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Pages on Dionysios Solomos
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The editors would like to express their gratitude to Andras Berkes for his heroic efforts to make this journal readable. This issue is dedicated to Veronica and Andreas.
JEN HARRISON
The University of Sydney

DEATH AND SALVATION
IN NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS’ CAPTAIN MICHALES

Kazantzakis’ Captain Michales tells the Cretan rebellion against the Turks of 1889. Through the individual men of Megalo Kastro, we watch the struggle for freedom of a people under foreign rule. Disempowered, feeling second class in their own territory, the Cretans’ battle is not only for their country, but also for themselves. Disaffected, the men have lost their sense of power and purpose. Taking arms against the enemy promises a way out, even at the cost of their own life; often, in fact, deliberately at the cost of their own life. Although the book bears as subtitle the slogan Freedom or Death, the Cretan situation does not afford a choice between the two outcomes. As realised in his own final hours by the eponymous hero, Captain Michales, the only genuine option for the men is freedom and death: finding their own salvation through giving their lives to the cause.

While Kazantzakis’ story is clearly located in a specific place and time, it has universal resonance, especially so just now, with the world’s attention still on the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. War in Afghanistan – with at least as many civilian deaths as were killed the USA – the overthrow of the Taliban, continuing pursuit of Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaida network, George W. Bush’s declared Axis of Evil: none of this has deflected from the basic questions raised on September 11 of why. Some of these questions, event-specific, are more the business of political economists: why then, why there. But the fundamental issues stretch much more widely. Regardless of anything else, September 11 could not have happened without men willing to die and to kill, and to do so for a cause. Unravelling this situation is where the parallels in Captain Michales come into their own.

Kazantzakis’ book is not about successful revolution. At the end of the book Crete is no more free than she was at the start. For many of those still alive at the end, things have probably worsened significantly: women and children left on their own, property and crops to be rebuilt, Turkish dominance given renewed vigour and vigilance. Nearly all of the major characters are dead. In practical terms, their deaths seem to have achieved very little – if anything at all. Yet the tale is not a tragedy. Its focus is not on material, practical gain, but on more spiritual matters. And in these terms the characters’ gains seem undeniable. Even death seems like an achievement when the only options given are death or dishonour.
Death as the means to salvation is the language of martyrdom, something held very deeply in our Christian culture. The majority of our saints are martyrs, holding up death for the cause as the greatest good. The original Christian martyr, of course, was Christ. But where Christ’s being martyred involved only his own death, at the hands of and for the benefit of others, modern-day martyrdom is a much more complicated affair.

The starkest difference between Christ’s model of martyrdom and that of more recent times is that modern martyrs die fighting. While Kazantzakis’ Cretan freedom fighters are eager to die for their cause, they also want to take with them as many of the enemy as possible. When Captain Michales and his handful of fellow martyrs choose to stay on the rock and die, they choose also to die armed, in battle; and the greater the carnage they cause, the more profound their martyred status. Even the Abbot, who willingly hands himself over to the Turks to be hanged, in order to preserve his monastery (fruitlessly, as it turns out: as soon as he is taken away, the monastery is burned to the ground) – even the Abbot, with his Christ-like passive humiliation and death, gains martyr status on the strength of the many Turks he has already killed. Dying for the cause means fighting for the cause; martyrdom comes in the certainty that one will not survive the fight.

The rioting of captured Taliban forces in the Qala-i-Jhangi citadel at the end of November was a good example of this contemporary martyring. With one hand on the Koran and the other lobbing mortars, the men – foreign volunteers in what they perceived as a holy war – died fighting. The men are martyrs because they knew they would die and still continued on their course of action. They knew that their aggressive resistance was, for themselves, hopeless, but their commitment to the cause compelled them to press on. The same is true even when the action of battle involves deliberately killing oneself in the hope of causing maximum damage to the enemy. Consider the suicide bombers – the martyrs – of Kashmir, Palestine, and September 11. In contrast to Kazantzakis’ Abbot, who willingly was put to death in the belief that this would reduce the death and destruction suffered by his compatriots, these martyrs’ focus is all harm to the other, not protection of one’s own.

As martyrs, men of battle cease to be merely engaged in the business of war: spreading death, suffering and mutilation; and become endowed with glory. Martyrdom offers a sense of transcendence, of moving beyond the sphere of ordinary human endeavour and into the numinous. As such, it is a very powerful tool for coming to terms with essentially pointless death. Dead the martyr surely is, and, just as surely, the cause for which he died remains to be won; but what greater death could any man seek for himself, or any mother for her son? Thus we find Leila, the Palestinian mother of a martyr of the occupied territories, refusing to mourn her son’s death: “as they were Islamic martyrs, there was nothing to mourn.” Such is the glory of martyrdom, it overrides even the most deeply entrenched of ritual, both cultural and personal.
The power of this glory is most beautifully portrayed in Kazantzakis’ Metropolitan. So desperate is he to fulfil his life’s ambition and be given an honourable death – and so convinced is he of his deserving such a death – that he remains continually in his religious robes, ready at any moment for the great honour to be bestowed upon him. In the end, however, he’s denied such glory, given instead to snooze a while with the Pasha, in the name of peace negotiations. Ludicrous as it appears, the role he does perform is of immense importance to Crete, bringing a halt to the troubles, allowing the land and the people to recover themselves. But for the Metropolitan, none of this comes near to the glorious martyrdom he could almost taste; the same glory sought by those who flew the planes of September 11.

The glory of martyrdom is permanent and sublime. In moral and temporal terms, the kudos given it is incomparable. As the last act of one’s life, it is the one which carries most weight, the one after which there’s no further opportunity of redemption; but the one through which it is possible to redeem oneself from all previous transgressions and incompetencies. The martyr is the one who can say with Dickens’ Sydney Carton: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done,” knowing that nothing else will ever come after to sully the moment.

The attractions of dying well – and not just well, but superlatively – are particularly strong for those whose opportunities for living well are few. For many Palestinians life seems little more than a litany of unjust hardships; particularly so since the intifada began in late 2000. Unemployment, poverty, grief, insecurity, hopelessness – these are the hallmarks of life as they experience it. And in the face of such powerlessness, taking one’s own life presents as a viable option: something positive and active, for someone who feels one’s options for action are seriously limited. Thus we hear voices such as Rafiq Musabeh: “I have 12 kids at home, and I can’t feed them... I have no taste for life. I am ready now to explode myself at an Israeli tank, and” – in testimony of how far hopelessness has driven him – “I am someone who has worked in Israel, and had friends among Israelis.”

Finding life impenetrably purposeless provides the willing potential for martyrdom: “When people – even children – believe that life has no value, the instinct to make their death meaningful is strong.” But to be realised, this potential must be given shape; which is exactly what the glory attached to martyrdom provides. For Edward Said, suicide attacks by desperate people may be “stupid”, bringing only further reprisals and more hardship. For Robert Fisk, such actions may make them “mass-murderers”. But for the martyrs themselves, they are engaging in acts of sacramental glory; acts of the sort about which it is written: “The Prophet said, ‘Nobody who enters Paradise will ever like to return to this world even if he were offered everything, except the martyr who will desire to return to this world and be killed 10 times for the sake of the great honour that has been bestowed upon him.’”
For those whom such propaganda fails to convince, finding alternative roads out of hopelessness is an arduous task. For Muzamil Jaleel, clear vision of the futility of his Kashmiri compatriots’ deaths – all 50,000 of them – brings him no comfort. Powerless to stop the carnage, unable to find sense in it, the only option he has is to try to distance himself: “I am immune to the death of my own people; I have developed an inability to mourn.”¹⁹ When the only other options seem to be despair or emotional detachment, the attractions of meaningful, glorious action are obvious.

Those who envisage more options, however, are much less likely to buy the propaganda. Katerina, Kazantzakis’ Captain Michales’ wife, for example, remains firmly unconvinced by the man’s need for glory. Her focus is the life of her family and how much harder things will be for them without their protector and provider.²⁰ Others of Kazantzakis’ characters advocate non-hostile, non-suicidal measures; all of them able to see options, both for themselves and for the cause, that do not entail either death or dishonour. Kambanaros, for example, an old and venerable community leader, argues strongly against any actions which will incur reprisals from the Turks and which are not certain to bring freedom for Crete.²¹ He can see a bigger picture than the current circumstances. Nor has he sufficient personal drive towards salvation through death. Kambanaros, like Katerina and the others who advocate caution, has clear material goals, which he believes to be achievable, and thus is not drawn by the lure of martyrdom.

This echoes the current situation for gay men in Egypt, where twenty-three men have recently been gaoled on account of their sexual identity. Despite acknowledging privately the grave injustice of the situation, Egyptian human rights groups have remained silent on the matter; not because they think it’s an unimportant issue, but because they know that this is a case they cannot win, just now, and which has potential to destroy the rest of their cause. In the words of one prominent activist: “I don’t want to be charged with defending homosexuality in Egypt, which is seen as a taboo. This would have been like jumping into water, not to try to save a drowning man but to die with him.”²² These activists have neither the sense of disempowerment and hopelessness, nor focus on personal spiritual redemption to propel them to martyrdom. With social change their goal and confident that it will, ultimately, be realised, the scope of their actions is limited to achieving this end. The contrast could not be sharper than with Captain Michales’ suicidal intent. He takes his decision without regard for its material futility, in terms of Crete’s being freed, or for its detrimental consequences for his dependents – and for the community in which he has a leadership role.²³ His motivation is entirely self-focussed, driven by his need to prove himself autonomous, constrained by his sense of having nothing to offer in staying alive; the only salvation he perceives for himself lies in his death.

Death for the martyr is never the end. This is true of all martyrs, of any persuasion. For the martyr with religious focus, very often their drive centres on finding a better life after
death. Much public comment has recently been made concerning the promised land sought by latter-day Muslim martyrs, such as this by Hamas activist Muhammad Abu Wardeh: “I described to him how God would compensate the martyr for sacrificing his life for his land. If you become a martyr, God will give you seventy virgins, seventy wives and everlasting happiness.”

In the face of such future promise, losing one’s current life – and especially when the overwhelming measure of that life is hardship and impotence – seems a relatively small and sensible cost. The same is true, of course, of the focus of Christian martyrs, inspired from early times by exhortations such as this: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

For Richard Dawkins, this kind of focus on future rewards, beyond the scope of life as we live it now, is not just misguided but exceedingly dangerous; because it devalues life: “I don’t mean devaluing the life of others (though it can do that too), but devaluing one’s own life. Religion teaches the dangerous nonsense that death is not the end.”

Death as final brings with it responsibilities to preserve life now, because, lousy as it may be, it’s all we have. If death is not the end, and especially if it is to be followed by something far more pleasurable and significant, then where, according to Dawkins, is the sense in placing value on it at all? For men in situations of desperation, this becomes exceptionally poignant: “There is no doubt that the afterlife-obsessed brain really is a weapon of immense power and danger.”

Kazantzakis touches on these themes through, for example, Captain Sefakas, who states that it is, in fact, a higher moral achievement to die for Crete than to live for Crete. It would be difficult to conceive of a value system placing less worth on life now – and this is, of course, a value system utterly reliant on the promise of heaven: an external, paradisian, personal reward. In a similar vein, the Pasha, trying to stop the troubles and recognising the power of heavenly promises, asks the Metropolitan to convince the Greeks that if they kill a Turk their eternal rewards will be revoked. He fails; Christian afterlife rhetoric and anti-Turkish antipathy are far too deeply entrenched in Cretan cosmology for such a suggestion to be taken seriously. But it does highlight the power of Dawkins’ claim.

Religious overemphasis on an afterlife, however, is not the only way to motivate contemporary martyrdom. Salvation through death can come from the power of the cause, and such conviction in the worth of one’s cause that one’s own life becomes insignificant in comparison. Barry Horne, for example, was driven to suicide via hunger strike not through any religious conviction, but from a commitment to what he perceived as animal rights. Imprisoned for eighteen years for actions he saw as legitimate battles in the war for animal liberation, he believed that his death would ignite the enthusiasm of other activists, striking
grave wins for the cause; and he held this belief so strongly that he was prepared to be a martyr.

The common fundamental of these martyrs’ motivations is their looking to make their lives meaningful. It’s not only the glories of dying well, but also the promise that one’s death has long-lasting consequence. Even the most tragic of lives is redeemed through martyrdom. And so is the most violent of deaths – even when that violence is not limited to oneself.

Kazantzakis’ Cretan freedom fighters are men in an undeniably macho culture, where manhood is founded on violence, honour and proving oneself impervious to the sways of human affection. It is a culture in which male aggression is not only acceptable, but almost obligatory. When Captain Michales’ ten year old son, Thrasaki, leads his mates to kidnap and assault a young woman, he is only seen to be living up, appropriately, to his destiny – the son of his father – proving himself triumphant over fear and feared by others. Thrasakis’ uncle, Tityros the school master, only acquires manhood status once he has killed his brother-in-law and taken a lover. So powerful is Cretan machismo that mastering its trappings increases his stature, not only socially but also physically. It also makes a man a more attractive partner. Captain Michales’ daughter, Renio, considers her father’s arrogant dominance the absolute epitome of masculinity. Emine, the Circassian woman with whom Captain Michales is obsessed, requires a man with unmatched ruthlessness. And Penelope’s constant lament concerning her husband Demetros is his effeminate timidity, wishing she’d been blessed with a real man: rough and indomitable.

Even within a culture so accepting of male aggression, however, there are limits beyond which violence is unwarranted and proscribed. Such proscriptions drive, for example, Captain Michales to chastise his brother, Manusaka, for taking an ass to the mosque to pray. Such an inflammatory action could easily have incited a massacre, and for what reason? – merely for Manusaka’s temporary drunken entertainment. Such violence, even in Kazantzakis’ Cretan terms, is unjustifiable, and therefore unacceptable. Had Manusakas provoked serious Turkish reprisals, he would not have been a hero, or a martyr; but merely a tragic fool.

In order for acts of violence to entail martyrdom, they need to be seen to be just. The two most common conditions for such perceived justice are the service of the underlying cause (in Kazantzakis’ case, freeing Crete from Turkish rule) and revenge.

Vengeance killings in Captain Michales are both personal (killing the man who killed one’s father) and political (killing Turks – any Turks – in response to the slaughter of Greeks, and vice versa). We see the same in contemporary situations: young men in Palestine and Kashmir joining the offensive to avenge the deaths of family members, thousands more wanting to join the Taliban to avenge the attack on a Muslim regime; promises of retribution for the death of a teenager in Belfast: “After his funeral, we whack back,” retribution
rhetoric about September 11, as a response to the threats (material and spiritual) of godless western imperialism⁴⁸.

All of these serve as justification for actions of violence. Vengeance killings, in the name of the cause, make martyrs out of murderers; a crucial step, for propaganda is the key to prolonging conflict. Most people – even the macho men of Megalo Kastro – are unwilling to follow in the footsteps of a senseless mass-murderer. But reclassify him as a warrior in a sacred cause, and eagerness to emulate his actions – however violent – is astonishing. The Christian crusades are probably the starkest examples of this in the last millennium.

Make him not only a warrior in the cause, but a martyr, and the propaganda currency is increased yet again. Thus we see the accidental deaths of young men in troubled areas redefined as examples of martyrdom: Palestinian boys caught in the crossfire⁴⁹, a Protestant lad in Belfast who blew himself up by mistake⁵⁰. By making them martyrs, they’re more likely to be followed by others risking themselves for the cause. And their deaths are made a little less senseless.

If martyrdom, with all its trappings of glory, purpose and redemption, is removed, then their deaths become just that: death. And the loss of their lives and all those they’ve taken with them becomes senseless tragedy. And most often – for, as we’ve seen, contemporary martyrdom is most often the domain of the most disaffected – a senseless tragic end to what appear to be senseless tragic lives: purposeless, powerless, hopeless.

Removing the martyrdom ideal entails removing also the promise of a better life beyond this one. And while Dawkins⁵¹ makes a convincing case for the dangers of such belief, for a very large percentage of the world’s population this life really does seem cheap; beyond the material seems to be the only place where any hope or meaning might lie.

In 1984 a pesticides factory run by US multinational Union Carbide exploded in Bhopal, India, killing thousands and critically injuring a hundred thousand more.⁵² While millions of dollars has been spent since September 11 in New York on body part retrieval, DNA analysis and compensation for those who lost loved ones, Bhopal has not even sufficient medical care for those left alive. They continue to suffer, the land and the water poisoned, and longer term consequences emerging still. Their deaths, their disfigurement and pain, so starkly exposed without the buffering either of religious or patriotic intent or material recompense, seem impossible to come to terms with. On a global scale, these are worthless lives and, as Anne Kampf says, “those unvalued in life are worth just as little in death”.⁵³ For those like the people of Bhopal whose lives are torture, hope for an after life seems not just reasonable, but almost a necessity. The one salvation they might cling to is death as a release from the horrors of now.⁵⁴

Martyrdom as a way of making sense from violence is thus heavily eschatologically imbued. But there are contemporary martyrs whose focus is clearly on the here and now. One of these is Zackie Achmat, a South African AIDS campaigner. Achmat is HIV positive
and, although able himself to afford to pay for antiretroviral treatment, he has refused to do so until such treatments are available in the public health system. As an educated, articulate man, Achmat recognises the power he wields in comparison with his poorer, more disadvantaged compatriots; where their lives may be seen as expendable, his is less likely to be so – and this is the linchpin of his campaign.55

Achmat’s martyring intent is unique among those we have considered so far, because the heart of his value system rests in life. If he dies an unnecessarily early death, his death will serve as a powerful indictment against an inequitable regime. His intention is not to die. His salvation hope is not for the joys of the after-life, nor for the glories of having died well, but for fewer deaths from a cruel disease. In this, as well, his actions are peculiarly altruistic. He has many options not to be a martyr. It’s his commitment to justice and social change – and not his own internal needs – that propels him to choose this road.

Awe-inspiring as his actions are, though, they serve chiefly to highlight the bathos of most modern martyrs’ endeavour. Glorious as it purports to be, finding one’s salvation through death for the cause is merely proof of a life held to be of little value and of a value system which gives scant weight generally to life; and of one’s own loss of purpose and hope. Against the perspective of Achmat’s campaign, martyrdom becomes not glorious, but pitable. Could there be greater tragedy than men driven to believe that their death is all they have to offer? Where to kill and be killed, regardless of the material futility, marks the highest achievement of one’s existence. And where this is portrayed not as cause for grief and shame, but as proof of the valiant calibre of our men. This is as true now for the martyrs of Palestine, Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and September 11 as it was for those of Kazantzaki’s Crete. Which is why a book such as Captain Michales stands, and, unfortunately, will continue to be, a temporally unbounded masterpiece.

NOTES

4 Apart, of course, from those whose hands had previously been tied behind their backs. It’s difficult now to be sure that these also were such willing martyrs.
9 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 328. (“How sweet it is to be killed to save your people.”)
10 Ibn Warraq, “Virgins? What virgins?”, The Guardian Saturday review 12/1/02: 3. “I love that I should be killed in the way of Allah; then I should be brought back to life and be killed again in His way…” Sahih Muslim, chapter 781, The Merit of Jihad.
14 Brittain, op. cit. 12/2/01: 11.
18 Sahih Muslim, chapter 782, The Merit of Martyrdom. Warraq, op. cit. 12/1/02: 3.
23 These are the sorts of grounds for Trotsky’s condemnation of suicidal actions – that their benefit is really for the individual, not the community or the cause.
24 Warraq, op. cit. 12/1/02: 3. See also Rory Carroll, “Taliban suicide squads primed for action”, The Guardian 8/11/01: 7: “The Taliban indoctrination system was such that death of their cadres is glorified and killing the enemy and losing one’s life in the process is considered the ultimate ticket to heaven. Photographs of martyrs are pasted in mosques and recruits told to model their lives on them.”
25 Matthew 5: 10-12, Revised Standard Version.
27 ibid.
28 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 357. (“It seems better to me to be killed for her sake than to live for her sake.”)
29 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 287. (“Metropolitan Effendi, pronounces an anathema, that anyone who kills a Turk will find no rest in the grave.”)
30 Of course, not all religions offer a personal afterlife, and of those that do, not all subscribers give such focus to their beliefs. Consider, for example, the slogan of the UK church charity, Christian Aid: “We believe in life before death”.
32 And others perceived as antisocial and acts of arson and terrorism.
35 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 308-309. (“Tityros... had begun to improve. His dead wife grew progressively less significant, and the brother-in-law he had poisoned did not haunt him, not once, neither asleep nor awake. He was properly killed; he could not leave his grave. Gradually, from the day that he committed the murder, Tityros grew in courage. He became a man. He realised that he was a man and that he too could kill...”)

36 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 350-351. (“Gradually, with his spirit, his body also grew stronger. He was no longer puffed out going up a mountain. He no longer stooped. He ate with gusto, he drank wine, his cheeks grew red. And, most unexpectedly, he began to catch fire and to chase after women.”)

37 For example, Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 51.

38 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 251. (“This is what it is to be a man: not responding to an insult with another insult; women do that. Men kill... I want the man who embraces me to be without peer.”)

39 Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 69. (“Curse my fate... I should have married a palikari: one who eats and drinks and takes women with gusto. One who would have given me a dozen children, and tamed me!”)

40 Captain Michales himself treads very close to the edge of inciting unjustifiable carnage, in riding his horse into the Turkish coffee shops. Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 150-161.


42 And this, of course, can be interpreted very liberally.

43 For example, Nuri Bey and Manusakas, Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 222-227.

44 For example, Kazantzakis, op. cit. 1981: 267-268.


46 Jonathan Steele, “Mullah Omar’s top aide pledges a fight to the death”, The Guardian 22/11/01: 5.


49 Brittain, op. cit. 12/2/01: 11.


51 Dawkins, op. cit. 15/9/01: 20.

52 For further information, see or www.bhopal.org.


55 Zackie Achmat, “How to beat the epidemic”, The Guardian, Opinion & Letters 1/12/01: 22. This campaign is already providing some success. Nevaprine, which reduces by half the probability of mother to baby transmission of the HIV virus, has now been made available to all HIV-positive women giving birth in public hospitals. See Chris McGreal, “Court orders Mbeki to provide Aids drug”, The Guardian 15/12/01: 18.