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Author(s): Paul Middleton

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What is Martyrdom?

PAUL MIDDLETON

The University of Chester, UK

p.middleton@chester.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: In the aftermath of 9/11, and the increase of the phenomenon of ‘suicide bombing’, it has become important for politicians, academics, and religious leaders to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’ manifestations of martyrdom. In order to do so, and to counter those who argue for the legitimacy of the suicide-attack, they must appeal to an objective and shared definition of martyrdom. However, as this article demonstrates, such a definition is elusive. Moreover, the quest to find one is doomed to failure; martyrdom has always been a contested phenomenon. Even excluding those who kill themselves or others from martyr-status is problematic, as examples of those remembered as martyrs are found in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. Official ecclesiastical canonisation processes are vulnerable to popular acclamation of ‘unofficial’ martyrs, and in any case churches often break their own rules. While mining the earliest Christian usage of the term ‘martus’ might appear promising, martyrdom was no less controversial in the early church, and functioned primarily as a means of creating and maintaining group identity, especially in the context of intra-Christian conflict. By examining martyrological narratives from the early, Reformation, and modern periods—where I show that martyrologies can be created quite separately from their martyr’s actual convictions—I argue that attempts to distinguish between true and false ideologies of martyrdom are simply replaying historical disputes, and should be read as contributions to the martyrological process of creating or maintaining religious or political group identity.

Introduction

Since the attack on the Twin Towers on 11th September 2001, the issue of martyrdom has become a matter of political as well as religious significance. While the mode of suicide attack had been employed throughout much of the twentieth century (see Gambetta, 2005), after 9/11 there was an increase in the reporting of such events. In consequence, greater attention has been paid to ideologies of martyrdom particularly in the Islamic world. Until the attack on the World Trade Centre, the dominant image of a ‘martyr’ was someone who demonstrates extraordinary courage in the face of persecution or oppression. Arguably the events of 9/11 have irrevocably changed the default response to those prepared to die for their beliefs from admiration to fear. Whereas in time past martyrdom might convince others of the rightness of a cause, people today may be more sympathetic to Oscar Wilde’s quip, ‘a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it’ (1997, 231).

Of course, many would dispute that those who carried out the 9/11 attacks, or those who have blown themselves up killing others in the process in Palestine, Iraq, or the Lebanon should be called martyrs. Former US President, George Bush, was emphatic: suicide bombers in Palestine were ‘not martyrs, they are murderers’ (Bush, 2002). Scholars too have complained about the ‘hijacking of the terms “martyr” and “martyrdom” by some violent groups today’ (Hurtado, 2004, 415). This objection is most vigorously expressed in a volume of essays edited by Brian Wicker, who writes in the introduction, ‘The purpose of this book is to counteract a *false ideology* of martyrdom wherever it rears its head’ (Wicker, 2006, *xi*). In order to carry out this agenda, the contributors to this volume work towards a definition and understanding of martyrdom that can be shared between Muslims and Christians.

However, as I will demonstrate, the quest for an adequate objective definition of martyrdom is doomed to failure. Interestingly, two recent books on twentieth century Christian martyrdom sidestep the issue of definition (Chandler, 1998; Bergman, 1997). Martyrology is (*pace* Wicker) neither ideologically neutral nor objective, but is bound up with questions of identity. It reinforces a group’s particular view of the world—whether religious, political, or national (Middleton 2006, 13)—which is why it is so controversial. No definitional checklist would have ever convinced a Roman soldier that he was creating Christian martyrs; he was executing criminals. It was the *stories* Christians told about those deaths that made the difference between martyrdom and execution;¹ or in other words, ‘martyrs are not defined; martyrs are made’ (Middleton, 2006, 11). Therefore, the question, ‘what is martyrdom?’ is really ‘who makes martyrdom and for what purpose?’ In what follows, I establish how martyrdom was used as a means of reinforcing identity and group boundaries in early Christianity, and will then argue that attempts to evaluate martyrdom, whether religious, political, or theological, are in essence reinforcing prior understandings of

¹ For narrative approaches, see Weiner and Weiner, 1990; Boyarin, 1999; Castelli, 2004; Middleton, 2011; 2006.

identity. In other words, they become part of the creative martyr-marking project. I will go on to demonstrate that even interpretative communities struggle to control the meaning and limits of martyrdom; contemporary ‘non-traditional martyrs’ have been created through mass media, circumventing attempts to control official or normative martyr-making processes.

Defining martyrdom

Attempts to narrow down the meaning of martyrdom are hampered by its contemporary usage in which the ‘martyr’ need not die, but suffer some kind of affliction. Even in Christian contexts, the term martyrdom has been applied almost indiscriminately, causing some to protest against the ‘democratisation’ of martyrdom:

Because of...mass violence, the notion of martyrdom has broadened out and become imprecise: it extends to groups sacrificed to contemporary barbarism. Whole peoples become martyrs: the Armenians, the Jews, the gypsies, the Biafrans, the Cambodians; the list grows longer (Chenu, 1990, 13).

Cunningham complains that ‘the word “martyr” has become bandied about in the popular press somewhat promiscuously, with the result that the concept itself is not only frequently used flabbily, but the precise meaning of the word becomes blurred’ (2011, 18). Similar blurring is found even in those churches which have official canonisation processes. The Roman Catholic Church, which defines a martyrdom as ‘bearing witness unto death’, and the martyr as one who ‘bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine’,² officially recognises the infants slaughtered by Herod as martyrs. Moreover, Pope John Paul II stepped well beyond the official definition when he canonised Edith Stein, who was Jewish.

However, while defining martyrdom positively might be difficult, for many the line is crossed decisively when violence is employed. Cunningham, while conceding phenomenological similarities between Islamist suicide-bombers and early Christian martyrs,

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2473

argues that to apply the term martyr to those who kill others ‘is to evacuate the meaning of the term in any Christian way of understanding’ (2011, 16-17; also Jensen 2010, 25-40).

From an Islamic perspective, Anees claims suicide attackers represent ‘a highly distorted theology’ which is in ‘dire violation of the teaching of Islam’ (2006, 278-79). Yet, killing and suicide do appear in earlier Christian and Islamic martyrologies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed in 1945 for his part in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, quickly achieved martyr status. A few months after his death, the Bishop of Chichester said of him:

As one of the noble company of martyrs of differing traditions, he represents both the resistance of the believing soul, in the name of God to the assault of evil, and also the moral and political revolt of the human conscience against injustice and cruelty (Schlingensiepen, 2010, 380).

Importantly, this acclamation was not without resistance; the Lutheran Church did not recognise him as a martyr, and he is not remembered as one of the ‘Righteous among the Nations’ at *Yad Vashem* since his stance against the Nazis is judged to have been for ecclesiastical reasons rather than out of concern for the Jews. Bonhoeffer’s place in Christian martyrology is surely secure, yet his case highlights the difficulty of creating a definition of martyrdom that includes and excludes the ‘right’ people (Slane, 2004).

When a working definition of martyrdom has to incorporate Socrates, the Maccabees, Crusaders, soldiers of the First World War, Bonhoeffer, and perhaps Joan of Arc, Ché Guevara, Malcolm X, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King, the task becomes ominous, especially when other types of death are to be excluded, including those carried out by a group calling themselves The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. It seems to be stating the obvious that perspective is a crucial factor in determining whether or not one particular death constitutes martyrdom.

It is difficult to say whether or not Bonhoeffer would have been memorialised had the plot to kill Hitler succeeded, but we note that the intention to kill does not necessarily

disqualify one from being a Christian martyr. Moreover, Popes Leo IX (r. 1048-1054), Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085), and Urban II (r. 1088-1099) encouraged participation in the Crusades by offering spiritual benefits, such as penance, for those who took part, and martyr status for those who died in battle (Tyerman, 2006, 76-80). Islamic martyrs were also created on the battlefield. The Qu'ran, probably in response to Mohammad's only defeat at Uhud (625), affirms that those who died had been chosen by God to be martyrs (*shuhada'*). Furthermore, the earliest recorded example of suicide-killing occurs in the Hebrew Bible in the figure of Samson— seemingly with God's approval (Judges 16). We note, therefore, that within Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions there is solid evidence of soldiers-martyrs who kill as well as die for God.³ Therefore, it is difficult for modern account of martyrdom simply to exclude those who kill from the canon of martyrs.

Many modern theological constructions of martyrdom make appeal to the earliest Christian experiences of and reflection on the phenomenon. In so doing, they attempt to establish an original idea and practice of martyrdom against which subsequent manifestations might be judged. So we now turn to these early texts, where we find, contrary to expectation, martyrdom was as controversial then as it is today.

The semantic range of martyrdom

One of the earliest attempts to define martyrdom was to trace the technical terminology on the basis of the semantic use of the $\mu\acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\upsilon\varsigma$ cluster of words, which are transformed from their original meaning 'witness' to the technical term for Christian martyr. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, believed to be the first Christian 'Martyr Act',⁴ $\mu\acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\upsilon\varsigma$,

³ See Evans, 2007; Morris, 1993; Cowdrey, 1985; *pace* Hovey, who claims fighters cannot be martyrs (2008, 54).

⁴ Cf. Moss, 2010, who argues for a later date.

μαρτύριον, and μαρτυρεῖν are all found in the unambiguously technical sense of martyrdom.

We are writing to you, brothers, an account of those who were martyred (τοὺς μαρτυρήσαντας) especially the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution as though he were setting his seal upon it by his martyrdom (μαρτυρίας)...

Such is the story of the blessed Polycarp. Although he...was the twelfth person martyred (μαρτυρήσας) in Smyrna, he alone is especially remembered by everyone...He proved to be not only a distinguished teacher but also an outstanding martyr (μάρτυς) whose martyrdom (μαρτύριον) all desire to imitate since it was in accord with the pattern of the gospel of Christ (1.1; 19.1).⁵

The earliest Christian Latin text, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* uses the Latin transliteration *martus* as technical vocabulary. After being condemned the Christians proclaim, ‘Today we are martyrs (*martyres*) in heaven’ (15). That a Latin writer could simply transliterate the Greek term in its technical sense indicates the Greek equivalent had acquired its technical meaning well before the end of the second century.

However, while it may be true that unambiguous technical martyr language is not found prior to the mid-second century, deaths that look like those of Christian martyrs are found earlier. *Μάρτυς language* is closely linked with death in the book of Revelation in respect of Antipas (2.13), the souls under the altar (6.9-11) and the two witnesses (11.17). In the gospels, Jesus anticipates the inevitability of death following confession of faith. The choice whether to confess or deny Christ (Mark 8.34-38) is in effect a decision to save or lose one’s life (Middleton, 2014).

Furthermore, many scholars have pointed to Jewish antecedents of Christian martyrdom, especially those found in Daniel and the second and fourth books of the Maccabees (see van Henten, 1997). Frend, in his classic study, goes so far as to claim, ‘without Maccabees and without Daniel, a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been possible’ (Frend, 1965, 65; cf. Bowersock, 1995). While the three men in Daniel

⁵ Martyr acts from the collection by Musurillo, 1972.

are rescued, their resolve not to deny their faith before the king serves as a model for the Maccabean martyrs. King Antiochus decreed that Jews were to abandon their ancestral traditions (2 Macc. 6.1), and those who refused to comply were executed. Women who had their sons circumcised were thrown from the ramparts with their babies tied around their necks (6.10).

The heart of the narrative (2 Maccabees 6–7; 4 Maccabees) recounts in more detail the martyrdoms of the elderly Eleazar, who is killed for refusing to eat pork, and seven brothers horrifically tortured and killed when each refuses to abandon the ancestral laws. In the course of the narrative, the brothers in their respective responses to the king develop a doctrine of post-mortem vindication hinted at in Daniel. The pattern of refusal to compromise religious belief in the face of an edict and then torture is common to both Jewish and Christian martyr acts. Therefore, the novelty of the technical *martyr* vocabulary is less significant than Bowersock (1995) claims.

This is not to say there are no differences between Jewish and Christian conceptions of martyrdom (See van Henten 2012, 95-106; Middleton, 2006, 110-115). Christian martyrdom *pace* Frensdorff is not a simple extension of the Jewish phenomenon. There are also links with the Graeco-Roman tradition of Noble Death which itself took many forms: choosing death rather than face capture or humiliation by an enemy; death for the fatherland; suicide in the face of devastating misfortune; as a means of devotion (*devotio*) to the gods or emperor; or when ordered to do so by the state (Droge and Tabor, 1992, 17-51; van Hooff, 2002). Pagan suicides are praised by early Christian writers as forerunners of martyrdom; there is no early ‘pure’ form of martyrdom from which to mine an adequate contemporary definition.

Martyrdom and Identity

If defining precisely what constitutes martyrdom is difficult, then it may be more fruitful to examine how martyrdom narratives function in shaping identity. The moment where a martyr confesses to being Christian is the climax of most early Christian martyrology is. For example, in the early third-century *Passion of Perpetua*⁶ the eponymous heroine remains resolute in her confession ‘I am a Christian’ (*Christiana sum*; 3.2) in the face of her father’s pleading to renounce her faith, and then pressure from a State official to recant:

‘Have pity on your father’s grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors’

‘I will not,’ I answered.

Hilarius asked, ‘Are you a Christian?’

And I answered, ‘I am a Christian’ (*Christiana sum*; 6.3-4).

In most early Christian martyr acts, the main characters hold fast to a confession of Christ despite ill-treatment and torture.⁷ The Christian confession ‘I am a Christian (Χριστιανός εἰμι/*Christianos sum*)’ is a crucial element in early Christian martyrological dramas. Martyr narratives were composed in such a way as to make the confession the climax of the story. So for example, in the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Aganthonicê*, Carpus, on being asked his name, states, ‘My first and most distinctive name is that of Christian (Χριστιανός)’. He and Papyrus then go on to repeat ‘I am a Christian’ several times in response to questioning, the demand to sacrifice to the gods, and to torture (5, 23, 34). This affirmation of Christian identity is similarly found in respect of Polycarp,⁸ the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (9, 10, 13), the *Martyrs of Lyons* (1.20), and most dramatically of all in the *Martyrdom of Saint Justin and Companions*, where the editor has constructed the narrative so

⁶ The *Passion* contains of what purports to be the prison diary of Perpetua. If this section is even partly authentic, this would represent the first recorded writing of a Christian woman.

⁷ Descriptions of torture are found in many Christian martyr acts. The earliest reference is Pliny’s famous letter to Trajan written in 110AD (*Epistles* 10.96; Radice, 1963).

⁸ A herald announces ‘Three times Polycarp has confessed himself to be Christian’ (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12).

that each martyr individually confesses their Christian identity in turn.⁹ While Bisbee (1988, 45-47) notes that every Roman trial began by establishing the identity of the accused, the Christian confession is ubiquitous in these martyr acts to the point of cliché. Repeated confession in these martyr texts construct Christian identity: ‘Χριστιανός εἰμι [I am a Christian] in primitive Christianity is almost exclusively a martyr’s confession. In the maelstrom of a trial, Christian identity *depends* on whether one confesses or denies’ (Middleton, 2012, 174).

As well as contributing significantly to the construction of Christian identity,¹⁰ attitudes to martyrdom, as we will see, became an important dividing line in the battle for Christian orthodoxy. While the earliest Christians obviously attacked those who persecuted them with threats of judgement, their fiercest criticism was directed against ‘heretics’ who did not embrace martyrdom.¹¹ Justin ruled that the followers of Marcion and other ‘heretical’ leaders were not truly Christian because none of them experienced martyrdom.¹² Yet martyrdom was not an unproblematic category in the early Church. Attitudes on the effectiveness of martyrdom varied, and more problematically, not everyone who died for the faith was universally accepted as a martyr. We find even in the earliest church a preoccupation with making and unmaking martyrs, beginning with the late second-century Church Father, Clement of Alexandria.

Contesting Martyrdom

⁹ *Martyrdom of Justin and Companions* 3.4; 4.1, 3, 4, 6, 9. A second recension adds a communal confession ‘We are Christians’ (Recension B 5.7).

¹⁰ See Perkins, 1995; Cobb, 2008; Matthews, 2010.

¹¹ Tertullian complains in *Scorpiace* 1-7 that the ‘heretics’ appear unaffected by persecution. Versions of all early Christian primary texts are available at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/churchfathers.html>

¹² Justin, *1 Apology* 26.

Clement's teaching on martyrdom is the earliest extended Christian reflection on the subject. More significantly, it is the first attempt to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' martyrdom.

Now we too blame those who have rushed on death, for there are some who are really not ours but share only the name, who are eager to hand themselves in hatred against the creator, athletes of death. We say that these men take themselves off without witness (ἀμάρτηρος), even if they are officially executed. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of faithful witness, because they do not know the real God, but give themselves up to a futile death.¹³

Those who rush into death, he claims, hate life by demonstrating 'hatred to the Creator.'

Clement does not deny that they *look* like martyrs; they share the name Christian, they are arrested, undergo trial, and are officially executed. But he emphatically denies they belong to his group.

While many scholarly accounts of early Christian martyrdom have tended to simply accept Clement's three-fold schema,¹⁴ using this model as a means to establish a standard by which all other attitudes to martyrdom should be measured is problematic.¹⁵ Early Christian attitudes to and practices of martyrdom were varied before and after Clement. Indeed, Clement's condemnation of what has become known as 'voluntary martyrdom' has been shown to be 'an island of criticism' in the early church.¹⁶ Behaviour Clement would condemn as 'self-killing' is found throughout early Christian texts. One of the most dramatic examples of the former is Agathonicê, who while witnessing the martyrdom of two Christians, receives a vision of the 'glory of the Lord', which has a profound effect on her:

realising that this was a call from heaven, she raised her voice at once, 'Here is a meal that has been prepared for me. I must partake and eat of this glorious meal.' The mob shouted out, 'Have pity on your son!' And the blessed Agathonicê said, 'He has God who can take pity on him...' And taking off her cloak she threw herself joyfully on the stake... And thus she gave up her spirit and died together

¹³ *Stromata* 4.16-17.

¹⁴ Reasoner, 1997; Luter, 1996; Morris 1994; Ferguson, 1993.

¹⁵ See especially Moss 2012b; 2012a, 145-58; van den Hoek, 1993.

¹⁶ For recent discussion of voluntary martyrdom, see Middleton 2013; cf. Moss 2012b.

with the saints. And the Christians secretly collected their remains and protected them for the glory of Christ and the praise of his martyrs (τῶν μαρτύρων αὐτοῦ) (*Martyrdom of Carpus* 42-44, 47).

Disqualifying Agathonicê from the ranks of the martyrs would entail over-ruling one of the earliest technical Christian uses of the term μάρτυς.

The enthusiastic manner in which Agathonicê chose martyrdom is common enough in early Christianity (see Droge and Tabor, 1992, 17-51; Middleton, 2013). Tertullian recounts a similar phenomenon in which he describes how the Christians of Asia presented themselves to the proconsul, demanding to be martyred. ‘On ordering a few persons to be led forth to execution, he said to the rest, “O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have cliffs and nooses!”’ Tertullian clearly approved of the actions of these Christians, and indeed threatens the proconsul to whom he is writing with the same behaviour.

Your cruelty is our glory. Only see you to it, that in having such things as these to endure, *we do not feel ourselves constrained to rush forth to the combat*, if only to prove that we have no dread of them, but on the contrary, *even invite their infliction* (*Ad Scapulam* 5.1).

While Hovey asserts ‘it is not possible to become a martyr by directly seeking it or in some way killing oneself’ (2008, 51), this view is contrary to the evidence of earliest Christian tradition. Tertullian does not regard these voluntary martyrs as a particular subset of ordinary martyrs. Despite the Asian proconsul seeing little difference between the action of the Christians and unreflective suicide, for Tertullian, these acts are those of authentic martyrs.

While many Christian martyr texts reveal enthusiasm for martyrdom, and make little distinction between those who gave themselves up voluntarily, those arrested after a spell in hiding, or even those who took their own lives, Clement’s position on martyrdom was less inclusive:

He who presents himself before the judgement seat becomes guilty of his own death. And such is also the case with him who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture. He becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor (*Stromata* 4.77).

Clement excludes from the roll-call of martyrs many of those whose acts of devotion to Christ was demonstrated through their willingness to undergo persecution and martyrdom. Clement also criticises those who failed to avoid arrest accusing them of complicity in the sin of the executioners. This position puts him at odds with Tertullian, who branded those who fled persecution as cowards.¹⁷ However, during a period of persecution around 202AD, Clement did precisely that and fled Alexandria. To some extent at least, Clement's position on martyrdom may be explained less by theological principles and more by a measure of self-justification (Droge and Tabor, 1992, 141-144).

Like Clement, other Christian bishops also fled in the face of sustained persecution, while others remained but lapsed. At a time when episcopal authority structures were developing, 'rigorists' were able to challenge the authority of a bishop who abandoned his church rather than remain and face martyrdom. Confessors¹⁸ became an alternative locus for authority, so bishops, such as Cyprian had to tread a delicate balance between praising the martyrs, but at the same time limiting the ultimate value of martyrdom. In his treatise, *On the Lapsed*, Cyprian skilfully defends his own decision to go into hiding rather than face persecution; it was, he claims, the exile of a confessor. While he is careful not to criticise the martyrs or confessors, he disapproves of the practice where confessors forgive the sins of those who had lapsed, arguing that God's forgiveness can only be meditated through the Church through priests and bishops. Cyprian further consolidated his position by declaring that confessors through their deeds were clergy without requiring ordination, making them subject to his episcopal authority (Middleton, 2012, 175-81).

This was a crisis that would be replayed several times; the appeal of martyrdom was diminished each time bishops had to re-establish their authority. Martyrdom was most

¹⁷ So Frend (1965, 360) remarks, 'It is perhaps fortunate for the Church that Clement and Tertullian never met.'

¹⁸ Confessors are those who were arrested for confessing Christian faith, but were eventually released. They enjoyed a status slightly less than martyrs.

valorised when the least number of Christians were called to undergo it.¹⁹ Under the persecutions of the emperors Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian large numbers of Christians, including priests and bishops lapsed, even handing over the scriptures to be burned. It was these priests and bishops, dubbed the *tradiatores* by those who had remained faithful, who became the focus of the controversy which would eventually lead to the Donatist schism (Tilley, 2006). The proto-Donatist rigorists held that those who had been guilty of cooperating with the persecutors could not be valid priests or bishops. In contrast, the proto-Catholics held that ecclesiastical office invested them with authority.

The Donatist movement employed the authority and the blood of the martyrs to exclude the Catholics from holding office, while the Catholics used the authority of ecclesiastical office—despite the holders of those offices committing apostasy—to exclude the Donatists (Middleton, 2012, 179).

In 317 the Donatist movement suffered repression from the Catholics and for the first time Christians created other Christian martyrs. Since they were heretics, reasoned Augustine, violence against the Donatists was not persecution, but correction (Brown 1964). Therefore, if a Donatist lost his life in such circumstances, he could not be a martyr. Augustine's famous dictum *non poena sed causa facit martyrem* was forged in the sectarian battles of the fourth and fifth centuries. Like Clement before him, Augustine's desire to unmake martyrs was driven by ecclesiastical politics.²⁰

After each major bout of persecution, the Christian Church dealt with the problem of the lapsed by repeatedly downgrading the importance of martyrdom, so that by the fifth century, the orthodox position on Christian martyrdom had been forged by failure rather than faithfulness. There is, therefore, an inherent danger in testing the authenticity of martyrdom through Augustinian lenses. Attitudes to martyrdom in the early Church were diverse, and

¹⁹ The same criticism may be levelled against theological accounts which argue that today martyrdom is a possibility for every Christian. So Jensen, 2010; Hovey, 2008, although he concedes that this 'sounds absurd' (19).

²⁰ The great weakness of many theological accounts of martyrdom is the tendency to simply adopt an Augustinian position as authoritative, so for example, Jensen, 2010; Wicker, 2006.

there is no real sense of any natural development of belief. Indeed, if the prevailing Augustinian view of martyrdom is the culmination of a traceable trajectory, it is one of failure and apostasy.

If the Donatist controversy undermines ecclesiastical authority in the arbitration between true and false ideologies of martyrdom, then Reformation martyr narratives surely settle the question.²¹ The practice of making and unmaking martyrs became industrial in scale. In the two centuries which followed the burning of proto-Reformer Jan Hus in 1415, thousands of Christians had been killed by other Christians. One of the most significant battles in this war for the soul of the church was the question over who controlled martyrdom. Jan Hus had held a mass for martyrs for three men who had been executed in Prague for burning Papal Bulls advocating the sale of indulgences. By provocatively declaring executed criminals to be martyrs, Hus directly challenged the authority of both Church and State. After his own execution for heresy, Hus's death was a source of controversy between his supporters and detractors. For the Catholics, Hus was a heretic justly executed by the State, but his supporters venerated him as a martyr, and celebrated his death in literature and songs. Recognising the power of this martyr narrative, the Church declared that denying Hus was justly executed would be a capital crime.

Hus interpreted his own experiences of suffering in light of the Passion of Christ. In letters from prison, he noted that Christ had been denounced as a 'blasphemer ...excommunicated as a heretic' and killed. As the Donatists had done centuries earlier, he compared the evil committed against him by the priests of the contemporary church with the Jewish priests who mistreated Jesus.

If, then, Christ supported such things from the priests...why should we be astonished that the ministers of the antichrist, who are more avaricious, more debauched, more cruel, and more cunning than the Pharisees, now persecute the

²¹ On Reformation martyrdom, see the excellent treatment by Gregory, 1999.

servants of God, overwhelm them with insult, excommunicate, imprison, and kill them?²²

For Hus and for later Protestants who would undergo imprisonment, trial, and death, it was important to root their experiences of suffering in early Christian tradition. For Luther, such persecution and martyrdom was a sign that the true church had been reborn. That the Protestant movement was producing martyrs was the way by which the Reformers claimed continuity with the past. As in the fourth century, obedience to the Church through the acceptance of ecclesiastical authority or martyrdom constituted two mutually incompatible ways by which to construct Christian identity.

Martyrdom became an increasingly significant battleground as the Reformation progressed, and so the propaganda war to control martyr stories was particularly fierce. Deaths were remembered in songs, poetry, but most importantly from the mid sixteenth century stories were collected together, edited, and printed, such as the *Swiss Brethren Hymnal* (1564), and the famous Menonite *Martyrs' Mirror* (1660). These martyrologies described in gruesome detail the torture and death of the faithful, reinforcing the sectarian divide between Protestant and Catholic. The *Martyrs Mirror* was the most significant Anabaptist martyrology, but the most enduring of these martyrologies is John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. First published in 1563, the *Book of Martyrs* was so popular that three editions were produced in Foxe's own lifetime. Each new edition added further accounts of martyrdom reinforcing Protestant claims that they represented the true church, while casting Roman Catholics in the tradition of the ancient persecutors, and the Pope as a latter day evil Roman Emperor. Foxe's work was a highly effective propaganda tool, especially in its treatment of Mary's reign (1553-1558).

Roman Catholic responses to Foxe were numerous and fierce. More than 50 responses and rebuttals were written from the 1560s onward, such as Robert Person's, *A*

²² Hus, *Letter 6* in de Bonnechose, 1846.

Treatise of Three Conversions of England from Paganism to Christian Religion (1603-4), which is a Catholic version of Foxe's work. To his critics, Foxe was a 'martyr maker'; his publication dismissed as a 'huge dunghill of your stinking martyrs.'²³ Nicholas Harpsfield, employing the logic of Augustine, reasoned that since Protestants were executed for heresy, they could not be true martyrs; they did not die for the true church or Christ (Gregory, 1999, 270-271).

When Elizabeth ascended to the throne, Roman Catholics had cause to write martyrologies, although the vast majority of Catholics executed under Elizabeth were convicted of treason. However, it was important for English Catholics to write martyrologies which emphasised that it was for a religious rather than a political cause for which they died. In the Reformation period, it obviously mattered to Protestants and Anabaptists that they were dying for the true faith rather than as heretics, just as it was important for Catholics to understand their suffering as religious persecution rather than political prosecution.

Reformation martyrology divided competing Christians into martyrs, persecutors, and heretics, as each sought to connect their own beliefs and practices with the early Church. Each narrative reinforces the religious convictions of the martyr's group, and serves to accentuate the boundaries between competing movements. Furthermore, it was equally important to deny martyr-status to those considered to be heretics, not only to reinforce outsider status, but in order to justify the use of ecclesiastically-sponsored violence against them.

The Donatist schism undermines the view that martyr-making should be left to official canonisation processes. As we have seen, the Church 'makes' and 'unmakes' martyrs for reasons which are situational and political. Oscar Romero would hardly be remembered as a martyr had it been left to the Church authorities who viewed him suspiciously as a

²³ Thomas Harding (1515-72) quoted in Mitchell, 2012, 76-77.

dangerous leftist and communist sympathiser (Budde, 2011, 154-55). While Pope Francis recently ‘unblocked’ Romero’s path to sainthood and thus his formal recognition as a martyr, official recognition has lagged behind the popular acclamation of Romero’s martyr status.

Churches may also ‘create’ as well as ‘unmake’ martyrs for political purposes. The Rev. Robert. J. Thomas is widely celebrated as the first Protestant Korean martyr. However, he was almost certainly killed in 1866 not as a result of his Christian faith, but because the armed American trade vessel, the General Sherman, on which was a passenger entered Korean waters in a move which was interpreted as imperialist aggression. Thomas died along with all other members of the crew and there are no contemporaneous details about his death. However, by 1926, Thomas had a full-blown martyr narrative in which in the last few moments of his life he is said to have held out a Bible to his killer urging him to take and read. The soldier after killing Thomas took the Bible and was converted (Choi, 2013). The martyrology establishes the credentials of the Protestant Church in Korea by providing a foundational missionary martyr story such as already existed in the Roman Catholic Church. It was not Thomas’ *death* that made him a martyr; it was the stories which were circulated much later which transformed him into a martyr of significance.

It is my contention that insights from the history of martyrology fatally undermines contemporary attempts to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’ martyrs. Those religious, political, and even academic theological accounts of martyrdom today function primarily as identity markers which reinforce religious, cultural, national, and even trans-national group boundaries. The distinction between a ‘martyr’ and a ‘terrorist’ is the difference between two stories; modern manifestations of the Donatist/Catholic or Reformation disputes over the meaning of particular deaths. Palestinian posters, western news reports, Al-Qaeda propaganda videos, and political condemnations of acts of terrorism are the modern equivalents of the martyr-making of Foxe and the counter-attack of Harpsfield.

We may go further. Stories of martyrdom circulated not simply to celebrate the deaths of brave individuals, but to inspire similar behaviour, and in doing so created strong group boundary markers. Even where the possibility of martyrdom has disappeared, martyrologies still function as a means of creating group identity, through sympathy or rejection of particular martyrs; martyrology demands people take sides.

I have been arguing that the quest for an objective definition of martyrdom by which to assess true and false ideologies of martyrdom is futile. There are too many instances of ‘martyrs’ who transgress one or more of the disqualifiers set in place to sift out false martyrs, who the group would wish to commemorate. Even where ecclesiastical organisations create canonisation processes, they are either susceptible to more temporal rather than spiritual concerns or stray outside the confines of the definitions they set themselves. Furthermore, there never was a stable category of martyr even in the earliest church; it was always a term associated with controversy and group definition. Therefore, appeals to an early ideal form or definition of martyrdom cannot be sustained.

To problematize the discussion further, martyrs can be appropriated or even ‘created’ in order to legitimate religious or political causes. Significantly, this can be the case whether or not the ‘martyr’ intended to die for that cause, or even counted themselves among the movement which goes on to celebrate their martyr status. I will support this claim in relation to several instances of modern ‘martyr making’, which so separates the martyr’s beliefs and actions from the construction of martyrology, that it renders impossible all quests to define objectively the meaning or limits of martyrdom.

Making Martyrs

On 20th June 2009, a 26 year old philosophy student at the University of Tehran, and part-time travel agent became a martyr. Her name was Neda Agha-Soltan. By all accounts,

the car in which she was travelling had got caught up in the traffic chaos caused by the Iranian pro-democracy protests. She left the car and was shot in the chest by a stray bullet. Footage of what appear to be her last moments was captured by mobile phone, which shows her eyes clearly roll to the side as she loses consciousness. Blood begins to gush from her nose and mouth. The scene becomes more frantic as agitated unidentified voices urge her not to die, but in vain. Although ignored by Iranian news services, the 40 second film of her death went viral on social media sites; #neda was the top trending item on Twitter that day. The story was also broadcast by the BBC, CNN, CBS, and NBC, and pictures appeared in international print media. Hundreds of thousands of people watched the footage which portrayed, according to *Time* magazine, ‘probably the most widely witnessed death in human history’ (see Zelizer, 2010, 8-12).

This unparalleled coverage of her death ensured Neda was not simply one death among many who died in the Iranian election protests that month. The following day crowds were back on the streets bearing placards reading ‘I am Neda’. She became a focal point for protest against the regime and was hailed as a martyr for freedom in print and social media.²⁴ Government officials, aware of the strong Shia martyr tradition prevalent in Iran, banned public mourning for Neda. Her grave was vandalised while ostensibly under State protection. President Ahmadinejad even suggested the whole story was concocted by enemies of Iran.

Despite widespread acclamation of Neda’s martyr status, her death is far removed from that normally associated with martyrdom. She was not a revolutionary, and she did not die for her political beliefs. According to her fiancé, Neda only got out of the car because she was getting hot. She was not part of the protest, and no-one deliberately targeted her. Her death was entirely accidental, and so in no sense could it be said she was killed for her

²⁴ For discussion on Neda as martyr, see Middleton, 2011, 27-28; Mitchell, 2012, 47-50. The BBC aired a documentary entitled *Neda: An Iranian Martyr* (24th November 2009).

beliefs, traditionally understood as a pre-requisite for martyrdom. However, the Neda martyrology consolidated the group identity of the protesters.

Neda's martyrdom is by no means an isolated occurrence of this phenomenon. Matthew Shepard, murdered in Wyoming in 1998, became a gay martyr because of the ways in which his death was later recounted. Art, music, and film depicted the 'crucifixion' of Shepard. Though he was never a gay activist, his martyrology had a profound effect on the psyche of America. The then President, Bill Clinton, promised hate crime legislation, as Matthew's murder became a death for others. In all the reports, websites, and tributes, there is a noticeable lack of information about his life; it is his death which has been mythologised through martyrdom (Middleton, 2011, 24-26).

Matthew Shepard the martyr reinforces the identities of those on either side of America's culture wars, as does another unwilling martyr, Cassie Bernall, one of the victims of the Columbine Massacre in 1999. Her mother's book, *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* is a work of martyr-making. Cassie is depicted as a troubled teenager whose life was transformed by a dramatic conversion to Christianity, and shot after declaring her belief in God. Misty Bernall models her daughter's death on the confession ancient Christians gave before their executioners. However, there are conflicting eye-witness accounts of her famous exchange between Cassie and the gunman, suggesting it probably did not occur. Nonetheless, the powerful martyr act, confronted by a vigorous anti-martyr campaign on internet sites, reinforce group boundaries between two competing factions of the American culture wars (Cullen, 1999; see also Castelli, 2004, 172-196). Importantly, Cassie's status as a martyr is not dependent on her beliefs or the accuracy of the story, but on whether or not her death is remembered as a martyrdom.

Conclusion

The deaths of Cassie Bernall, Matthew Shepard, and Neda Soltan are illustrative of the way in which martyrologies can be created independently of the particular convictions of the ‘martyr’ (*Pace Hovey, 2008, 78*). While it may seem these ‘martyrs’ differ from the earlier manifestations we have explored, *all* martyrs are dependent on others for how they are (or are not) remembered. A ‘martyrdom is created when a narrative about a death is told in a particular way. The central character is not the most important element in the creation of martyrdom; it is the narrator’ (Middleton, 2011, 30).

As I have shown, martyrdom is an inherently unstable category. All attempts to define or evaluate martyrdom are powerless to prevent the acclamation of martyrs.²⁵ Politicians, religious leaders, or theologians may well lament the spread of martyrologies in praise of those they regard as false martyrs, but this has always been the case from Clement onwards. They may successfully harness the potential in creating a martyr account, or even claim themselves to be martyrs despite holding a position of power.²⁶ The way a martyr story or anti-martyr narrative is told holds the key to the intended interpretation of the death. Martyrology does more than tell the story of a death; it defines the community who claims the martyr. Similarly anti-martyr narratives (both religious and secular) seek to police the borders of community identity by excluding those ‘martyrs’ and ideologies of martyrdom which fall outside normative belief and practice. Martyrdom has always been and will always be divisive. In the absence of an adequate definition, the foundation of all evaluative approaches to martyrdom is in effect the community or communities (understood in its widest sense) to which the evaluator holds some sympathy. Critiques of aberrant martyrdom become part of an identity forming process that began with Clement, and has continued to the

²⁵ This is especially true in a digital age. See Mitchell, 2012. 42-50, and for the same problem in relation to Islam, see Bunt, 2003, especially 67-111.

²⁶ See Moss, 2013, 8-13 for an effective analysis of the appropriation of martyr terminology by powerful right-wing figures to portray themselves as victims of liberal oppression. For example, Rick Santorum, a Republican Presidential candidate claimed in 2011 that that gay community had taken out a *jihad* against him for opposing gay marriage.

present. So what is martyrdom? In the end, martyrdom cannot be defined; martyrdom is what martyrdom does; a narrative that creates or maintains group identity, by holding up an ideal representative of the community, who chose to, or is made to die for its values.

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