



Features

Murderers have no place among cherished heroes

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673 words

13 November 2008

The Courier-Mail

COUMAI

1 - First with the news

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English

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The Bali bombers showed none of the noble qualities possessed by revered Islamic martyrs of the past, writes Dr **Halim Rane**

FOR the Bali bombers to go down in Islamic history as heroes or martyrs would be an insult to the legacy of the faith and its pioneers.

The recent executions of the Bali bombers have sparked debate in Australia over capital punishment. Both the Government and Opposition have restated they oppose the death penalty.

Some friends and relatives of the victims of the bombings in Bali have said the executions are a fitting punishment, while others would have preferred to see them face a lifetime of contemplation in prison.

One concern that seems to have cut across these varying perspectives is that the execution of the Bali bombers runs the risk of making them martyrs.

The concept of martyrdom is common to many religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'ism, and Sikhism. Both the Greek term "martyrs" and the Arabic term for martyr, "shahid", mean witness. Originally used for one giving testimony in legal proceedings, the term has evolved to define a person who sacrifices his or her life for a higher cause or set of beliefs. It is in this sense that such holy texts as the Bible and the Koran refer to martyrs.

Just as the early Christians suffered at the hands of the Romans, the early Muslims were persecuted by the polytheistic Arabs of Mecca for their practice of a "new" faith, for believing in God, observing prayers and the like.

The Koran praises these "believers" for enduring this adversity with patience. Others, however, were martyrs, slain by their persecutors for their faith. Of such people the Koran repeatedly affirms that they should not be thought of as dead, but alive in a different state, rewarded and sustained by their Lord for their sacrifice.

As Islam established itself in Arabia and spread from the peninsula it encountered hostile Arab tribes followed by the armies of the Byzantine and Persian empires.

From the days of the first battles with the Meccans, the Muslims were given detailed instructions by the Prophet Mohammad concerning the conduct of war. In many respects, these Islamic laws of war were a break with the prevailing norms at the time; they replaced the barbarism of Arab and Middle Eastern warfare with what could be described as pre-modern humanitarian laws. A clear distinction was made between combatants and non-combatants.

The Muslims were permitted to fight only against the combatants who had made war on them and taken up arms. Those who were unarmed, women, children, people seeking shelter in places of refuge, and those not engaged in the fighting were not permitted to be harmed. Their homes, crops and livestock were also off-limits.

In Islamic history the names of Ali bin Abi Talib, Usama bin Zayd, Khalid bin Walid, Sa'd bin Waqqas and Salahuddin Ayyubi (Saladin) are heroes who led the Muslims against the armies of much larger and more powerful foes. Their names are revered for the honour and integrity with which they are remembered to have fought and for their displays of kindness and fairness to the people they are remembered to have liberated from tyranny.

The Bali bombers, however, along with their counterparts in Madrid, London and elsewhere, fall far short

of this standard. They sought to attack order and progress and offered nothing more than fear and hatred. They did not display the valour and courage possessed by those who fought well-armed adversaries, only cowardice of the lowest form when one attacks the innocent and defenceless.

Given this historical perspective, if Muslims are to salvage the good name of their cherished heroes, the Bali bombers and their cohorts will have to be written into the history books not as martyrs but just plain murderers.

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CML-20081113-1-033-361112

Document COUMAI0020081112e4bd0001h