

# **The Concept of Martyrdom and Sikhism**

By

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**Martyrdom in its purest form is voluntary, conscious and altruistic readiness to suffer and offer one's life for a cause<sup>1</sup>. It means that no fear or material inducement underlie as the driving factors in such extreme sacrifice of life.**

**Etymologically the word martyr (or martyrdom) is derived from the Greek word 'martyros' which means witness. Martyrdom is thus the supreme witness to the truth of faith – bearing witness to the faith even unto death. A martyr is one who accepts death with courage as a witness to his faith believing it to be the most noble of all human endeavors.**

**The idea of martyrdom (or martyr) has been around since time immemorial. However, the word and its present connotation dates to the Judeo-Christian era. Even before the Judeo-Christian times people were called upon to die for their beliefs and they did, but the awe and respect associated with this kind of death developed only after the establishment of organized religion which propounded the idea of heaven and hell as potential reward or punishment in the hereafter for one's behavior here. That is probably the reason why the concept of martyrdom has been mostly associated with religion (although recently it has been used in connection with sacrifices for political causes as well).**

**Among the different faiths in the world, the Semitic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) adopted the idea of martyrdom. However, the motivating factors and, to some extent, the concept itself were modified by each faith to suit its respective doctrines. The earlier religions spreading in the East (Hinduism and Buddhism) do not seem to have accepted this idea. Sikhism, the youngest of all the major religions of the world, is the only religion originating in India, which has adopted the concept of martyrdom. It is therefore interesting to see how this concept has been understood and practiced by each faith.**

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<sup>1</sup> The Encyclopedia of politics and religion; Ed. Robert Wuthnow, 1998; P. 404-97.

**Budhism:** Budhism neither believes in heaven and hell, nor does it profess violence (it believes in Ahimsa), therefore the idea of martyrdom in any form is completely absent in this faith.

**Hinduism:** Hinduism does believe in heaven and hell, reward and punishment according to one's actions and it does not believe in non-violence. But the concept of martyrdom seems to be absent in this faith. Sanskrit, the language of ancient Vedic (Hindu) religion does not even have a word equivalent or close to martyrdom. Only recently the semantic range of the term "Balidan" has been expanded to bring close to this concept. Various scholars have tried to find an explanation to this and come up with different answers. For example, Swami Ram Tirath thinks that in Hinduism human life was considered as a gift from God and therefore too sacred to be glorified when sacrificed for any human endeavor.

**Judaism:** In Judaism the interpretation of the concept of martyrdom seems to be somewhat different from other Simitic faiths. It simply means "standing up to the principles of faith, even when one has to face hardships and oppression. The famous episode of 'Masada' where all Jews preferred to commit suicide rather than boldly fighting the enemy in the battlefield, amply illustrates this point.

**Christianity:** The inception of Christianity came as a result of death, by torture, of Jesus Christ, This event is considered by the followers of this faith as the highest act of martyrdom. Christianity is thus predicated around the concept of triumphing over death as Jesus did. Under such circumstances it stands to reason why the concept of dying for one's religion would be given so much importance. Thus by fourth century (CE) the idea of dying for Jesus Christ had morphed into the idea of martyrdom in which dying for one's faith was considered not just a duty (because it was emulating Jesus) but an honor and a privilege.

This simplistic explanation, however, ignores one important psychological reason for exaltation of such a death to such a high level. Among Christians it is a firm belief that Jesus sacrificed his life to wash off the sins committed by humanity through Adam. Thus he is responsible for interceding between God and the faithful (atonement). All a believer has to do is to confirm faith in Jesus and he shall have a seat reserved for him in heaven. Psychologically, it introduces a guilt

**complex (all Christians are indebted to Jesus for what he did and what he will do for them in the hereafter) which is the driving force for Christians to emulate Jesus Christ and embrace martyrdom.**

**Islam: With the beginning of Islam came the Arabic word ‘shahada’ or ‘shahadat’ which is conceptually similar to the word martyrdom but has even broader meaning. It means to see, to witness, to testify or to become a role model. This word is inseparably associated with the Islamic concept of “Jihad” or holy struggle. A Shahid (Shaheed) is therefore a person who in struggle (Jihad) witnesses the truth and stands by it firmly to the extent that not only he testifies to it verbally but is prepared to fight for the truth and if necessary give up his life and thus become a role model for others<sup>2</sup>.**

**In essence, according to Islam, martyrdom applies only when it is preceded by Jihad which is an inclusive struggle for the truth (the way the truth is interpreted in this faith). A person involved in Jihad (a Mujahid) always dies the death of a martyr even if he does not fall on the battle field, as long as he stays loyal to the truth and stays ready to fight for and defend the truth at all costs.**

**Now, truth according to a majority of Islamic fundamentalist theologians is the moral obligation of every Muslim to Jihad which they define ‘to expand the scope of Islam, even by the use of force (sword). According to this view martyrdom is associated with even forcible conversion or death to the infidel, which is the highest privilege of Islam<sup>\*</sup>. Some relevant quotes from Quran are summarized as follows in order to substantiate this point.**

- 1. Any religion other than Islam is not acceptable<sup>3</sup>.**
- 2. If you do not fight in the cause of God with whatever you have got then God will inflict serious punishment on you<sup>4</sup>.**
- 3. If you fight for God then expect either martyrdom or paradise<sup>5</sup>.**

**The rewards promised to a shaheed by Islam are:**

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<sup>2</sup> A. Ezzati, Tehran University, Al-Serat. Vol XII (1996)

<sup>\*</sup> Emperor Aurangzeb and Osama Bin Laden belong to the category of zealots who seem to firmly believe in this idea.

<sup>3</sup> Holy Quraan, Sura 3, verse 85.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Sura 9, verses 38, 39 and 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Sura 9, verse 52.

1. Forgiveness with the first drop of his spilt blood.
2. A guaranteed place in paradise with a celestial crown in his head.
3. Availability of seventy two virgins.
4. Authority to intercede for seventy two of his relatives.

The picture of paradise painted in Islam is much more carnal than in Christianity and it gives impetus to the urge to attain martyrdom.

The question arises, if a reward is offered for any act, even if it is the sacrifice of one's own life, the sanctity attached to it by religion is downgraded to a promise of payment of a certain amount in the hereafter for performing an act here. In this world today there are many who are ready to carry out a mission in which the odds of losing life are overwhelming, in return for payment of an appropriate sum of money. No one would call the death of such a mercenary, martyrdom.

**Sikhism:** Sikhism elevated the concept of martyrdom to new heights when Guru Nanak, the first prophet said:

ਜਉ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਉ ॥

ਇਤੁ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪੈਰੁ ਧਰੀਜੈ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਦੀਜੈ ਕਾਣਿ ਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥

(SGGS, P.

1412)

“Should you have an urge to play the game of love,  
step into my lane with your head placed on your palm.  
Once embarked on this path,  
hesitate not to sacrifice your head.

Guru Nanak did not offer any rewards or enticements for playing the game of love even at the cost of one's life. Also there is no guilt complex among Sikhs because none of the Sikh Gurus gave any promise of intercession for any one who expressed unconditional full faith in Sikhism. Whatever one sows, so does he reap:

ਜੇਹਾ ਬੀਜੈ ਸੋ ਲੁਣੈ ਕਰਮਾ ਸੰਦੜਾ ਖੇਤੁ ॥

Also:

ਅਹਿ ਕਰੁ ਕਰੇ ਸੁ ਅਹਿ ਕਰੁ ਪਾਏ ਕੋਈ ਨ ਪਕੜੀਐ ਕਿਸੈ ਥਾਇ ॥

“(in this age of Kali) one gets retribution for what one does.

No one gets caught in anyone else's place”.

Furthermore, Sikhism does not believe in sinful birth of human beings. Love for God and Guru or staying steadfastly on the path that leads to

**the supreme reality is something that is beyond the idea of any rewards corresponding to attainment of paradise full of virgins.**

**Sikh history is full of examples where all kinds of worldly rewards and even promises of paradise (after death) were offered but the Sikh martyrs summarily rejected them for the sake of love for their Guru and God.**

**The first martyr in Sikh history was the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev. The only reliable source of the account of his martyrdom is the diary of the then emperor of India, Tuzk-i-Jehangiri. Referring to the seat of Sikh Guru Arjan Dev at Goindwal, Jehangir writes:**

**“For years the thought had been presenting to my mind that I should put an end to this false traffic or he (the Guru) should be brought into the fold of Islam”. Guru Arjan, according to Jehangir, was calling himself religious as well as worldly leader and because of his ways and teachings, was attracting many simple-minded Hindus and many foolish Muslims also. Therefore on some flimsy grounds he was arrested and put through some of the most inhuman tortures (setting on a hot plate, putting in a cauldron of boiling water and pouring hot sand on his body) until his demise. The writing in the diary indicates the Guru Arjan Dev was probably given a choice to convert to Islam in order to escape all the torture, which he rejected.**

**The records of martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, are available in relatively greater details<sup>6</sup>. He sacrificed his life not for his own faith but in order to defend the rights of religious freedom of Hindus. He is thus the apostle of Human Rights who stood up against a tyrannical regime that was hell-bent upon converting its majority subjects by oppression to its own faith. He sacrificed his life but not his principles**

**There are innumerable examples of martyrdom by Sikhs in the relatively short span of their history. Starting with Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Sati Das and Bhai Dayal Das, the companions of Guru Tegh Bahadur, who were martyred mercilessly to scare Guru Tegh Bahadur so he would accept the conditions laid down by the emperor Aurangzeb of accepting conversion to Islam. The tradition of martyrdom has since**

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<sup>6</sup> The Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Ed. Harbans Singh, Punjabi University, Patiala; Vol. 3, P.58.

**continued till recent times without any abatement and will continue as long as there are adherents to the words of Guru Nanak live in this world.**

**Some of the most notable names of Sikh martyrs that come to mind are:**

**The four sons of Guru Gobind Singh.**

**The three of the five Beloved ones.**

**The forty Muktas.**

**Banda Singh Bahadur.**

**Bhai Mani Singh.**

**Baba Deep Singh.**

**Bhai Bota Singh and Bhai Garja Singh.**

**Bhai Taru Singh.**

**Bhai Lachhman Singh and Bhai Dalip Singh.**

**These are examples of knowingly and voluntarily sacrificing their lives for altruistic causes and noble ends. This makes their martyrdom pristine.**