

The Civil Rights Movement in America: An Islamic Perspective on Martyrdom

By A.H. Kafel

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It is certain that for each human being granted an opportunity of worldly life, he will also meet his death. Man can meet his end by a number of outcomes, so many that to enumerate them would be a task not worth our time (we might, to mention a few general categories, refer to old age, accidents, natural disasters/illness, unjust acts, and a noble fifth, the topic of this talk). And yet, of the various preappointed ends that are prepared for each of His creation, there is one that has been worth mentioning from time immemorial and will merit mention till the Day of Judgement and beyond - martyrdom.

To be martyred, to become a 'shahid', is to die for a cause in the way of God, knowing in full the risk to himself but having full faith in both the value of upholding justice and righteous acts and God's promise of the Hereafter. This particular talk does not concern the many martyrs who have been unjustly killed and continue to be martyred at the time of this talk, while in the defense of their homes, families and lands, although we praise and honor their acts and status as martyrs in the way of God. And we hope by this discussion, that both our fellow Muslims, but more importantly our fellow human beings, especially (as per the topic) our American ones, will see that a life of martyrdom for a good, godly cause is an honorable, selfless act, beneficent to humanity, and is afforded all the virtues of the Quran and Islam, even if that act is not directly attached to capital 'I', institutionalized, Islam.

Therefore, the purpose of this discussion is to urge you to consider that the masses of righteous and striving individuals who were undoubtedly martyred in the struggle for freedom and civil rights in the United States of America (often termed in the academia the Abolition

movement and Civil Rights movement) were martyred in the way of God. Our assertion is that there is no righteous and godly act and certainly no martyrdom that occurs without God (since martyrdom would equal death, and thus, a human's appointed time). There need not be a consideration of mere names or titles. Indeed, all good in religion is God's religion, all praise belongs to Allah. God, Allah, is the overseer of all such matters, inside or outside of the human institutionalized and structured religion of 'Islam'. It is not by coincidence that a cause as righteous and significant as the centuries of struggle against the severe oppression of black people in America garnered as many martyrs as it did. So too is the adverse and honorable history of the oppressed people of the world, today and throughout humanity's past.

The Quran is filled with mentions of the rewards and meaning behind martyrdom and its connection to God. It also has stories of martyrs throughout time, including, of prophets of God but also ordinary people, across all levels of faith and religiosity. One cannot help but be moved by the deep emotion these verses invoke but also inspired by the certain feeling of a heavenly light, nur of the Hereafter. It is no coincidence, just as when you find martyrs of the American civil rights and freedom struggle, you find similar emotion and godly light in their stories.

One of the most inspirational such parables of martyrdom in the Quran is the story of the man in Surah Ya Seen. It tells us that God sent three messengers to the people of this community. In other words, there had been more than enough signs sent to this community to desist from their bad deeds. Despite the clearness of the message and the plethora of signs provided to them, they chose to stone the messengers to death.¹ What is remarkable is that the martyrdom of these unnamed messengers did affect others to hasten to the cause of God. The Quran narrates that a man from a nearby place, just a simple man, "rajul", comes running and says to the people "follow the messengers". It is clear that what they bring you is righteous and true. He turns to

¹ Quran, (36: 15-19)

himself, “if I don’t follow what I know in myself to be true then what claim do I have before God?”. After he makes his plea to the people of the community he likely killed.² Because the Quran says, “thereafter, it was said to him ‘enter Paradise’”. Remarkably, and I think this highlights the selfless nature of a martyr, he is still concerned about his people, replying “if only my people would have known how my Lord has forgiven me and placed me among the honored ones!”³The story of William Lewis Moore, a man gunned down while delivering a godly message, contains similarities to that of the man who ran to his people urging them towards Allah.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s database of Civil Rights Martyrs, William Lewis Moore “was known for standing up for his beliefs, even when he stood alone, as he usually did”.⁴ He was adamant that he would oppose segregation, as such he took a stand against injustice, facing prison for his courage. As the Quran hints, it is a fearful task to stand up against others who are doing wrong. Most of the time, it is easier to put one’s head down and ignore the suffering of a fellow man. It would have been easier for this man, a white man and mail carrier with nothing much to lose if he had just ignored the oppression of those not like him. But there is something that drives man to do things that defy the worldview of cynical materialists and social darwinists and points to the existence of something greater than any one individual. God truly is greater than anything which can be compared to Him!

William Lewis Moore felt compelled that he would deliver a letter to the Governor of Mississippi, a skill natural to his trade as a postal carrier, urging his fellow people to tolerate one another and the Governor to support integration. And does the Quran not say, “we created you in groups so that you may get to know one another and become more conscious of Allah”.

² Quran, (36: 20-25)

³ Quran (36: 26-27)

⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/william-lewis-moore> April 23, 1963

Further, just as the Quran recounted that the man was running to his people to urge them towards good, Moore too decided he would walk his message from Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi. Unjustly, like the man from the Quran, he was killed for his deeds, shot while resting on the side of the road by .22 caliber rifle fire. I wonder what his reaction was when he was told to enter Paradise?

It would be worth studying the many martyrs of God across various contexts outside of the traditional Islamic topics given much (rightly so) consideration. People like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers⁵ similarly gave their lives, knowingly crusading in the face of danger against injustice and oppression, should be examined and honored with the status of martyrs of Allah as well as the countless men, women, children, from all ethnicities, life paths and birthrights that have given their lives for a cause in the way of God and the betterment of humanity. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King makes clear his godly imperative, “Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns... I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown.” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly”⁶. Dr. King’s message is inseparable from the one his fellow martyr Dr. Ali Shariati implied when he spoke the eternal phrase, “everyday is ashura, every land is Karbala” and invoked the eternal sacrifice of our Imam (عليه سلام). Dr. King and Dr. Shariati understood the essence of the Quran’s pronouncement that one life, to kill or save it, is to kill or save all of humanity.⁷ To stand for the rights of all oppressed and marginalized peoples is to stand for the rights of all of humanity. If everyday is ashura, it is lucky that we are blessed

⁵ [60 years ago, Medgar Evers became a martyr of the Civil Rights Movement](#)

⁶ [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#) Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, August 1963.

⁷ Quran (5: 32)

with those who unquestioningly put themselves last when in service of a cause in the way of God.

In closing, when one's belief in God and comprehension of tauhid (the oneness and unity of God) goes deeper than the surface, one becomes immersed in signs around them, and they, with ease, find Allah's divine will and mercy behind every godly act. Those like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the other martyrs of that movement had been undoubtedly immersed in godliness by some experience of the divine. In his last speech before a public audience, Dr. King, like martyrs and godly individuals before and after him, makes clear that he does not fear death since he has felt the presence of the Lord and with him is God's cause. He proclaimed, less than a day before being martyred, "I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord".⁸

When Dr. King was told to enter the Paradise, with no fear or worries upon him, I wonder what was his reply? There is no question, the blood of the martyrs for the cause of freedom and the defeat of injustice in America is the blood of martyrs in islam. Surely, all martyrs in the way of their Lord will have their share of the light and the reward of Allah, that is His promise.

⁸ ["I've Been to the Mountaintop" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. | American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees \(AFSCME\)](#)

