

Who, now, is a **MARTYR**?

ours theirs

killers

A	B
C	D

killed

μάρτυς, μάρτυρος *martus, martyros* "witness"

"a person who suffers greatly or is killed because of their political or religious beliefs" (Camb.Dict.of Am.Eng./00).

1 Today (9.4.01), in a CAPE COD TIMES letter, a local rabbi says the Palestinian suicide bombers are "terrorists--not martyrs." And two other newspapers say an Egyptian film now drawing crowds romanticizes the s.b. to such an extent that some Egyptian youth, girls as well as boys, yearn to go to Palestine to die as suicide-bomb martyrs "for our Arab brothers and sisters."

The meaning of "martyr" is clear to all, but who gets the honorific is ideologically determined. Since "martyr" is as elative a word as "terrorist" is pejorative, why do I bother to remark it? (1) Personal **spin-control**: we all need continuing education in the hermeneutics of suspicion, sharpened awareness of "their" using words to lasso us into their corral (as we pro-choice folk know what's going on when a fetus is called a "baby" & abortion, "murder"). (2) I want to look more intently than we usually do at "martyr" (as Ken Woodward, in one book each, looked at "saint" & "miracle"). In religion & politics, some words, "martyr" being one, are 18-wheelers, capable of carrying huge loads of promise & threat. More broadly, I want to look at the way our/their killers/killed are seen & spoken of (thus the diagram). Especially remarkable & hopeful are crossovers like Amos (story below): *crossovers* mess up both sides' comfortable stereotypes/prejudices.

2 While the RANDOM HOUSE unabridged doesn't even use the word "political" in connection with "martyr," whose first definition is "...suffers death rather than renounce his or her religion," the CAMBRIDGE (above) puts "political" before "religious"--but is the distinction a quibble, a distinction without a difference? How much sense would it make to say that Hitler's killing of Jews was religious (thus Heb. "shoah" Gk. "holocaust"), but of homosexuals was political? Or to say that since Bonhoeffer was killed for plotting Hitler's assassination, he was not a religious martyr? But we can say, can we not, that religion is seldom not a factor in deaths to which any-one/-group applies the term "martyr." And of the priority of the political in the CAMBRIDGE definition, we can say that the definer was more impressed by, considered more important, the political than the religious martyr; &, more broadly, that he/she was more interested in politics than in religion.

3 On the **window-diagram**, note that AB is active & CD, passive. Let's look first at the actives: soldiers, murderers, assassins, aborters, executioners, suicides, suicide assistants. How are these terms & others distributed, in common usages, between us (A) & them (B)? But this Thinksheet's special concern is with the naming of the dead, ours (C) & theirs (D): **victims, heroes, martyrs**? The terms are always relative to what/who killed them & how they died (in utero [with/out human intervention], neonate unviability, cradle. disease, murder, riot, war, old age, euthanasia [suicide, assisted suicide, prior instruction]). And finally, with whom (if anyone) did they die: family, religious/political group, ethnic/national group ("genocide"), military unit, gender/age group?

4 Back to the beginning of §1, please. Political suicides are demonstrators who do not (as immolators) or do (as bombers) intend to take others with them. In others, immolators create horror but not terror; bombers, both horror & terror: AD is our bombers killing & terrorizing them & so becoming martyrs (a condition contrary to fact, thank God); BC is their bombers becoming (in their eyes) martyrs by killing & terrorizing us. Who, in all this, are the victims? heroes? martyrs?

5 Why the diagram, since much of what I've said so far is obvious? It's (1) a systematic way to view, so nothing's left out; & (2) It's an analytic tool for asking POV (point-of-view) questions, such as (a) was the martyr's theirs or ours? & (b) what was the martyr's POV?

6 The difference between an **assassin** & a murderer? As you know, the difference is in the victim, who is "assassinated" only if in a high station of political power: all illegal killers are murderers, a few of them are assassins. Nor are all the assassinated called martyrs: only those whose death is viewed by their public as a direct result of a courageous because dangerous stand on an enflamed issue. And a further division: some martyrs are "theirs" (BD), some are "ours" (AC).

You could ask a group to help you list martyrs in the two columns. Below you will see why the dual listing is important for this Thinksheet. But 1st you must decide who "we"/"they" are. In their schools, Palestinian children are taught as truth the lie that the Jews started the war of 1948, so all Palestinians killed then or since by Israelis/Jews are martyrs killed by "occupiers." This propaganda is part of the PLO project to instill in the young (as the WASH.POST puts it today, 9.5.01) "a mixture of envy, resentment, fear, and hatred." So do "we" include the Israelis? And, since the Jews did not start the 1948 war, are all Israelis martyrs who are killed by Palestinians? Complicated. And do you remember what a weapon "martyr" was during the Cold War?

If I were to list martyrs & ask you to describe them on the window, you would experience how difficult the "we"/"they" decisions can be. Instead, I'll place a few & let you at me:

AC: our martyrs of us--M.L.King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy

BD: their martyrs of them--Ghandi, Sadat, Rabin

AD: our martyrs of them--The Inquisition, Calvin

BC: their martyrs of us--Jan Hus (d.1415), Bonhoeffer, JFK

(Yes, I've named the martyred, not their killers-martyrs.)

(Whom would you add, & where on the window, & why?)

7 STORY: A few days ago* in the W.Bank (Palestinian) town of Ni'elin (pop. 6,500), an Israeli cabdriver, **Amos Tagouri**, age 60, was murdered by a masked Palestinian none on the scene could identify. Amos loved, & was loved by, the Palestinians, whose children called him "Flower" "because his face was so beautiful, & he always smiled at us, & passed out candy." Amos was the only human bridge over the Green Line: he used his cab to transport Palestinian farmers so they could sell their produce in Israel, & the Israeli guards had to let his Israeli cab through the lines. (When the guards said to him "Those Palestinians will kill you," he said "If God decides I die here [in Pal. territory], then he decides.") When news of Amos' death reached Israel, the soldiers came to punish the village--but quietly left when they found the whole village weeping for a dead Israeli! (BOSTON GLOBE 9.1.01: "one side cried over a death on the other side.") Commonly heard in the village was this: "This is a bigger loss for us than for the Jews." Amos had been a Good Samaritan (!) to a whole village that had fallen into unconscionable restrictions & humiliations. Motive for the murder? The village was sitting out the intifada (partly because of love for Amos, who'd smashed the we/they stereotype), & the gunman hoped to radicalize the villagers (but his action, thank God, has had the opposite effect). Ideology filters reality, but Amos' reality broke the filter.

So where on the grid shall we put Amos? From the Pal. POV, he was B ("theirs") but also A ("ours"). ADC: We killed one of theirs who was one of us. But also B (a radical Palestinian) killed one who was DC (one of theirs, the Israeli; but also one of ours, "for us" [as the NT often says of Jesus]). In Pal. schools, children are asked "Can you image a good Jew?" & are expected to answer "No." The children of Ni'elin didn't have to imagine; Amos loved them.

8 Yes, this Thinksheet, & especially the story of Amos, is to provide a fresh AV (angle of vision) for thinking about **Jesus**, re-imagining christology. Truly God & truly human, Jesus was more than a martyr, but martyr he was (Rev.1.5; 3.14--the wd. not limited to "witness"). "The death of Jesus was early regarded as the first martyrdom" (Arndt/Gingrich, GK.-ENG. LEXICON, 495). Now that you're thoroughly familiar with the window, please think of Jesus as ABCD & in other orderings of these four letters.

9 The first American scholar to master the category "martyr" was Donald Wayne Riddle, with whom I studied the subject at the U. of Chicago in '41. I'd love to tell you all about it sometime!