

## Martyrdom in Context: Implications for Conflict Resolution

PUSHPA IYER

### THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN POST-COLD WAR CONFLICTS

Intractable conflicts have become an enduring feature of the Cold War period. Kriesberg et. al. (1989) conceptualize *intractable* conflicts as those that resist attempts at resolution. In these conflicts, both sides disagree even about what a solution might look like — since “solutions” are matters of perception and context. This type of extended, multi-faceted conflict involves psychosocial process which include three characteristics: (1) resistance to being resolved, (2) conflict-intensifying features not directly related to the initial issues in contention, (3) a high level of hostility involving attempts to harm the other party. The current conflicts between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East could thus both be labeled intractable.

When the Cold War period came to an end many people, say Taras and Ganguly (2000), hoped for the end of such intractable conflicts and the beginning of a new era in history. Unfortunately, the absence of Cold War checks and balances, and the resurgence of local power in nation-states which had formerly been pawns of the superpowers, have instead exacerbated internal conflicts which have erupted and exploded — with plenty of violence. When these conflicts have arisen in contexts of poverty, illiteracy, population explosion, malnutrition, environmental degradation, and inadequate infrastructure and resources, they have become even more *interlocked* and *protracted*. According to Kriesberg (1981) *interlocked conflicts* involve more parties than merely the two primary adversaries. In such conflicts, the two “sides” are not mutually exclusive, that is, relationships are maintained between the sub-groups of one “side” and the sub-groups of the other “side”

— relationships that exist apart from the conflictual interactions between the two main adversaries. Interests cut across conflict groups. Various issues receive salience during a various periods of time. The conflicts between Iraq, the US, the allies of the US, and the Arab world are thus interlocked conflicts. Edward E. Azar (1990) uses the term *protracted* to describe longterm, intractable conflicts that are inter-locked with so many issues that the core dispute may have changed from the issues originally at stake. The classic example is the USA-USSR confrontation between 1945 and 1990. Another one is the conflict over Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

Much of the violence in the above-mentioned contexts of poverty, illiteracy, etc. can be described as *structural* rather than *physical*. Johan Galtung (1969) coined the term *structural violence* to describe the violence imbibed through the social structure in contexts where no clear violent relationship between subject and object is apparent. *Direct violence*, in contrast, involves an obvious relationship of violence between perpetrator and victim. Structural violence, while primarily covert, may manifest itself at times in varying degrees of overtly violent behavior. At other times it becomes the root of other protracted social conflicts. John Burton (1987) describes structural violence as the denial of basic human needs. Because structural violence is perpetuated through the norms, traditions, and beliefs of the elites and are imposed by them upon those below, it helps maintain a social system in which the basic needs of all are not met. These norms, traditions, and beliefs manifest themselves in the institutions in the system. The covert, structural nature of much post-Cold War violence and conflict only adds to the difficulty of finding resolution.

An interesting feature of most intractable, interlocked, protracted conflicts is the way in which religion gets tied to them as an issue. One example is conflict in Kashmir: a territorial conflict between India and Pakistan that often gets presented as a conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Another example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a land dispute that is often misrepresented as a conflict between the Palestinian/Arab/Muslim world and the Jews.

According to T.K. Oommen (2001), when religion is seen as independent of states, nations and ethnicity, it is rarely a distinct source of violence. It would be safe to say that in modern times no conflicts have been purely religious. However, when religion is framed as inextricably bound up with the other elements in society, that is, when it gets tied to land, ethnicity, language, borders and nations, it becomes the single most important source of

division and polarization. (Friedland and Hecht 1998). Examples of this are the rise of Hindu Nationalist movement in India, the Iraq-US conflict, and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Much as I would like to argue that the events of the 11th of September, 2001 in the US were simply one more unfortunate and sad event on this planet, the reality is that these events have indeed changed the manner in which conflicts are being categorized and the manner in which some religious groups are being characterized as parties in particular conflicts.

The particular perspective on the relationship between religion and conflict out of which I am writing is explained by Friedland and Hecht's analysis of the conflicts in India and Israel (1998). They see these conflicts as situations in which both the causes and effects of religious struggles are political as well as social. If we look at most of the conflicts around us today, it seems that religion more often than not ends up being a tool that is used by groups that are more powerful and more numerous in order to manipulate, mobilize, oppress and suppress whole communities of people. Violence is almost a natural fallout in such conflicts. Religion, more often than not, is what then divides people. These conflicts thus become not only protracted, inter-locked and intractable but also *deep-rooted*<sup>1</sup> in the sense of involving not merely the self-interests of individuals and groups, but their deep motivations, values and needs (Burton 1987). They seem to defy all attempts at resolution.

The approach to post-Cold War conflicts (and the role of religion within these conflicts) which I have outlined above will serve as the theoretical framework for my response to Matthew Lundberg's paper: "*The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of Life: Liberation Theology, Martyrdom, and the Prophetic Dimension of Theology*". Martyrdom has been a basic Christian experience. Within the Christian scriptures, the word "martyr" means "witness," and martyrs are witnesses who confess their faith before the powerful of the world, and face their judgment. Lundberg does well to draw an analogous relationship between the martyrs of solidarity and the original martyrs (defined as martyrs of confession). This is definitely a step in the direction of making theology more inclusive.

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Burton, the consequences of deep-rooted conflicts are serious in magnitude. These conflicts may seem endless (protracted) and are invariably linked to more than one issue (inter-locked).

THE FAILURE OF LUNDBERG'S THEOLOGICAL LENS  
TO PERCEIVE NONRELIGIOUS MARTYRS FOR JUSTICE

Lundberg's paper raises two major concerns for me. The first one is that he provides no space for us to consider concepts or examples of martyrdom that may not be visible from the narrow confines of a theological lens. His paper therefore leaves out many other kinds of martyrs, two of which I will highlight here. His definitions of martyrs of confession and martyrs of solidarity are very much rooted in the Christian tradition, and so are the examples of martyrs he provides (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Romero, the slain priests and nuns of El Salvador, and Martin Luther King).

For Lundberg, a death becomes a martyrdom when it reproduces the dynamics of the crucifixion of Christ. Lundberg mentions five of these dynamics: 1) the martyr is killed in the face of apostasy or while standing up for justice, 2) she or he submits willingly to death at the hands of others (who are usually more powerful), 3) she or he dies calmly with thoughts not on his or her own suffering and imminent death but on God — and on forgiving the murderers, 4) the death somehow recapitulates Christ's resurrection, and 5) the death somehow effects an important element of salvation.

In the context of a paper written within the field of Christian theology there is nothing wrong with these definitions. However, only a few of the deaths in the world today which get labeled as martyrdoms would be recognized and valued as such if one were to rely solely upon these five criteria. The reasons people embrace martyrdom today are not limited to defending their religious faith or to accepting death instead of apostasy — the motivations behind what Lundberg calls "martyrs of confession." And their reasons are even more complex than the reasons for martyrdom which Lundberg attributes to the people he calls "martyrs of solidarity." Some contemporary martyrs exist outside of any faith tradition. Others may hold a religious faith as a very personal matter, but be thrown into the arena of martyrdom because they have entered into a conflict or struggle for political, economic and social motives. I will briefly discuss two ways of conceiving martyrdom which fall outside Lundberg's definition of martyrdom, which I believe have motivated various contemporary martyrs for justice. I am calling these two modes *strategic martyrdom* and *activist martyrdom*<sup>2</sup>. It is important to

---

<sup>2</sup> The two models of martyrdom mentioned here are terms coined by the author.

note that in both of these conceptions of martyrdom faith (religion) plays a only a limited role.

## TWO CONCEPTIONS OF MARTYRDOM IN WHICH RELIGION PLAYS A HIGHLY LIMITED ROLE

### 1) Strategic Martyrdom

This perspective sees martyrdom as death or some other form of suffering which is endured to achieve goals that may be political, social or economic in nature. Martyrdom (in whatever form) is, under this model, a strategic tool used to achieve specific objectives. It is not something that simply comes along the way. Gandhi's perspective on martyrdom is one of the best ways of understanding this model.

Gandhi advocated a school for martyrs. He said: "Just as one must learn the art of killing in training for violence, so also one must learn the art of dying in the training of non-violence" (Smith 1997:274) However, says Smith, the Gandhian notion of martyrdom is different from the usual understanding of martyrdom in the West, and from the way martyrdom is understood in some faith traditions. Always the shrewd political strategist, Gandhi wanted to make martyrdom his political tool or else it was of no use to him. He took into consideration very seriously the core flaw in using martyrdom as a political strategy that McGinley (1970:38) pointed out: "to be a martyr is easy. You only have to be it once." This makes it impossible as a political weapon says Smith (1997:266) for "it may project its practitioner into heaven but it leaves the battlefield empty and rarely does it have a prolonged or practical consequence."

Gandhi thus, through his strategic approach, added a new dimension to ways in which martyrdom can be viewed. Ends and means were interchangeable for him. So as important as death was (although he did not want to die in his struggle), the style and control over oneself in life were equally important. And the circumstances under which life was being given up were even more important (Smith 1997). The real martyr for Gandhi was not one who was just willing to die but one who transformed the act (there may be a hint of suicide in this) into a positive act of heroism and thus re-energized all the people around this death. Gandhi, therefore, seemed to emphasize that death (martyrdom) should be an end in itself (Smith 1997). It needed to cre-

ate an impact, an effect, and bring some change — or else it was a another wasteful loss of life.

Gandhi believed that one had to earn martyrdom, not just accept death. Fasting was a political tool that Gandhi used for martyrdom. People from all faiths understand fasting. It involves inflicting some form of suffering on one's self. But for Gandhi, drawing from his own personal faith, it was a method of self-purification, and it also prepared him for a closer association with God (Smith 1997).

For Gandhi, a fast was a means to an end. Many times, through fasting, he inflicted suffering on himself and played brinkmanship with his life. But he would not squander his life for something unattainable. His demands when fasting for days on end were never the seemingly unattainable ones such as “the British must leave India”. According to Smith (1997:293), Gandhi's fasting had the same shock effect the cross had, but this messiah did not have to die. In this way, Gandhi overcame the weakness of the cross – death. Millions of India's starving population could identify with fasting — and then could rejoice when the Mahatma took his first nourishment.

Gandhi was a man of deep faith, very religious in his orientation. He was firmly a Hindu, but borrowed heavily from Christianity. Working among a very diverse population, his political strategy was very secular and non-sectarian. He saw God in humanity and encouraged others around him to identify their God in humanity. Smith (1997) argues that Gandhi's political strategy for martyrdom came primarily from Hinduism and Christianity. Borrowing the model of *Sanyasi* from Hinduism (the renunciation of all worldly pleasures — the idea closest to martyrdom in Hinduism) and the ideal of service to humanity from Christianity, he gave shape to his own theoretical model of martyrdom.

The most important aspect of the way Gandhi modeled strategic martyrdom is his insistence that “to obtain martyrdom, one should not just be willing to die but should have gone through a process of self purification, should have practiced non-violence in thought, word and deed, and should be ready to give up one's life for humanity, not just for *salvation*”. (Smith 1997:274). It would be unusual to find a pure form of Gandhian martyrdom today. Yet, there are many who have borrowed some of his ideas to support their struggle for justice. An example is the mass student resistant movement (OTPOR) against Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, as portrayed in the documentary film “Bringing Down a Dictator”.

## 2) Activist Martyrdom

According to this model, martyrs are activists drawn from the ranks of all those men and women who struggle to bring justice and who are on the side of the oppressed and the suppressed, that is to say, those who take on the more powerful —sometimes their own people — in order to bring justice to all. Thus this model sees martyrs as people who would willingly give up their lives, or who would willingly live and suffer, all for a cause.

Some of the activists who ascribe to this model of martyrdom may be secular, but many of them in their private life ascribe to a religion and may even draw their strength for the struggle for justice from their faith. Yet in their public life, religion has no role. They would accept death in the name of justice or humanity, not simply in the name of God. Their goal is rarely individual salvation.

Medha Patkar and her fiery team members of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) in India are examples of the type of activists that can end up becoming martyrs. While fighting the governments of three states as well as the central government of India on the construction of the huge dam over the Narmada river, and while seeking compensation and rehabilitation of the millions displaced, Patkar and her team members have at various times over the years sought martyrdom.

Patkar has very often used the Gandhian tool of fasting to seek martyrdom. She and her colleagues have fasted repeatedly in protest against government policies concerning the construction of the dam. They have inflicted great pain and suffering upon themselves. Sometimes they have collapsed completely, and have been moved to the hospital for forcible treatment. They have expressed openly their willingness to die for their cause. Over the decades, however, their movement has clearly felt the need for more drastic measures to bring social justice to the people and to make a point to the rest of the world. In 2003 an NBA member, along with a few villagers, opted for *jal samadhi*. They sat down peacefully on the land that was going to be submerged by the dam waters and were drowned in peaceful protest. At this point their model of martyrdom moved from being the means to achieve an end to becoming an end in itself.

This example under this model is a lot similar to the strategic model described above. But the prime difference is the fact that the members of NBA do not bring the language of their faith into their public life and into their struggle for justice. Their vocabulary is replete with words about human rights and social justice, not words about God and salvation. The other ma-

major difference between the two models described above is that under strategic martyrdom, the ends and means (that is, the political/ social goals and the goal of martyrdom) are interchangeable while under activist martyrdom, the act ultimately remains an end. Under the first model, martyrdom itself is a political strategy and giving it shape becomes the ultimate goal. On the other hand, activist martyrs use it as a tool to achieve their final goal. The two models of martyrdom above differ from the models of “martyrs of confession” and “martyrs of solidarity” defined by Lundberg in two primary ways: 1) faith or religion is not the primary driving element in martyrdom, and 2) the ultimate goal is not salvation. However, Lundberg does touch upon the fact that there are options other than actual death to be sought by those desiring to “witness” with the totality of their lives when he talks of living martyrdom near the end of his paper. This is a useful way of broadening the understanding of martyrdom, I believe.

#### LUNDBERG’S OVEREMPHASIS OF THE ROLE RELIGION SHOULD PLAY IN RECOGNIZING MARTYRS FOR JUSTICE

My second concern with Lundberg’s paper is of a more serious nature. His over-emphasis on the role that religion (essentially Christianity) should play in bestowing the mantle of martyrdom on individuals could, I think, end up making conflicts more protracted, interlocked, intractable and deep-rooted. I am very uncomfortable with his seeming assumption that it is only by looking through the lens of a particular theologian’s perspective, or from the circumscribed boundaries of the field of theology as a whole, that people can gain an understanding of martyrdom and thus recognize true martyrs. This approach does nothing to help humanity move towards resolution of the many types of conflicts discussed earlier. To substantiate this point I will discuss current suicide bombing strategy used in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Even though suicide is prohibited under various religions including Islam, there are times when suicide bombing receives support and is even sanctioned by religion. This is primarily because, as noted by Brooks (2002), in many violent conflicts there reaches a point where all pain, suffering, and endurance become directed toward a single-minded pursuit for that final victory. At that point, says Brooks (2002:18), martyrdom becomes not just a means, but an end.

Clearly, in the case of the Palestinians, there is a sense of despair and hopelessness that drives them towards using suicide bombing as a weapon of terror. According to *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion* (1998:494), it is the weaker of the antagonists that produces martyrs. One could, of course, debate about what makes each party in a particular struggle stronger or weaker.

While the rest of the world may call these suicide bombers militants, the Islamic world insists upon bestowing on them the title of martyr. It is clear from Davis's analysis (2003:9) that one has to accept that the concept of martyrdom in Islam is very different from the way it is understood in the West. In Islam the concept of martyrdom, *shahada*, can only be understood in the light of the Islamic concept of holy struggle, *jihad*. (Ezzati 1986). Martyrdom in Islam is associated with the idea of witness or testimony. In fact, the word for martyr in Arabic has the same root as the word *shahada* – meaning to witness or testify, similar to the New Testament Greek roots of the word *martyr* which lies behind Lundberg's definitions of martyrs of solidarity and martyrs of confession. The death of the suicide bomber reproduces all the dynamics of Christ on the Cross except for the fact that the suicide bomber kills other people in willingly embracing his/ her own death, while the martyrs of confession or solidarity coming from the Western world are essentially pacifists. Grasping this basic difference in how martyrdom is conceived of in the contemporary West and how many contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim scholars are urging the Islamic world view of martyrdom, could go a long way in understanding the disagreements over whether a suicide bomber is a militant or a martyr. Of course the subject is more complex than what is simply described here, since one may argue that some types of suicide bombers are more criminal in their objectives than those fighting for causes similar to the Palestinian struggle.

I fear that Lundberg's paper offers us no help whatsoever in understanding suicide bombing, a type of martyrdom that simply cannot be recognized as such if we stay within the narrow confines of the five criteria for martyrdom which he derives from Christian theology. I thus find the following quote from Lundberg's paper a particular cause for concern: "Though, as Sobrino insists, the contemporary martyrdoms do shed light on the cross of Christ, the interpretive priority must rest with the cross of Jesus. Otherwise the cross of Christ could easily become the subsequent justification for many types of 'martyrs', some of which may not be as Christian as others". He goes on to

elaborate that it is the cross that enables contemporary martyrdoms to retain their proper character as witnesses to Christ.

If, as Lundberg suggests, we let the Christian cross alone bestow the mantle of martyrdom on individuals, then it seems that anyone outside of this Western faith tradition who achieves martyrdom according to the tenets of his or her own faith would be branded with some other less honorable title. The reverse would also hold true. Given the current context of a world full of conflicts, it does not seem to make sense to let each religion define, and have the power to bestow, the title of martyr on its own people alone. If we keep in mind all that was said in the beginning of this paper about the role religion seems to play in the conflicts today, and the fact that death and dying for a cause is rampant, the debate may well end up being one of semantics – martyr or freedom fighter or terrorist or traitor? A soldier? A political activist? A social activist? Or just a fool? Isn't one man's martyr another's traitor? Isn't one man's freedom fighter another man's terrorist?

But that would end up being a very simple debate. Ultimately, it would become a debate among religions, with each religion becoming more and more and exclusive instead of inclusive. Religious inclusivity is what the world needs today. This paper began by arguing that violent post-Cold War conflicts are not necessarily about religion but about other issues such as nationality, ethnicity, land, and politics and it seems to me that if we: 1) analyze these powerful and important contemporary issues only within the narrow confines of each religion's perspective, and 2) define martyrdom only according to the doctrinal perspectives of each religion, we will in fact end up making these conflicts purely "religious" ones! This would not help. Religion involves deep beliefs and values that cannot be easily given up or compromised upon. In a conflict situation, exclusive religious claims will likely ensure that more passion will be whipped up — passion that will take us further and further from resolution.

It seems as if the need of the hour is some kind of dialogue between these different theological worlds rather than for each one to continue to think exclusively within its own box. Martyrdom has to be situated within such a context of inclusive religious discussion today. It is imperative that we do so if we want to bring peace in the world.

## REFERENCES

- Azar, Edward E.  
1990 "Protracted International Conflicts: Ten Propositions." In *Conflict: Readings in Management and Resolution.*, ed. J. Burton and F. Dukes. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Brooks, David  
2002 "Culture of Martyrdom: How Suicide Bombing Became Not Just a Means but an End." *The Atlantic Monthly.* 289/6 (June 2002):18-20.
- Burton, John W.  
1987 *Resolving Deep-Rooted Conflict: A Handbook.* New York: University Press of America.
- Davis, Joyce M.  
2003 *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance and Despair in the Middle East.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ezzati, A.  
1986 The Concept of Martyrdom in Islam. *Al Serat*, Vol. XII (1986).  
<http://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/concept-ezzati.html>
- Friedland, Roger and Hecht, Richard  
1998 "The Bodies of Nations: A Comparative Study of Religious Violence in Jerusalem and Ayodhya (Israel and India)." *History of Religions.* 38/2 (Nov. 1998):101.
- Galtung, Johan  
1969 "Violence, Peace and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6/3 (1969):167-191.
- Kriesberg, L., Northrup, T. A., & Thorson, S. J., eds.  
1989 *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

- McGinley, Phyllis  
1970 *Saint-Watching*. New York: Viking Press.
- Oommen, T.K.  
2001 Religion as Source of Violence. *The Ecumenical Review*. 53/2 (April 2001):168.
- Smith, Lacy Baldwin  
1997 *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.
- Taras, Raymond C. & Ganguly, Rajat  
2002 *Understanding Ethnic Conflict: The International Dimension*. New York: Longman.
- Wuthnow, Robert  
1998 *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, vol.II. Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc.