

Martyrs, Madmen or Criminals: Christian Self-sacrifications in 9th Century Cordoba from the Prospective of Different Historiographical Traditions

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For most people in the west, it is hard to understand how someone who blows themselves up, destroying his own life and killing many people, can be considered a hero and his actions hailed as commendable. We usually call these people terrorists, and consider their acts atrocities. We exhaust social and psychological investigations to understand their motives and acts. Typically, these individuals come from economic misery, intellectual poverty, and cultural “backwardness.” In our opinion, this explains their propensity for ideas and ideologies which indoctrinate them for killing. The news and documentaries on the subject often show slums in Muslim countries where appropriate organizations easily find future suicide bombers.

This explanation however suffers a terrible plausibility crisis when the suicide is the exact opposite than expected. A number of more recent attacks in Iraq and throughout the world were carried out by educated, financially well-off, and socially adept young men, who made lives for themselves abroad. In one example, an educated, wealthy woman, on al-Jazeera, stated that the men, who flew the planes on the 11th of September, were heroes of Islam. Many westerners were disgusted with the scenes of spontaneous joys on the streets of Muslim countries as people celebrated what happened in New York. It is difficult to understand how a considerable number of British Muslims think that the London tube and bus bombers are martyrs.

These individuals are called terrorists, madmen, or criminals. However, these descriptions do not really explain anything, but only apply rhetoric to oppose terrible acts. More recently, a considerable array of scientific, politic, and military efforts are underway to find a solution to the problem of violence, which represents a global threat. As a historian, I want to point to an interesting historical example from Muslim dominated 9th century Cordoba, which has a certain analogy to what is going today. I will present several historical events, along with historiographical studies mostly known to modern scholars and students. I also refer to historical texts that offer a theological legitimation of voluntary deaths, which may not be known to many modern readers.

The case of Cordovan Christians, who in the middle of the 9th century insulted Islam and its prophet and offered themselves to a Muslim judge to be executed, provides an example of how our understanding of history is effected by the biases, perspectives, and interpretations of those doing historic research. The opinions of scholars are frequently not the same, and they differ considerably in case of Cordovan martyrs. Within the research on the Christians of Cordoba,

scholars typically reach one of three conclusions regarding the Christian's actions. The first conclusion considers them martyrs. A second group of scholars regards them as madmen and religious fanatics. A third conclusion is of the opinion they were only criminals. Before discussing these points of view, it is important to consider historical sources and their context.

Two authors, Eulogius and Albarus, describe the Christian martyrs of Cordoba. Recently, all remaining texts of Eulogius and Albarus, originally written in Latin, were edited by Ioannes Gil in *Corpus Scriptorum Mozarabicorum* [Gil 1973]. Information on the lives of the two authors is scarce. We learn that Eulogius was a Catholic priest, and Albarus was a Christian laic. Both men were well educated, and were in the middle of their lives when the events they described occurred. According to Eulogius und Albarus, approximately 51 Christians sought a martyr's death in Cordoba between 852 and 859 AD through the Muslim authority [Henriet 2002, p. 96]. Most executions happened in a similar pattern. First, the Christians presented themselves to a Muslim judge, where they insulted Islam, its prophet, and even exhorted Muslims to become Christians. Afterwards, they were put into prison, and later executed. Some of them were priests or monks, but also women were among the executed. Some martyrs were legally considered to be Muslims, as they came from Muslim families or from families with a Muslim father. In these cases authorities would try to persuade them to return to Islam in order to save their lives.

Whereas not much research has been done on Spanish Christians under Muslim rule (Mozarabs), the research done on the martyrs of Cordoba is quite substantial, detailed, and frequently controversial. Ambrosio de Morales (1513-1591) was the first to edit Eulogius in his *Spanish History* [Morales 1574-1586]. Ambrosio de Morales can be regarded as the founder of the historiographical tradition, which considers the Christians who sought death by insulting Islam as martyrs. There are many Spanish scholars who share this interpretation. Several other authors that belong to the research tradition founded by Ambrosio de Morales are Juan de Mariana [Mariana 1601], Henrique Florez [Florez 1747-], Francisco Javier Simonet [Simonet 1983], Justo Pérez de Urbel [Urbel 1927] and Isidro de las Cagigas [Cagigas 1947-1948]. The youngest author on this list is Baldomero Jimenez Duque [Duque 1977]. In his writing he explains that the Christian culture of Cordoba draws its superiority from the martyrs who died for Christ in Cordoba [Duque 1977, p. 299].

The historiographical research, which is critical of Cordovan martyrs, originated outside of Spain. Its results, understandably, have been vehemently contested by many Spanish scholars. This historiographical research tradition can be traced back to the Dutch Orientalist scholar Reinhart Pieter Anne Dozy, who wrote on the history of Muslims in Spain in his book, *Histoire des Musulmans d'Espagne jusqu'à la conquête de l'Andalousie par les Almoravides (711-1110)* [Dozy (1861)

1982]. Dozy called those Christians, who sacrificed themselves in the name of Christ, religious fanatics [Dozy (1861) 1982, p. 356]. Various publications, which appeared mostly in English during the 20th century, can be regarded as belonging to this critical historiography on martyrs founded by Dozy. These studies were often done from a historic, sociological, or psychological prospective, and try to explain the motivation of the Christians who sought a voluntary death. I want to highlight here, in chronological order, the publications of Edward P. Colbert [Colbert 1962], Allan Cutler [Cutler 1965], James Waltz [Waltz 1970], Kenneth Baxter Wolf [Wolf 1988], and Jessica A. Coope [Coope 1995].

A German scholar, Franz Richard Franke [Franke 1958], published an influential work on this subject. Franke emphasized that voluntary martyrs were motivated by ascetic ideals, and considered death to be the surest way to achieve their ascetic goals. Also, by insulting Islam, they reevaluated their own Christian belief in the face of the Islam, which at the time was advancing politically and culturally [Franke 1958, pp. 23-27]. The interpretation propounded by Franke has influenced many subsequent publications, and has been further promoted by various western scholars.

The latest, and most controversial contribution from the perspective of the critical research on martyrs is in Ann Christys' book [Christys 2002]. She doubted the factuality of the events described by Eulogius and Albarus, but this position has not found much support within the scholarly community. I contradicted Christys' interpretation in my own publication [Pochoshajew 2007]. The main argument surrounding the Christian martyrs is the fact that there are two principle text sources that describe the events in Cordoba. They are the writings of Eulogius and Albarus. The text of Aimoin [Aimoin] can be considered as an additional source. Aimoin's work describes a journey of two monks from St. Germain to Cordoba, and their translation of relicts of some martyrs to the north. Other contemporary Christian sources do not discuss any executions of Christians in that time. Arabic chronicles also fail to mention the deaths. Given this problem, I argue that the lack of additional sources does not minimize the credibility of the writings of Eulogius and Albarus, or indicate the actions of the Christian did not take place. Instead, it shows that the acts of the martyrs and their apologetics happened, but were not ideologically fitting or convincing enough to draw the attention of contemporary writers [Pochoshajew 2007].

The third scholarly view on Christian self-sacrifications in medieval Cordoba is found in contemporary publications by Muslim authors. In his English study on the political history of Andalus, Mahmoud A. Makki [Makki 1992] explains that those Christians who attacked Islam and the prophet were rightly sentenced to death, as the Islamic state has to punish such assaults [Makki 1992, pp. 28-29]. Aḥmād Muḥtār al-‘abādī [Al-‘abādī 1978] deals in his monograph with the Cordovan martyrs in the chapter titled, “Revolt of the Mozarab Extremists in

Cordoba” (فتنة المستعربين المتطرفين في قرطبة) [Al-‘abādī 1978, pp. 144-148]. This terminology suggests the author’s rejection of those Christians and their actions. Similar language is found in ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘uṭmān Ġād ar-Rab’s [Ġād ar-Rab 2003] article. Ġād ar-Rab is of the opinion that extremist, Christian priests (رجال الدين النصارى المتطرفين) incited young Christians to self-sacrificing (الاستشهاد) on behalf of their religion, and had thereby provoked social division and discord (الفتنة) [Ġād ar-Rab 2003, p. 255; cf. Bayḍūn 1980, pp. 252-256].

These historiographical presentations of the Cordovan self-sacrifications make it clear how differently history can be seen and interpreted. Differences in the interpretation of history are not merely a scientific issue with a relevance limited to scholarly debates in publications and conferences. The patriotic historiography of many Spanish scholars is found not only in books. When visiting the Great Mosque of Cordoba, which was transformed into a church after the Christian conquest, one can see the Cordovan martyrs exhibited in the very center of the cathedral, as well as how the chapel was devoted to their hagiographer, Eulogius. Taking into account the opposite perspective of these events represented by the modern, Muslim authors, we must concede that differences in seeing history have very much shaped the historical consciousness of those who live within cultural settings that are separated by Gibraltar. For the people of Muslim countries, the conquest of Muslim Spain by Christian powers does not represent a *reconquista*, but rather a tragic loss of a political entity that made important political and cultural achievements in the past possible. This nostalgic view can be found in scientific publications like those of Abdelkarim Touati [Touati 1967] and Al-‘abādī [Al-‘abādī 1978], and in historic films on Muslim Spain (Andalus) produced in Arabic countries.

These examples demonstrate that history is never neutral, but its interpretation can very much strengthen political and social divisions, or even deepen them. From this controversial historic event, can any constructive knowledge be drawn that would provide a better understanding of current issues or information that would help shape a more peaceful future? In a recent publication devoted to various expressions of fundamentalism in the past and present, the case of Cordovan martyrs was examined as a historical expression of fundamentalism [Herbers 2005]. Surely, under the aspect of lacking tolerance towards Islam, those voluntary martyrs and their apologetics in the writings of Eulogius and Albarus can be regarded as historical forerunners of what we are accustomed to call “fundamentalism.”

In my own book on martyrs [Pochoshajew 2007], I tried to understand their behavior from a cultural perspective containing a strong theological dimension. The advance of Islamic culture in Cordoba was experienced as a cultural estrangement by Christians. At the time, their identity was deeply rooted in the Latin Christian culture and tradition. Given the importance of religion for

identity in those times, the way Christians opposed the impact of a foreign culture had a religious expression, and was aimed at what was perceived as a religious enemy. The martyrs justified their behavior through their Christian belief, and attacked Islam and Muslims as religious adversaries. In this point, the parallels with current Muslim self-sacrifications are obvious. However, this conclusion can only be drawn if we concede that today's form of Islam is able to form identities, and we do not regard this religion as an anachronistic residual of an obsolete foretime.

Seeing the victims of present attacks and bombings perpetrated in the name of Islam, most people in the west adopted the view that Islam is a violent religion. People in Arabic countries, who are accustomed to seeing scenes of violence and destructions perpetrated in the name of a superior western culture, consider occidental countries as real aggressors. This point is clearly stated in Tobias Schultz's recent publication [Schultz 2002]. Muslims usually quote numerous texts from Koran, which enjoin respect for life. However, nobody can deny that people who refer to the Koran to justify killing those, they call enemies of Islam, find a large audience within the worldwide Muslim community. We must conclude that it is not Islam as a religion, but the reading and interpretation of Islamic religious texts that encourage either the saving or destroying of life in the name of Islam.

It would, however, be inappropriate to think that only the Koran or the Islamic tradition can be used for either purpose. By looking at the theological reasoning on the Cordovan martyrs, which Eulogius and Albarus expounded in their texts, it is possible to see how the Bible can be exploited to justify that, under certain circumstances, it is commendable to kill. There is a significant difference between the Cordovan self-sacrifications in the name of Christianity and the actual killings in the name of Islam. The Christians wanted only their own life to be destroyed, they never intended for death to come to others. For my purpose, I will analyze two texts: *Indiculus luminosus* of Albarus [Albarus, *Ind. lum.*], written in 854 AD, and *Liber apologeticus martyrum* of Eulogius [Eulogius, *Apolog.*], which appeared after 857 AD.

Both texts demonstrate that the seeking of death to resist Islam was heavily opposed by the majority of the Cordovan church community. Polemics against martyrs, and doubts about the religious legitimacy of their doings form the very background of Albarus' and Eulogius' writings. Both authors not only defend the martyrs, but elaborated on a theological defense for their behavior based on the Bible. The point, which the opposition was making against self-sacrifications, held that unlike the early church martyrs who were killed by heathens, the Cordovan Christians were sentenced to death by devotees of a monotheistic religion. Also, unlike the ancient martyrs, the Cordovan Christians were not tortured, but departed from life through a rapid execution. By insulting Islam,

they demonstrated a tactless behavior, which was unparalleled in Christian history and tradition. Moreover, there was no religious persecution in Cordoba that could justify martyrdom [Albarus, *Ind. lum.*, 275,3,13-14.23.36; 278,6,20-21; 279,7,18-19; Eulogius, *Apolog.*, 475,1-476,7].

Considering that the Cordovan Christians did not undergo any torture, Eulogius elaborates on the theory of martyrdom. He explains that what matters is not whether death came through torture or not, but the disposition to abandon life. The Cordovan Christians, who chose to die, renounced their material goods and social relations on behalf of Christ and heaven. Therefore, their sins were forgiven and they would be in the company of Christ forever [Eulogius, *Apolog.*, 498,5,1-479,5,36]. Apart from the defending the martyrs, the writings of Eulogius and Albarus contain vehement polemics against Islam, which were aimed at undermining the opinion that Islam represented a monotheistic religion next to Christianity. Islam was, according to both authors, not a religion to tolerate, but a heresy to combat.

Albarus places himself in agreement with the early Christian polemics against wrong doctrine [Albarus, *Ind. lum.*, 272,1,1-4]. Polemics against wrong teachings and heresies have, according to Albarus, an example in the apostles themselves. The apostles preached the Gospel, and were persecuted and sentenced for it [Alvar, *Ind. lum.*, 274,3,1-5]. Albarus stresses the point that the public proclamation of the gospel by ancient Christians was the very precondition for the spread of Christianity, and was the duty of all Christians [Albarus, *Ind. lum.*, 273,2,6-274,2,52]. Given this Christian obligation, the lack of freedom of expression in Muslim dominated Cordoba was regarded as religious persecution, as Christians were not allowed to publicly confess their beliefs or criticize Islam, which they considered wrong [Albarus, *Ind. lum.*, 278,6,4-5]. Albarus gives a long list of examples from the Old Testament, New Testament, and Church Fathers to prove that not only hard rhetoric is justified against a wrong doctrine, but even physical force against unbelievers. Thus, the attacks on Islam by Cordovan martyrs was considered legitimate by the Bible and the Christian teachings [Albarus, *Ind. lum.*, 279,8,1-280,8,1.12-34; 283,11,3-14. 18. 32-36; 283,11,18-284,11,32; 284,11,42-46].

After this analysis, one can see how Christian texts can be exploited to justify the destruction of one's own life, and even to justify violence against those viewed as threats to the Christian faith. We know from history and current events that this principle has been put into work many times. On the basis of this study, we can conclude that it is not a particular religion, but the reading and interpretation of religious texts that determines, in the name of the religion, what can be done. It would be, however, incorrect to conclude that only from religious texts and traditions intolerance and violence can arise. We know the 20th century, which is considered the most violent in human history, is

predominantly secular. We also know that most of the atrocities of this century were committed by partisans of secular ideologies. These acts were legitimized by a culture or ideology, considered to be superior and future-oriented. Given this point, it would be worthwhile to review claims of cultural superiority or prophetic claims that some cultures are more forward-looking than others, and not deny different cultural traditions their value and their historic importance.

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