

One thing is quite clear – and this is found even in Aristotle – that if a man is willing to give up his life to attack or kill someone else, it is very difficult and often impossible to stop him. Groups or institutions such as the Secret Service and Scotland Yard are in part designed to prevent the killing of politicians and their families from such suicide bombers. A number of American presidents have been killed by men who did not care for their own lives. But rarely was their motive religious. This power of the man who cares not for his life means, in practice, that if we know someone is on a suicide-bombing mission, he must be stopped or killed first if innocent people are to be protected. The only alternative is to let it happen because this killing is what the terrorist intends to do and will do, as we see in hundreds and hundreds of instances. I recently came across a website that listed, with times and places, 2400 acts of terrorism since 9/11 in various parts of the world. These were from Muslim sources involving the killing of others (but not all suicide bombings, of course).

The Islamic suicide bomber does not think that those who are killed in their "mission" are "innocent." Subjectively, they understand that they are killing "enemies" of Allah even if those killed are women, children, elderly, or just passers-by. This is a radically erroneous conscience, of course, but it seems to exist. Suicide bombing is rarely random. Someone orders it to happen; someone obeys the orders. The purpose of suicide bombers is precisely, by carrying out orders, to help to extend Islam to its "rightful" immediate or long-term dimensions, the conquest of the world for Allah. This great "cause," nutty as it may sound to us, is evidently what gives nobility and dignity to such acts of what the rest of us call "terrorism."

### The Erroneous, Deadly Conscience

As I wrote immediately after 9/11 ([www.tcnews.com](http://www.tcnews.com), 15 September 2001), even on the principles of Catholic moral thought which says that a truly erroneous conscience must be obeyed (*Veritatis Splendor*, 57-64), it is possible that the suicide bombers went to heaven along with those they killed, if we can assume they were true religious believers and following their consciences with no chance within their culture or personal history of correcting themselves. This view does not make the act right or eliminate its consequences, but it takes seriously what some Muslims evidently hold.

In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II spent a considerable time discussing the notion of martyrdom. Ironically, that 1993 encyclical was not written with the suicide bombers in mind, though they were already active. The notion of dying for one's faith is an ancient and noble one. It attests to things more important than life. Sometimes, in the course of too many human lives, the only choice they had was between dying or doing evil. To choose to stay alive and renounce one's beliefs or understanding of virtue meant implicitly a denial of the principle at stake. The only way to uphold the principle in fact would be to accept death, but it was not one's choice to die as such, hence not suicide. The traditions of St. Stephen and Thomas More, following Christ, was to forgive, but not condone, those who carried out the death sentence, both the executioners and those morally responsible for ordering it.

"Charity, in conformity with the radical demands of the Gospel, can lead the believer to the supreme witness of martyrdom," wrote John Paul II (*Veritatis Splendor*, 89). He went on: "The relationship between faith and morality shines forth with all its brilliance in the unconditional respect due to the insistent demands of the personal dignity of every man, demands protected by those moral norms which prohibit without exception actions which are intrinsically evil" (90). Among such actions, the document points out (80), is "voluntary suicide." But "suicide bombing" is something more than just "voluntary suicide." Back in the Vietnam War, we had instances of Buddhist monks burning themselves to death in protest against something or other. Though the act was bad enough in itself, those monks did not intend to take anyone else with them.

The whole point of the contemporary suicide bomber is precisely to "take someone else with him." And who are these "someones"? They can be soldiers – usually in areas where obvious distinctions of combatants and non-combatants is deliberately obscured. But they can be and often are passengers in buses or airliners, or shoppers in markets, or just about anyone. The bombing is of the innocent is precisely to make publicity and cause civil unrest and even retribution against some outside "cause."

If the analysis presented here is generally valid, the major conclusion is that any group, religion, philosophy, or world-view that positively advocates and carries out this practice of suicide bombing cannot be true. What is at stake is not merely a distinction between two divergent groups within one religion, but the very possibility of any truth existing in that part of the religion that advocates suicide bombing as "martyrdom" in its religious "cause."

Used with permission of the author.

### Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

14818 Rancho Road

Hesperia, California, USA

Telephone: 760-220-6818

FAX: 760-948-7620

E-mail: [pjpiisoe@earthlink.net](mailto:pjpiisoe@earthlink.net)

[www.pjpiisoe.org](http://www.pjpiisoe.org)

### Pamphlet 326

# Martyrs and Suicide Bombers

Fr. James V. Schall, S.J.

After the London subway bombings, the father of Mohammed Atta, the lead suicide pilot in the World Trade Center destruction, denounced as traitors those fellow Muslims who condemned these "terrorist" bombings. He would encourage more attacks. Indeed, he would donate five thousand dollars (such is the apparent cost of such acts) to carry out another such bombing. That is how much, he thought, it would take to finance another London attack, another "volunteer" to kill others by killing himself.

### Suicide Bombers Treated As Martyrs

A July 30<sup>th</sup> report in the London *Spectator* depicted the *in absentia* funeral in Pakistan of one of the London suicide bombers, Shehzad Tenweer. The *Koran* was read; a large crowd was present. Tanweer was popularly considered a "martyr" for his "heroic" act that killed seven people. It is this topic that I wish to discuss — the notion that a "suicide bomber" is a "martyr," a hero, to be imitated and encouraged, while those who oppose such actions, even if they are Muslim, are condemned.

In his recent address to Muslim leaders in Cologne Benedict XVI, seeking some common ground between Muslims and Christians, remarked, "I am certain that I echo your own thought when I bring up as one of our concerns the spread of terrorism. Terrorist activity is continually recurring in various parts of the world.... Terrorism of any kind is a perversion and cruel decision which shows contempt for the sacred right to life and undermines that very foundations of all civil society." Presumably, suicide bombings are a sub-set of "terrorism," itself an abstract word that avoids the explanation of "by whom?" and "for what purpose?"

The question is, does this "common ground" exist and what is its basis? Clearly, no common ground exists between the positive promotion of and the absolute condemnation of suicide bombing. Either it is right or wrong. If it is wrong, any organization or movement promoting it as a matter of principle and policy cannot be a valid religion or philosophy, no matter how earnest or sincere its proponents may be. Are those Muslims who do have "common ground" with Christians and Jews in condemning suicide bombings – say on the basis of "rights" or natural law or reason – also thought to be "heretics" by accepted Muslim standards? Ought "suicide bombing" to be encouraged under any conceivable circumstances?

This claim of the moral approval of suicide bombing, clearly found within uncomfortably large segments of Islam, is surely the point of many Muslims calling a suicide bomber a "martyr." Historically, a martyr was not and could not be a "suicide." Even Socrates at his trial had to explain why his acceptance of death at the hands of the State, even his self-administration of the death penalty, was not a suicide. Nor was Christ's crucifixion a voluntary suicide. In fact, a martyr is the exact opposite of a suicide bomber. A martyr is someone who upholds – by his *being unjustly killed* –

the Socratic principle that it is never right to do wrong, even to oneself, no less to others.

More bluntly, a suicide bomber, by any objective standard, *cannot* be a martyr, though he may be the cause of the martyrdom of others. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have said that such deeds can never be justified by reason or religion, even when some religions or sects evidently do so justify them. A line is drawn in the sand. To approve and foster suicide bombing is to make something intrinsically evil to appear as good. This position has serious implications. Positive advocacy of suicide bombing, not to mention terrorist bombing that does not include suicide, indicates that the teaching of persons or groups holding the doctrine supporting it cannot be true.

### **Muslim Ambivalence?**

Italian journalist Sandro Magistro, in a long essay, charted the connection between the leaders of Muslim groups in Germany, with headquarters in Cologne and Munich, to the Muslim Brotherhood with Egyptian and Syrian connections. Indeed, we know that at least some of the World Trade Center attacks were originally planned in Germany. "In 1994, a frequent visitor of the mosque in Munich, Mahmoud Abouhalima, was given a life sentence in the United States for having organized, one year before, the car bomb attack on the World Trade Center in New York. But it was only after the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, that investigations into the connections between terrorism and the radical Islamic circle in Germany intensified."

A BBC report (August 21), in a Panorama debate about whether the British Muslim community refuses to look at the extremists among them, cites the leading British Muslim politician, Sir Iqbal Sacranie. He "condemns suicide bombings by British Muslims anywhere and said there was no difference between the life of a Palestinian and the life of a Jew and that all life was sacred." But just to confuse things, "in a separate interview, a senior spokesman for one of the MCB's (Muslim Council of Britain) main affiliates, the Muslim Association of Britain, appeared to condone the glorification of suicide bombers." Numerous Muslim sources can be cited as approving this latter view.

Led by Prime Minister Blair and President Bush, Western leaders, both religious and political, have sought valiantly to maintain the separation between "peaceful" Muslims and "terrorism." Implicitly this distinction implies that only "peaceful" Muslims are "really" Muslims, if this liberal and theological distinction is correct. Unfortunately, the "terrorists" themselves do claim with considerable historical and doctrinal evidence, on Koranic grounds, that they are in fact the true interpreters of Islam. In one sense, it is "illiberal" not to take them at their word. One of the problems with understanding Islam is that it has no final authority within itself to decide which of these two interpretations is valid. For every fatwa that pronounces suicide bombing wrong, another from another equally credible source pronounces it valid. This situation is perhaps why Blair and others are more and more insisting that Muslims, so that they can be held accountable, stand up and be counted in public as rejecting "terrorism" not only as a practice but as inherent in Islamic sources.

The test of Pius XII was Nazism. The test of John Paul II was Communism and absolutist liberalism. The test of Benedict XVI, for better or for worse, is Islam – and this in the context whether or not the absolutist liberal theory can tame it. But Islam, unlike Nazism and Communism and likewise unlike many academic analyses of it, is not primarily understood in terms of Western (often German) philosophical or social movements. Indeed, attempts to understand what is going on by these categories is more likely to obscure the truth than to clarify it.

By its record and its own theological presuppositions, Islam itself does not have and does not seek to have a regime of neutrality or tolerance. Its civil politics now and historically unite Islam and the state in various configurations. What Islam practices for non-Muslims within areas it politically controls, as Bat Ye'or has graphically shown in *Eurabia*, is a theory and practice of subservience. Jews and Christians may be given a special place of subservience, sometimes called tolerance, but it is still subservience. The Copts in Egypt are perhaps the longest lasting example of this (see *First Things*, March, 2005, 47-50). The persecution of Christians in Sudan is the most graphic example.

### **The Final Goal**

The first step in dealing with any movements or religion is to know what it is, what it holds about itself. Often, to be sure, a difference can be found between what one says he holds and what he holds to act on or practice. But not a few thinkers, like Hitler or Lenin, did tell us what they held and what they intended to do before they went ahead and did it. No one believed them until after they did what they told us that they intended to do.

In this sense, Mohammed and Islam itself, in word and action, do tell us what they have done and what they intend to do, if they could. One can say with little doubt that Europe today was intended by Islamic warriors to be Muslim. Europe, as Africa and the Middle East, was invaded for that purpose. And this purpose was conceived to be a religious purpose; the armies were fulfilling a mission. This goal is still held to be the purpose of the Muslim factions called "terrorists." The only reason Europe is not Muslim today is that Muslim armies were defeated by hard-fought military action in France and Austria. Many Islamic thinkers do not admit that any area that was taken back from Muslim control (Spain, for instance) is still not theirs. There is no legitimate "taking back," something that makes the Spanish elections after their own recent "terrorist" bombings doubly ironical.

Moreover, most of the world that is officially Muslim today is Muslim because of long strings of military victories and conquests which have remained to form, in one way or another, present Islamic configurations. This situation is simply a fact, whatever we make of it. Terrorist actions today are generally formulated in terms either of winning back former Muslim lands (Spain, Israel, Balkans) or pursuing the Muslim goal of peace by which is meant the whole world under Muslim law. This rule indeed would be a kind of "peace" with all external opposition eliminated.

The present Islamic division between the "world of war" (non-Muslim lands) and the "world of peace" would be eliminated. No doubt, the unexpected rise of a visibly militant Islam in recent decades is the result of certain Muslim theoreticians who see the

West as morally weak and degenerate, unwilling or unable to resist a concentrated attack, inspired by suicide bombers. The fact that no reputable Muslim army is capable of fighting well-equipped troops, as the two Iraq wars show, does not mean no war exists. Rather it means that we have an unlimited or unrestricted war that is fought with unconventional weapons.

The only thing really new today is that Islam, if patient, might well take over Europe and other areas through a combination of self-inflicted and rapid population decline among European peoples paralleled to continued rapid increase of Muslim birthrates in this area. This latter drama should be of especial interest to Catholics who once doubted the relevance of *Humanae Vitae*. In this light, it now appears as one of the most important documents of the twentieth century. In this sense, it is conceivable that Islam may not succeed precisely because it did not follow the "peaceful" population route but provoked the one power capable of using systematic force against it. But it remains to be seen whether a long-term political will to oppose the "terrorist" agenda can be sustained in democracies. The terrorists themselves seem sufficiently sophisticated to realize that the war is one not just of armies but of ideas and nightly news.

Little can be done about any dangerous threat until this clarity about its nature is forthcoming. And even when its reality is recognized — I think of the Munich agreements or the control of Eastern by the Soviets after World War II — will and decision to do something about it must follow intelligence, assuming it is accurate. A German publisher has famously described contemporary Europe as a continent that completely lacks courage to face what threatens it. The vaunted European "diplomacy" to use "other" means than force, as in the case of trying to convince Iran not to produce nuclear weapons is simply not effective.

### **The Horror of Terrorist "Martyrdom"**

Perhaps nothing has needed clarification more at every level from theological to political to medical and commonsensical than the difference between suicide bombing and martyrdom. It seems almost obscene to see them linked together as manifestations of the same thing. We should begin by affirming that the Muslim apologists and those who follow them do hold that suicide bombing is "martyrdom." It is an act chosen to further their destiny with Allah by killing themselves and others in a "cause" of furthering Muslim goals that are at the same time political and theological. Whatever we think of this view, it is held either actively or in sympathy by a large part of the Muslim world. Though there are those who do, few within the Muslim world itself voice much effective criticism of this association of suicide and martyrdom.

It is well and good for us cynically to think, using our own uncomprehending categories, that for the various Bin Ladens of this world this suicide bombing is just a form of "realpolitik," with no religious overtone. We might reinforce our view by noting that few Al Qaeda leaders themselves have been suicide bombers, though not a few have been shot by various military and police forces, both of Muslim governments and by the American army. Suicide bombing is definitely an instrument of war, but that does not, in theological terms, prevent it also from being something like an act of devotion, a martyrdom. Wars can be "holy."