



Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed (Guides for the Perplexed)

Paul Middleton

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It can be said, almost without exaggeration, that martyrdom has become one of the most pressing theological issues facing the contemporary world. Since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the world has had to face up to an Islamic manifestation of martyrdom. Martyrdom has a long history; as long as individuals have been dying for their faith or cause, others have been telling and more importantly, interpreting their stories.

These martyrologies are essentially conflict stories. Whether a Christian confessing her faith before a bemused Roman governor, or a suicide bomber blowing himself up in a crowded café in Jerusalem, the way these stories are recounted—positively or negatively—reflect a wider conflict in which the narrator and his community find themselves. Martyr narratives, whether textual, oral, or even a CNN news report, do more than simply report a death; they also contain the interpretative framework by which that death is understood—again positively or negatively.

When the death of a martyr is reported, the way in which that story is told places that death within a larger narrative of conflict, which may be regional, global, or even cosmic. The martyr becomes a symbol of the community's desires and hopes, or for that matter, their terrors and fears, but in either case, the martyr is representative of a larger struggle, and often martyrology contains the vision of how the community envisages final victory over their enemy. This book aims to illuminate the way these conflict stories have been told and function (principally, though not exclusively) within Christian, Jewish, and Islamic communities.

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