercy, He prohibits all that deserves anguish or probing [*mishqa aw mihna*].[86]

What does "In the Path of God" Mean, Exactly?

How, after all, do theological deliberations (such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's) on a human's responsibility with regard to the abandonment of one's own life relate to the issue of martyrdom? It seems as if for the Muslim theologians this special form of death played a subordinate role at best; for the advocates of both extremes of the discussion, voluntarists as well as determinists, the conclusive judgement over what can, and what cannot, be regarded as true martyrdom lies beyond human capacity. While, as shown above, martyrdom inevitably had to be dealt with especially from the view of religious jurisprudence, most Muslim scholars well into contemporary times were widely aware of their relative fallibility and, thus, the rather limited authoritative claim that their views could fairly make. For theologians, as for jurists, the priority appears to have always been the imperative to preserve life.

For both it was only to decide whether and to what extent the preservation of one's own life remains within each human's own power of disposal, or whether it was rooted exclusively in God's omnipotence. For the theologians this question was initially born out of speculative theoretical interest, for the jurists, in turn, out of a practical one, because, after all, on the answer to this question depends the liability of each human being for his or her actions.[87]

[85] al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 9, p. 74.

[86] *Ibid*. Especially with his reference to the grace of God Rāzī emphasised a central element of Ashʿarite theology, and aligned himself this way clearly with this particular tradition.

[87] Especially in matters such as the above highlighted responsibility of an individual for his or her own actions the intrinsic relationship of systematic theology and religious jurisprudence is expressed most vividly. After all, such an issue reflects clearly the complex intrinsic relationship of belief and action. Thus, already in the early Middle Period couples of certain theological currents and canonical orientations regarding jurisprudence had emerged which have to an extent been sustained into the present. See B. Johansen, 'The Muslim *Fiqh* as a Sacred Law.

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From this rather problematic constellation results the difficult task of lending legally applicable content to God's revealed promise that all those who pass from this life on His path will attain the heavenly pleasures as martyrs.[88] In other words, what exactly does it entail to be 'in the path of God' (*fī sabīli 'llāh*)? Once again do neither Qurʾān nor Prophetic tradition offer completely unequivocal clues;[89] the Dutch Orientalist Arent Jan van Wensinck (d. 1939) even advocated the view that the Prophet had deliberately abstained from establishing a clear-cut catalogue of criteria for belief as well as for religious acts.[90] Therefore, this task once more remained with the theologians and legal theorists who, in catechisms (*ʿaqāʾid*), increasingly sought to establish as far as possible cognitive criteria and increasingly to substantiate them theologically. One of the earliest such attempts appears to be the *Fiqh al-Akbar* of Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān (d. 150/767), patronymous founder of the second-oldest canonical legal tradition in Sunnite Islam, which consists of only fourteen rather short credal statements.[91] 'Belief' (*īmān*) is here established as "acceptance and affirmation [*al-iqrār wa'l-taṣdīq*]",[92] and, while Abū Ḥanīfa clearly emphasised that the maintenance of such belief is entirely within one's own responsibility, he did not elaborate on what the cognitive criteria for belief are, or could be.

This perhaps explains why later commentators, such as the Ḥanafite jurist Mullā ʿAlī ibn Sulṭān Muḥammad al-Qārī (d. 1014/1605) from Mecca, devoted so much more space to this,[93] though not with the result of bringing about much more clarity. Admittedly, some clarification is contained in the declaration that the affirmation has to be made by the tongue (*bi'l-lisān*), that is, the proclamation of the Islamic profession of faith, the *shahāda*, as possible smallest common denominator of all Muslims of whatever denomination or orientation.[94] ʿAlī al-Qārī's statement, however, that the 'affirmation' is essentially a matter of the heart stresses once again the fundamental insight of the jurists that the beliefs of one person can never be fully known by another person,[95] and that it is God alone who knows what is manifest and what is hidden alike.[96] Here, finally, the eschatological dimension discussed previously comes full circle, because a conclusive judgement of belief is God's prerogative alone, either on Judgement Day or, in the case of the martyrs, instantly.

Religion, Law and Ethics in a Normative System', in *Contingency in a Sacred Law. Legal and Ethical Norms in the Muslim Fiqh* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 1999), pp. 1–76, here p. 8.

[88]See Qurʾān 3 (Āl ʿImrān): 169.

[89]Asfaruddin, *Striving*, pp. 10–33, 157f and 174, after meticulously analysing the relevant Qurʾānic passages, as well as statements in various early compilations of *ḥadīth* and *faḍāʾil* works, has come to a similar conclusion.

[90]See A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed. Its Genesis and Historical Development* (New York, 2nd edition., 1965), pp. 17–19.

[91]See Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān ibn Thābit al-Kūfī, *Sharḥ kitāb al-fiqh al-akbar, al-shirraḥ li'l-imām al-Mullā ʿAlī al-Qārī al-Ḥanafī*, (ed.) ʿAlī Muḥammad Dandal (Beirut, 1416/1995), pp. 323–327. On this work, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 1, pp. 207–211.

[92]al-Kūfī, *Fiqh akbar*, p. 326.

[93]See *ibid.*, pp. 141–144.

[94]See Wensinck, *Creed*, pp. 32–35. This basic creed is shared by Sunnites and Shiites alike; the addition "And ʿAlī [ibn Abī Ṭālib] is the friend of God [*wa-ʿAlī walīyu 'llāh*]", which is oftentimes added to the *shahāda* in the call for prayer (*adhān*), is, according to the common legal view, not mandatory (*wājib*), but merely recommended (*mustaḥabb*).

[95]This refers to the complicated legal and theological discussion on apostasy (*ridda*) in the Islamic Middle Period. See J. Nedza, *Das takfīr-Konzept im Wandel? Erklärungsversuch zu einer Kategorie heutigen islamistischen Denkens* (unpublished MA dissertation, Ruhr-University Bochum, 2008), pp. 23–38 and 43–57.

[96]See Qurʾān 13 (al-Raʿd): 9f: *ʿālimu 'l-ghaybi wa'l-shahādati* [. . .] *sawāʾun minkum man asarra 'l-qawla wa-man jahara bihi wa-man huwa mustakhfi bi'l-layli wa-sāribun bi'l-nahār*.

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This situation did not even change in those *ʿAqāʾid* that did not emerge in and around Ḥanafite circles, even though in the course of the often quite fierce negotiation processes towards an Islamic orthodoxy all articles of faith, without exception, were again and again put to the test. A prominent case in point was Abū 'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935), whose arguments with theological opponents — first and foremost the Muʿtazilites[97] — have aided a much more literalist understanding of the various beliefs.[98] This way, a period of dominance of voluntaristic thought was ended, the fundamental ontic dichotomy of creator and creation re-established, and the human finally referred back to his due place. Even so, however, we do not arrive at a conclusive certainty over what the 'path of God' entails in concrete terms; at best remains some vague idea and, therefore, a wide scope of interpretation.

Conclusion: The End of Diffidence

At least from the eighteenth century onward, the historically dominant attitude of Muslim theologians and jurists, characterised by a humble reluctance towards apodictic judgement on the quality and firmness of belief[99] faced a most consequential aggravation. This leap also substantially impacted the discussion of the religiously motivated deliberate abandonment of one's own life, an impact that, to date, has lost little of its momentum. Of crucial importance for this was, and still is, the puritan Central Arabian scholarly movement of the 'Wahhābiyya', colloquially labelled after its eponymous founder Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792). It was he who, in his currently most popular catechism, the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, alladhī huwa Ḥaqq Allāh ʿalá 'l-ʿAbīd*, raised the cognitively discernible act in conformity with the *sharīʿa* to the status of the exclusive criterion of faith.[100] The consequences of such a perspective are, of course, most serious.

In the concurrences of orthodoxy and orthopraxy 'belief' becomes inter-subjectively verifiable, and can therefore be legally tried without any serious problem. To testify one's faith has consequently ceased to be a matter solely between the individual believer and God; it has become detached from its eschatological context and assumed a clear socio-political relevance. The testimony of faith has been profanised to a commitment to the community of (righteous) Muslims, and as such it can — beyond the mere proclamation of the *shahāda* — assume various manifestations. For example, *hijra*, that is, the participation in a collective exodus from a polity hostile towards Muslims — the 'House of War' (*dār al-ḥarb*) — into the 'House of Islam' (*dār al-islām*), or at least a 'House of Peace' (*dār al-ṣulḥ*), can now be construed as a clear commitment to the community of believers. Also to take

[97]See Abū 'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Baṣrī, *K. al-Ibāna ʿan uṣūl al-diyāna* (Hyderabad, s.t.), pp. 73f *et passim*.

[98]In this endeavour al-Ashʿarī even submitted to the tradition of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, "the excellent guide and perfect head [*al-raʾīs al-kāmil*] by whom God confers the truth, extinguishes error, smoothens the path [*al-minhāj*], and supresses the sectarianism of the sectarians [*al-mubtadiʿūn*] and the lies of the liars [*al-zāʾighūn*]." (*ibid*., p. 8).

[99]Compare, for example, al-Kūfī, *al-Fiqh al-akbar*, p. 325: "We declare no Muslim an unbeliever [*lā nukaffiru musliman*] on the ground of any offense [*dhanb*], however grave, unless he considers it [i.e. his offense] permissible [*yastaḥilluhā*]. As long as he does not give up the notion of belief we shall remain considering him a believer in the true sense of the word [*muʾminan ḥaqīqa*]. It is [therefore] possible to be a sinful believer [*muʾminan fāsiqan*] without becoming an unbeliever [*kāfir*]". Also, see the commentary of ʿAlī al-Qārī on this passage in *ibid*., pp. 117-121.

[100]See Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, *Majmūʿat al-tawḥīd al-najdiyya* (Mecca, 1391h), pp. 8-10, 18, 39 and 43f; Nedza, Takfīr-*Konzept*, pp. 58-64.

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part in *jihād*, that is to say, the armed fight in defence of the community, counts as such a testimony of faith, one that some radical Islamist ideologues of the twentieth century have even declared to be an absolutely necessary criterion of faith.[101] Last but not least, also *istishhād* — 'martyrdom', as religiously motivated incurring of bodily pains up to death — assumes an emphatically socio-political relevance: 'martyrdom' is not anymore exclusively an expression of deepest individual spirituality, but refers now much more importantly to the necessity of the absolutely uncompromising willingness of each individual to make sacrifices for the sake of the whole community.

In the wake of such an altered understanding of belief, its manifestation in a cognitively accessible reality, and finally the increased social role of its testimony, the mindset and actions of the contemporary so-called suicide attackers become much clearer. Their action is considered the ultimate testimony of faith — the most uncompromising affirmation of God and commitment to the Muslim community — and can therefore almost definitely be classed as 'martyrdom' by posterity, at least as long as one moves within the confines of such a theology; civilian casualties even among Muslims themselves are, in consideration of these actions' overall benefits, to be condoned as collateral damage. Especially the social functions that suicide attacks assume in Muslim communities under imagined and real oppression[102] indicate that Alshech's notion of 'egoistic martyrdom' has only a limited applicability and requires careful assessment from case to case.

However, it has to be emphatically stressed that an 'absolute contradiction' between 'suicide, or at least the acceptance of being killed' on the one hand, and the 'imperative to preserve life'[103] on the other, only appears from a human perspective which does, and needs to, distinguish between a temporal life in the here-and-now, and eternal life in the Hereafter.

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[101] See *ibid.*, pp. 74-88.
[102] See, for example, Alshech, *Egoistic Martyrdom*, pp. 38-42.
[103] See above, note 8.

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