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Editorial

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The popular reception and commercial success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion* brought to the fore just how forcefully Christian images and notions of martyrdom and victimization resonate with large segments of the American public. One might expect that at the height of US power and military prowess a 1980s era Rambo type character, rather than a submissive Aramaic speaking Jesus, would be more likely to capture the public imagination. However, as Elliott Colla elucidates (see p.4), *The Passion* represents a powerful example of the increasing presence of Christian evangelical themes in American popular culture; evangelical millennial literature is growing at staggering rates. Such images may be playing a role in perpetuating a culture of righteousness and, ultimately, a politics of domination and violence, particularly over the Muslim "other."

The paradoxical invoking of martyrdom as a justification for violence is by no means unique to the US. A similar logic has been developing in the Muslim East over the last decades, albeit as the result of markedly different power dynamics. The use of self-imposed martyrdom, i.e. suicide, has been one of the tactics used—even if intermittently—by groups involved in the struggle for Palestinian national liberation such as Hamas (Damir-Geilsdorf, p.10). The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 added another dimension to the phenomenon of suicide martyrdom; not only were those attacks unprecedented for the enormity of their scale, but they were not linked to a specific national liberation movement making their rationale—if one can call it that—far more nebulous. The use of suicide as a strategy in political struggle is neither indigenous to the Middle East, nor an inherent feature of Islam, but has its roots in radical secular modern movements, an example of which can be found in the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka (Hassan, p.8). Martyrdom has also been a central trope in Israeli national identity and politics where the historic victimization and suffering of the Jews often gets invoked as a justification for policies of subjugation and violence against Palestinians. The overlapping cultures of victimization and martyrdom in all cases have clearly yielded catastrophic results and done little to advance causes, whatever they may be.

Given the current political conditions in the Arab World, it comes as little surprise that *The Passion* was a hit there. In part, the movie was seen as exposing the cruelty of oppressors, evoking parallels, for example, with the oppression of Palestinians by the Jewish state. Very few governments in the region banned the film, and—in a departure from Islamic doctrine—the religious establishment, in many cases, received *The Passion* favourably while overlooking their standard fatwa against the graphic portrayal of the prophets, which, in Islam, includes Jesus. Moreover, few voices openly criticised the film's depiction of Jesus as being the Son of God and being crucified, both claims being considered null and void in Islamic teaching. Visions of martyrdom, even from such unlikely sources as a US produced evangelical themed film, can serve as potential instruments for political and cultural mobilization.¹

The valorization of martyrdom, whether through Christian and Jewish images of victimization, or Islam inspired Hamas suicide attacks, promotes not only a politics of violence, but perpetuates separation and mistrust. In order to prevent "holy wars," peaceful alternatives to conflict, as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi emphasizes (see p.30), must be realized through non-violent, non-sectarian, and more democratic strategies.

Note

1. See on the reception of *The Passion of the Christ* in the Arab World the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) report, "Reactions in the Arab Media to 'The Passion of the Christ'" by Aluma Dankowitz (21 April 2004, http://www.memri.de/uebersetzungen_analysen/themen/liberal_voices/ges_passion_christ_21_04_04.html).

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