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Compulsory death

By [Emilio DeGrazia](#), [Downstream](#)
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Because “freedom” is as American as God and apple pie, it’s surprising that the editors of the MIT Technology Review have not been charged with treason. In one of the MIT articles titled “Hacking the Soul,” Gabriel Kreiman, neuroscientist at Harvard Medical School, says that studies suggest, “all actions are the result of neural computations and nothing more.” So “there is nothing really free about free will.”

It also should be news that Candida Moss, an eminent Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame University in South Bend, has not been accused of heresy for her scholarly studies of persecution and martyrdom in the earliest centuries of Christianity. Active persecution of Christians, she shows, occurred in about twelve of Christianity’s first three hundred years. Persecution and martyrdom of early Christians is vastly overblown. In fact, several early Christian groups, willing to co-exist with other diverse religious sects, actively opposed martyrdom as a way of spreading the faith. Martyrdom was glorified mainly in fictionalized accounts of the faith’s propagandists, most of them not present or even born in time to experience the episodes they describe. Most people today get their notions of Christian martyrdom from Hollywood movies featuring lions and gladiators.

Professor Moss does not claim that the instances of persecution and martyrdom that did occur were trivial. But their scope shrivels when compared to the killing that occurred before (notably of Jews) and during the Crusades, or when measured against the sacred murder of hundreds of thousands of so-called witches and heretics tortured and burned alive after the Church came to power in European cities and towns. The trumped-up charges used to justify most of these killings have been well documented by scholars in books such as Jonathan Kirsch’s *The Grand Inquisitor’s Manual*, a well-researched and readable history of atrocities committed over several centuries by Church dignitaries.

Less well understood is the relationship between “freedom” (or, as the MIT Review studies suggest, its absence) and the form of self-persecution we call martyrdom. The issue is timely and important. Attempts to achieve civil society in the Mideast and elsewhere are routinely inflamed by suicide missions and bombings carried out by youths (mainly) who deem themselves “martyrs.” Today we seem to be experiencing an epidemic of martyrdom, especially among partisans of sectarian causes in troubled Mideast regions. As sects and tribes unhappily wage war against each other, no priests force-feed zealots to Inquisitorial fires; more and more

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seem willing to perish in fires or firefights of their own making, or to blow themselves up. And there seems to be a swelling supply of martyrs. Martyrdom recruitment is an active business in both Europe and the U.S.

Meanwhile, self-destruction not directly motivated by religion or politics quietly continues apace. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention findings for the year 2010 show that there were 33,687 deaths from motor vehicle accidents and 38,364 suicides.

Why do some people “choose” suicide or martyrdom? Do they in fact “choose,” or are they under some irresistible compulsion? If brains are naturally wired to tell minds how to tell bodies to behave so brains, bodies and minds can survive, what compels some to commit suicide? Because most (non-martyrdom) suicides are committed in private, they seldom get TV coverage. It’s routinely assumed that such suicides are compelled by despair rather than free choice, and for this reason the causes of the self-destruction are often dismissed, often without explanation, as irrationalities best soon forgotten. Those who commit ordinary suicide (“ordinary”?) are not revered as rebels with a cause.

But martyrdom is routinely accepted as a warrior act based on heroic purpose, courage and will. According to the stories told about martyrs and the ones they tell themselves, they happily leap into the fires of death because they, like sacrificial lambs, are offerings made to great gods and the alleged Great Good these gods represent. The glory and heroic dignity of their acts are undermined by suggestions (even if based on sound science) that they are victimized by their obedience to the psychic dictates of neurological systems. To remind prospects for martyrdom that their impulse to kill themselves is not driven by a free willed choice might inspire some to rethink their Great Good alternatives.

Belief in an afterlife and its rewards has a popular allure, and when this belief is powerful it no doubt creates neurological highways to the notions of heaven minds so desperately desire. When compared to the often miserable actualities of life on earth it’s obvious that the promised joys of the afterlife make heaven the better choice. Why suffer long-term pain on earth when one can conclude all striving with a brief outburst of martyrdom? If we are free to choose—as devotees of free market economist Milton Friedman believe—anyone passionate about upward mobility’s promise of paradise would choose swift transport to a heavenly mansion above this vale of tears. But then should those who prefer a long and perhaps hard-working life on earth be deemed lazy and cowardly?

Why should a compulsion to kill yourself be called a high calling rather than the lowest? Ordinary folk—many of whom believe in the Great Good their gods represent but who see no good coming from the heavenly fires martyrs perish in—are required to endure earth’s troubles. They are challenged to create civil societies that make life in their communities both endurable and fun, while working to put out the fires martyrs keep burning when they blow themselves, and others, to shreds. They are often the ones struggling to develop awareness that killing is a sin, that addictions are self-destructive and demoralizing, that wars are horrendous, usually counter-productive and often illegal, and that suicide is an easy way out of the ordinary hard work people do in order to make life worth living. We very rarely hear of Christian martyrdom these days. If several early Christian martyrs are now heavenly saints, these days martyrdom happily is not the Christian thing to do. We should be cheered by progress on that front.

If, as Dr. Kreiman says, “there is nothing really free about free will,” those who consider enlisting themselves into the ranks of suicide bombers should consider whether they are at the mercy of commands whispered by the dictatorships in their minds. Unfortunately, when powerful and established belief is challenged by evolving research-based knowledge it’s an unequal contest. Science’s small truths have a hard time competing with belief’s high pride. History is full of examples of believers casting knowledge-seekers into fires. Had she been alive in the year 1300, Professor Moss likely would have been burned at the stake for daring to tell the truth about martyrdom. Dr. Kreiman would have to be saved from a similar fate by Christian Calvinists—themselves once active burners of heretics—who made it a matter of doctrine that free will does not exist.

Let’s give martyrs some very small credit: As servants of propaganda campaigns they draw attention to deeply felt grievances. But in an era full of technologies ready-made to get messages out to masses of people, it’s hard not to think of modern day martyrs as one more minority put on display by media in love with violence, and exploited by fanatical leaders eager to recruit more soldiers for their wars. As such, martyrs are victims, not heroes. The loss of their



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Emilio DeGrazia has authored four books of fiction, including *Seventeen Grams of Soul*, winner of a Minnesota Book Award, and *Enemy Country*, winner of a Writer’s Choice Award. A founding editor of *Great River Review*, he has co-edited (with his wife Monica) *26 Minnesota Writers* and *33 Minnesota Poets*. His new book, *Walking on Air in a Field of Greens*, is a collage of creative prose pieces that focus on family, place and the implications of immigration. He lives downstream in Winona.

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well-meaning lives makes losers of us too.

It seems both natural and necessary for minds to compel people toward survival, prosperity and well-being. Self-destruction, by way of addiction or religious extremism, conveys one clear message: That we, both as individuals and societies, need to honor and celebrate those who do the hard and often unglorious work (and play) we are compelled to do if we are to carry on and survive.

Downstream



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