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Martyrdom

One of the features of the life of the early church was its experiences of persecution and suffering. Although in the first two centuries this persecution was local and sporadic, the reality of suffering and the possibility of undergoing death for Jesus left its imprint on the theology of the early Christians. The term *martus* (witness) was not in fact used unambiguously to refer to one who had been killed for the faith until *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (*c*. 155CE). Nonetheless, the link between witnessing and dying was not itself an innovation and is found in the New Testament, in the cases of Stephen (Acts 22.20, cf. Acts 7) and Antipas (Rev. 2.13). Furthermore, sayings attributed to Jesus reveal the possible dangers early Christian communities faced in witnessing to or confessing his name, including the possibility of death (Mk 13.9-13; 8.34-35; Mt. 10.38-9; cf. Jn12.25). Experiences of persecution and possible martyrdom are found throughout the New Testament, perhaps most graphically in the Apocalypse, where the Whore of Babylon is said to be drunk with the blood of both the saints and witnesses/martyrs (*tōn marturōn*) of Jesus (Rev. 17.6).

Much Christian reflection on martyrdom begins with the death of Jesus; Jesus is himself the faithful *martus* (Rev. 1.5; 3.14), and those who follow him on the road of suffering and martyrdom directly and most faithfully imitate his example. This meant that suffering and death could be interpreted positively, a move found as early as Paul (e.g. 2 Cor. 6.10; Phil. 4.4-6), so much so that many early Christians eagerly anticipated death, most famously Ignatius of Antioch (esp. *Rom*. 4.1-5.3). Moreover, so positively regarded was suffering and death that many Christians actively sought martyrdom, willingly handing themselves over to arrest or engaging in provocative behaviour designed to attract the authorities' attention (e.g. *Acts of Euplus*; Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* 5.1; *Perpetua* 4.5). Such enthusiasm for death was by no means shared by all early Christians, and martyrdom itself was scorned by those of a 'Gnostic' leaning (e.g. *Test. Truth* 31-32). Readiness for martyrdom, therefore, became one significant criterion for distinguishing between true and false Christians (Justin, *1 Apol*. 26; Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 1-7).

Early Christians created an alternative world-view within which they understood their experiences of persecution, suffering, and death. In Martyr Acts, popular stories of martyrs, the climactic moment where the hero could confess or deny Christ became a point of cosmic conflict; the protagonist was an athlete trained in combat to fight against Satan and his legions, who sought to steer her from her confession. Martyrdom took place under public and cosmic gaze, and often the reaction of the crowd (both hostile and positive) is noted. Those who recant under torture are said to be weak, untrained for combat, and the devil's prey (esp. *Martyrs of Lyons*). The central point of each martyr act is the confession, 'I am a Christian', where the martyrs explicitly identify themselves with the fate of their master. However, not only do they follow Christ's example in death, but also participate in his victory over death and Satan; charging towards death becomes in reality rushing towards life (*Martyrdom of Pionius*, 20.5; 21.4). Martyrdom is said to be a second baptism (Tertullian, *De Patientia* 13.7), cleansing the martyr from sin, according him an honoured place in heaven. It was believed that those in prison awaiting martyrdom possessed power to heal and to forgive sins. This world view helps explain the enthusiasm for death found amongst early Christians.

However, readiness for martyrdom as a measure of 'orthodoxy' broke down by the third century, when the proto-orthodox had to face the twin problem of 'heretics'– especially the Montanists–who enthusiastically gave confession and were martyred while the 'orthodox' lapsed in substantial numbers under the Decian

persecutions. Clement of Alexandria acknowledged the deaths of his theological opponents looked like true martyrdom, but their beliefs, together with their over-eagerness for martyrdom, rendered their sacrifice ineffective (*Stromata* 4.16-17). Augustine later confirmed Clement's view with his influential (though problematic) dictum: *non poena sed causa* (not the punishment but the cause).

The need to separate true and false martyrs was important not only for reasons of doctrinal purity, but for ecclesiastical order. Martyrs were celebrated and remembered by the early church, and stories of their heroic resistance to torture and faithful confession of Christ circulated; their graves meeting places for worship. As a rudimentary cult of the martyrs developed, with calendar, intercessions, and importance attached to relics, spiritual and ecclesiastical authority were accorded to imprisoned confessors awaiting execution, creating an alternative power structure to that of presbyters and bishops. The efforts of the rigorists, such as Cyprian, in relation to the lapsed following periods of persecution were often thwarted by confessors who had not been executed issuing certificates of reconciliation to them.

After Christianity became the state religion, opportunities to undergo martyrdom disappeared, though the rhetoric of martyrdom was retained in the developing monastic movement, so called 'white martyrdom'. With the exception of the Crusades and the few missionary expeditions at the edge of the Christian empire, there was little opportunity for martyrdom in the middle ages–Thomas Becket (d. 1170) and Peter Martyr (d. 1252) being significant exceptions, although their deaths are arguably more political than religious. Nonetheless, the cult of the martyrs, now transformed into the cult of the saints, remained important as martyr-saints, who had won God's favour by their heroic deeds, were asked to intercede for the faithful.

The dawn of the Reformation ushered in a new period of martyrdom, beginning with the Hussite movement. In July 1412, three men, whose names are now unknown, were beheaded for protesting against papal indulgences. Supporters carried their bodies through the streets of Prague bearing placards reading: *Ita sunt martyres* (these men are martyrs). At Bethlehem chapel, Jan Hus held a mass for martyrs for them. Hus was himself later arrested, imprisoned, and then burned in 1415. To the Church hierarchy, these men were heretics, but to others, they were added to the numbers of the martyrs. So seriously did the authorities view such unauthorised popular canonisation, it became a capital offence to deny the execution of Hus was 'just and holy'. As the Reformation movement advanced, and Protestants, Anabaptists, and Roman Catholics died at hands of other Christians, reports and counter-reports circulated both proclaiming and denying the executed the title 'martyr'. These books and pamphlets proved popular with the most famous, John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563), undergoing three printings in the author's lifetime. The commitment of those who lost their lives in this period cannot be questioned, and even hostile witnesses comment on the manner in which they faced horrific deaths, which acted as evangelical rallying points more often than deterrent. It is less clear to what extent both execution and resistance were political rather than religious, especially in England under Elizabeth and to a lesser extent Mary.

Similar ambiguity exists over two famous twentieth century figures, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (d. 1945) and Oscar Romero (d. 1980), both killed for essentially political reasons, yet remembered as Christian martyrs. It is often observed that the twentieth century has yielded more Christian martyrs than the rest of history combined. The example of Bonhoeffer raises an important and current martyrological question, especially in light of the increasingly common phenomenon of Islamicist 'suicide bombing'; the place of violence in the rhetoric of martyrdom. Christianity has not

been immune to the juxtaposition of violence and martyrdom. The acceptance of Bonhoeffer as a martyr is tacit approval of his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. More pointedly, an inducement offered to boost recruitment for the Crusades was the guarantee that those who died in them would be considered martyrs and have their sins forgiven. More ambiguously, the remembrance of the dead from the Great Wars, where the sacrifice of the soldiers is linked with that of Jesus (John 15.13 is often read at Remembrance Services), chimes with rhetoric of martyrdom, as does the political language concerning casualties in more recent 'War on Terror', where combatants die 'for the sake of democracy and freedom'.

A distinction is often drawn between these cases and the example of the passivity of the early Christians; if their example is appropriated for any modern political cause, it is passive resistance movements. But again, the relationship between early Christian martyrs and violence is ambiguous. Many early Christians provoked their own deaths and took their own lives. Furthermore, eschatological violence is not far from early martyrologies; the demands of the martyred souls under the altar for bloody retribution (Rev. 6.9) are more than satisfied in the Apocalypse. Persecutors are promised violent judgement for their actions, and the martyrs themselves are cast in the role of combatants in a cosmic battle; their bodies are the weapons by which the war will be won. Jewish Holy War tradition–which combined explicitly with martyrdom in the books of the Maccabees–is an important source for early Christian martyrological rhetoric. Indeed, Samson is Judaism's first martyr-warrior.

Such tensions and ambiguities cannot be resolved by attempts to formulate ever tighter definitions of martyrdom; martyrs are acclaimed not defined. Martyrs provide example of bravery and loyalty to a cause for good or ill. The way in which these deaths are subsequently remembered and retold ultimately determines whether or not they gain a place in the ever-growing *Acts of the Martyrs*.

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