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Ramadan's idea of reform, particularly in IEBF, may be viewed as ground-breaking and astounding, and representing a prodigious compass for further affirmative action and formulation of actionable policies.

ALBERT CAMUS, THE ABSURD AND MARTYRDOM BY
ARIEF S. ARMAN
A Rejoinder

*Malick Elias*¹

Thank you for another insightful edition of the *Al-Shajarah*, ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, Volume 26, Number 1, 2021. Moreover, an extended appreciation for the opportunity to post this rejoinder to the above-named article. At a glance, 'martyrdom' captures the attention and conjures questions, especially when positioned with Camus' absurdism often read as the 'meaninglessness.' But 'suicide' defined as killing oneself, and a suicide attack as killing oneself and others in the process² is not martyrdom. Etymologically, in the old English, a 'martyr' is a 'witness' originating from the Greek 'mártur'³ and this meaning is consistent with the Arabic term *shahīd*, literally a witness. Arman is not conflating the two, but one has to read some distance into the article to determine that. For instance, after briefly mentioning justifications for suicide found in Paul Gill (2007) "A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Suicide Bombing" – such as a pathological disposition to violence; an authoritarian personality; delusional religious hermeneutics; revenge; a hatred for other ways

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² Pearson-Longman (2005) edition.

³ John Ayto, *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins*, 1990.

of living and so on⁴ – he underlines that “The oblivious flaw of this analysis is that the considerations are too simplistic, in that it does not attempt to address the issue from the point of the world to the individual, but rather, the individual to the world⁵.” His stance up to that point is his clearest assertion in the article underpinning an opinion on the topic. However, the general aims of the article were less clear.

First, Arman wanted “to reconcile the incessant search for meaning in human beings with the motivations of martyrs who carry out suicide attacks across the globe, thus arguably justified in their actions.”⁶ How, I wondered! On page (112) he responds, “by looking through the lens of Camus’s absurdist projections.” There were other aims as well such as, to reconcile “Camus’ idea of the Absurd with the intricacies of human sentience (feelings) and mortality. And towards the end of the article on page (119), the author claims or ‘reiterates’ having dealt in his essay with Camus’ two philosophical concepts – ‘Revolt’ and ‘The Absurd’ – which he does not introduce as a main aim from the very start. Well for both Camusians and non-Camusians alike, perhaps more substance to those two concepts could have been given in the essay.

The following pages are intended to offer support by introducing to readers Albert Camus’s ideas on absurdity, its psychological and intellectual origins to arrive as close as possible to what Camus’ thinking on martyrdom might have been.

The emergence of ‘Absurdist’ thinking

First of all, Camus definitely qualifies to speak on rebellion and the apparent meaningless of life we sometimes encounter. But looking back upon Camus’ life one is faced with the question as to whether he projected his personal sense of meaningless he felt upon the minds of others. Growing up under depraved conditions during the interwar years in Algeria, a French colony at the time, without a father and in an ambivalent relationship with the women of his household

⁴ Arief S. Arman, “Albert Camus, The Absurd and Martyrdom,” *Al-Shajarah* 26, no. 1 (2001), 116.

⁵ Arman, 117.

⁶ Arman, 111.

conditioned by poverty, provides sketches of a defiant thinker with a will to live. In a little-known work entitled *The Right Side, The Wrong Side*, which he wrote at the age of twenty-two, he grants readers insights into the inner conflicts of his childhood years with the matriarchs in his family, namely his strict and abusive grandmother and his illiterate mother who played little to no role in his upbringings. Arther Scherr's "Albert Camus: revolt against the mother" alerts us as to why women are notably treated very inferiorly in his works as a whole.⁷ Few academics today are interested in psychological profiles allowing readers to reflect upon their own lives. On the academic front, Europe at the time of Camus' years at the University of Algeria, was dominated by German thought. And many of the mid-twentieth century thinkers were influenced by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Marx-Hegelian dialectics. It is also worth mentioning that his doctoral thesis dealt with Christian Neo-Platonism as well. His later associations and underground political activism along with Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty during the period of the Nazi occupation of Paris matured his developing thinking on absurdism in his earlier novels: *A Happy Death* (1936), which was seen as the dry run for *L'Étrange* ("The Outsider") published in 1942 and the 1944 play *Caligula*. Those works reflected the changing circumstances in Camus' life in which he attempts to follow life's rules. He married Francine Faure, and got a steady job as editor of *Paris-Soir*, which he soon after lost, and later ended up with tuberculosis around the time of the publication of '*L'Étrange*.' In pursuit of recovery, he left for the French suburbs with his wife. The events in Camus's life and the contents of his early novels and plays led some Camusian experts, like David Sherman⁸ to question the extent to which Camus' absurdism qualifies for being considered a metaphysical system, mainly because of the absence of a cosmology. Sherman argues that despite heavily influenced by Cartesian dualism Camus interprets 'indeterminacy'⁹ as absurdity that threatens any attempt at giving

⁷ Arther Scherr, "Albert Camus: revolt against the mother," *American Imago Journal* 34, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 170-178.

⁸ David Sherman, *Camus* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

⁹ The idea of 'indeterminacy' is the way in which intentional objects are presented to

meaning to one's life. Arman appears to agree with that assessment as well, when he cites Srigley's idea of "the divorce between human beings and a greater, transcendent reality"¹⁰ as the explanatory root cause of Camus' sense of meaninglessness. Arman says, "This divorce translates itself as a collision on a metaphysical plane, with the desire in finding meaning on one end and the lack of any apparent meaning on the other."¹¹ But like Sherman, Arman¹² detects the irrationality of the interpretation Camus would like to take, because what he is actually doing as well is arriving at his own meanings on life, albeit as Sherman often says, Camus is philosophising under the 'shadow of God.'¹³ The irony is to Camus' mind he is not committing the 'philosophical suicide' he accuses others of making in pinning their faith upon an absent God.

The changing faces of 'Absurdity' as a universal life experience

Camus' wife returned briefly to Algeria in September of that year but could not return due to the occupation of the country in November by the Allies leaving him in France alone. At the height of the German occupation of Paris his friendship with de Beauvoir, Sartre and notably Merleau-Ponty all of whom were Marxist activists and writers for the French Resistance underground newspapers against Nazi occupation, bonded together by war but intellectually competitive. However, one gets the impression from reading about their Socialist camaraderie there was a class of personalities and upbringing at play. They all viewed Communism as a Marxist revolution for the working class at the time, but Camus was the first of the trio to break with the shared sentiments revolution that the

the consciousness – between the active and passive intellects. See Gail Weiss, *Ambiguity, Absurdity, and Reversibility: Indeterminacy in De Beauvoir, Camus, and Merleau-Ponty* (Washington DC: The George Washington University Press, 1993), 71-83.

¹⁰ Ronald D. Srigley, *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2011), 50.

¹¹ Arman, 113.

¹² Arman, 119.

¹³ Sherman uses this expression to mean that philosophy was still being conditioned within a God's eye view of the world.

Communist party could deliver true revolution for the working classes. Distancing himself from the party in which the general view of Socialists at the time towards the unfolding events in the USSR was a wait and see policy, Camus remained a loyal Marxist with the vision of a democratic socialism, but abandoned Communism, which he saw as violent. Camus continued to support the Marxist cause speaking at public forums and co-founding a revolutionary movement committed to criticising both the US and the Soviet Union in defence of the working classes. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty remained committed for a while longer before the latter parted ways taking up a similar position to that of Camus. The relationship between these three iconic figures was far from smooth and the tensions between their views were often publicised leading to the decline of the resistance paper *Combat* that had once been popular during the resistance.

In *The Plague* published in 1947 after the German occupation had ended, a morally conflicted Camus began to emerge, and the ‘absurdity’ was contextual ontologically. Set in Oran, on the coast of Algeria, which ironically was later a flash point for violent events leading to the start of the Algerian War of Independence in 1949, instead in the novel it is the location for an outbreak of the bubonic plague. The disease in that case presented a metaphor for the Nazi occupation of Paris. The book was launched at a time when decisions were being made about co-conspirators who helped the Germans. Camus noted that this work signalled his changing attitude from being a solitary rebel to one that is grounded in solidarity with others, namely the community. The attitudes of the various alter-egos in this work in the context of solidarity were deconstructed as characters were made to forge together in their own ways and limitations responses to a common enemy. Sherman notes that Rieux was more or less Camus’ voice and spokesperson representing his beliefs. There are similarities between him and the relationship he had with his mother and Camus himself. Tarrou and Rambert also reflected aspects of Camus’s alter-ego as well. Tarrou was a foreigner to Oran and when he was asked why he was getting involved in helping to fight the disease, he replied “comprehension” and confessed that he was already touched by the Plague – most likely fascism or some

other form of indifference – long before coming to Oran.¹⁴ Tarrou planned to help out but not with the fighting, nor would he be passing judgment upon those choosing to do otherwise. His aim was to become a “saint without God,” because he acquiesced to the idea of an absent God.¹⁵ Rieux was in a similar position to Tarrou. Rambert on the other hand was a journalist trapped in the city and his only aim was to get back to the woman he loved, in other words his happiness. Rieux, who was a medical doctor and could perhaps help him obtain a certificate of a clean-bill-of-health, refused to do and acknowledged the absurdity of the situation but suggested that he submitted to it. His aim was to save as many lives as possible and Rambert’s life was not different.

To what extent were these voices representative of Camus’ inner conflicts towards political violence is worth asking here? Answers to those questions must have grown ever more frustrating in his mind after the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence, the ensuing Cold War, and the threat of Communism to the Western world as well.

It was not until the publication of *The Rebel* in 1951-2, in which he attacked the USSR while abstaining from praising USA capitalism, that Camus’ political stances, especially on violence were noticeable. The book received mixed reviews, but publicly distinguished him from the views of his comrades. In 1947, four years before it was published, Merleau-Ponty wrote *Humanism and Terror*¹⁶ in his own attempt to understand revolution and violence. It was a reflection on the Moscow trials in which many other revolutionaries were put on show trial and killed by Stalin.

Camus disliked and condemned revolutionary violence, which he viewed must only be used in extreme circumstances. Taking calculated risks and absolute positions are anti-human. For instance, in *The Rebel* he wrote that there were two ways of interpreting

¹⁴ David Sherman, *Camus*, 125, quoting from Stuart Gilbert’s translation of *The Plague* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 130.

¹⁵ Sherman, 126.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, English translation, 1969. This is an essay based upon Arthur Koestler’s article ‘Darkness at Noon’ which is based upon Stalinist purges in the 1930s.

political violence, the way of the Bourgeois and that of the revolutionary. He saw both as a problem. For the Bourgeois, political violence was essential, because of the refusal to accept challenges to its moral authority, while retaining the right to sanction what forms of violence was acceptable. Revolutionary interpretation of political violence on the other hand was necessary, because of the tendency in humans to violate the rights of others.

Nevertheless, Camus' view on political and revolutionary violence, is best illustrated in the Socialist revolutionary Ivan Kaliaye who is featured in *The Rebel*. This is an actual reference to a military wing of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party that fell victim to the Bolsheviks. To surmise, Camus preferred political assassinations with limited bloodshed and spill-over into the public domain. Hence, his martyr is someone acting in solidarity with the collective, drawing his moral authority from them,¹⁷ acting against a tyrant in a discriminate manner and willing to bear full responsibility for his action. This ideal rebel or renegade is portrayed in the character of Caligula and in *The Just Assassins*. Only under these circumstances one can draw conclusions about his views on martyrdom. However, there is one slight problem to overcome. The word martyrdom derives from a metaphysics of 'God-talk' and is therefore not sustainable to Camus' worldview. However, if one considers *Exile and Kingdom* published in 1971, which is among his later works, a change in Camus' attitude towards the Judaeo-Christian tradition is visible in the language of that text. He appears to be coming to terms with the hold 'God's shadow' has over a 'meaningless world.'

Sartre's editor, Francis Jeanson rebuffed *The Rebel*, which he viewed as rejecting the achievements of Communism that could not have been arrived at without revolutionary violence. Camus' *The Rebel* drove the two friends apart and he retreated from politics plunging him into depression as well. By the beginning of the Algerian revolution in 1954, he was totally demoralised and worn. Sherman¹⁸ remarks sympathetically that contrary to what others believe Camus did recognise the injustices of French colonial rule but

¹⁷ This is Sherman's reading of *The Rebel*, trans., Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 22.

¹⁸ Sherman, 17-18.

could not rally in support of the FLN (Front for National Liberation) because of the violence they employed for achieving their aims. But some disagree. It is difficult to square some of his later remarks for instance when reproached for his lack of support to the FLN. His reply was one of indifference and scorn as well, saying, given the choice between defending justice and his mother, he would defend his mother.¹⁹ Camus received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Sherman²⁰ remarks that Camus himself believed that the award was politically motivated, but not for very convincing reasons.

Three years later, he died in a car crash enroute to Paris. He was killed instantly. Much of what has been said here is needed to be written, because when Camus' name is mentioned two things come to mind, namely 'absurdism' and *The Myth of Sisyphus* published in 1955. Is this about Camus returning to his former postulations on life but this time with richer and more meaningful experiences? The novel is named after a Greek myth. It uses the tale of a human being whose dislike for the 'gods' earns him condemnation to a life of meaningless labour. He is sentenced to a life of rolling a boulder up and down a hill for eternity for his crimes of deceiving the gods. Camus equates this scenario to the absurdity of toiling through a meaningless life. Even up to this point Camus' views does not amount to a metaphysical system. To equate the two will appear conceptually absurd to a faith believer itself. Nonetheless, Camus' character is hailed as a hero, albeit an absurd one for his scorning of the gods, hatred of death and passion for living despite accomplishing nothing in the end.²¹ What conclusions do we draw from this glimpse into a prolific life?

As stated at the beginning of this rejoinder, opportunities were missed on many levels for both educating readers about a prolific twentieth-century thinker's philosophy and exploring his views on suicide while expanding into the question of martyrdom for instance. Arman briefly mentions Camus' thinking on 'suicide' through his early texts on 'Absurdity,' but this narrative shows some of the

¹⁹ Sherman, 19.

²⁰ Sherman, 18.

²¹ Sherman, 50. Quoting from Justin O'Brian's translation of *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 120.

conditions in which his ideas mature from revolt (freedom) to surrendering to the absurd, even if scornfully.

Arman wants to argue that such people have a point of view and were not being heard by society, but his list of examples of suicide bombings did not explicate any context in which convincing arguments could be readily imagined. For instance, The 1972 Munich Olympics killings; The Bali bombings (2002,05); London tube attacks (2005); Paris bombings (2015) and or Christchurch (2019) were all non-state actors and thus immediately slanted against them. Numerous other examples could have been selected to illustrate the causes and outcome of political violence and desperation: The Sri-Lankan Tamil Tigers as non-state actors; the many cases of self-immolation which happened recently, for instance, in Egypt and Tunisia and triggering the Arab Spring Revolution.²² I guess the point being made here is that if one is going to take a ‘authentic stance,’ as in going against the tide, it must be resolutely clear, especially if being beckoned “to a more lucid state of being.”²³

²² See: List of political self-immolations – *Wikipedia*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 116.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final

² – at in construct state

³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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