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Homo Profanus: The Christian Martyr and the Violence of Meaning-Making

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Abstract

The martyr is a potent symbol of sacrifice in Western cultural discourse. Understanding martyrdom as sacrifice, however, blunts the potency of the martyr's action. It obscures the violence by which the martyr's death becomes, paradoxically, a means to define institutional life. In this article, I propose an analogous relationship between the early Christian martyr and Giorgio Agamben's enigmatic *homo sacer*. Like *homo sacer*, the Christian martyr provides an 'other' against which to organize institutional life. Read as a sacrifice, the martyr also exemplifies the threat of biopolitics Agamben describes, where mere existence can be isolated from political life and made subject to sovereign violence. Distinguishing the martyr from their institutional appropriation is a step toward exposing the modes of violence inherent in sovereign power. It provides the possibility of reconceptualizing the martyr as an autonomous figure of resistance, not as *homo sacer* but as *homo profanus*.

Keywords: martyrdom, Christian, violence, autonomy, *homo sacer*, sacred, profane, Agamben, Basil of Caesarea, Heidegger, Žižek

In the wake of the mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, contemporary Christian music group dc Talk and the missionary organization Voice of the Martyrs produced *Jesus Freaks*, a compilation of contemporary accounts of Christian martyrdom interspersed with hagiography and Biblical narrative. The book opens by recounting the death of Columbine High School student Cassie Bernall, who reportedly affirmed her belief in God just before being shot.² Placing Bernall in a lineage of martyrs that includes Old Testament heroes, the apostles, and Jesus himself, the introduction concludes with the following exhortation: "Throughout history, many have died so you could experience the faith and freedoms you enjoy today. You too can choose to stand strong. God will honor you and you will make a real difference in your world. *Learn about these martyrs. Be encouraged by their heroic lives. And make your life count!*" (dc Talk and Voice of the Martyrs, 1999: 23).

This exhortation epitomizes a common Christian interpretation of martyrdom, that martyrs die for "us:" for God, for the Christian Church, and for the "faith and freedoms" of those they leave behind. Elizabeth Castelli (2004) has remarked on the effects of modern martyrdom narratives like this one, which oversimplifies the life of the martyr and minimizes—albeit unintentionally—the significance of the other deaths involved. These narratives are prevalent, however, because they also generate meaning, subsuming seemingly unexplainable violence into a larger theological narrative. I want to examine this process of making meaning, because it is here that the significance of martyrdom is shifted from the death of the martyr to the lives of those he or she leaves behind.

1. I would like to thank Christine Thomas, Hal Drake, and Beth DePalma Digeser for their comments on previous versions of this work. Thanks as well to Roger Friedland, whose class sparked my interest in Agamben's work and who provided feedback on an earlier draft. Claudia Rapp and Tom Sizgorich encouraged me when this project was in its formative stages. Lastly, I want to thank the reviewers at *Critical Research on Religion* for their helpful suggestions and comments, all of which have greatly improved the final product. All remaining errors are of course mine.

2. This account was contested by investigators and eyewitnesses within the year, who suggested that the dialogue between Valeen Schnurr and one of the killers was mistakenly attributed to Bernall. According to one source, "investigators were willing to say that whichever girl was asked about her faith, her life did not hinge on her answer" (Cullen, 1999).

In what follows, I contend that the Christian martyr is analogous to the enigmatic *homo sacer* (sacred man), an ancient Roman liminal political figure against which the power of sovereignty was constituted in the Western world (Agamben, 1998). This contention has two implications. First, it implies that the Christian martyr's primary significance, like *homo sacer*, consists in a violence that transgresses institutional boundaries. In the case of the martyr, this violence is explicitly consummated by the death of the agent. I thus call this violence autonomous, because it creates law unto itself against cultural and institutional norms.³ It must consequently be reconciled with the sovereign institution, and it is the process of reconciliation that makes institutional life from the martyr's death.

The second implication of the Christian martyr as *homo sacer* is that the transformation of the martyr's death into life is itself another form of violence, a symbolic violence that is hidden behind the institutionalized act. Symbolic violence constrains the threat of meaninglessness by creating a specific, circumscribed meaning, and concurrently excluding others. To indicate the ancient roots of this violence and its kinship with the function of *homo sacer*, I will examine a Late Antique martyrdom as delivered by Bishop Basil of Caesarea. The meaning of the martyr in Basil's narrative is particularly poignant because it is spoken from a position of institutional authority in the wake of Christianity's "triumph" over its Roman persecutors. In other words, this narrative occurs at the point where the institution against which the martyr's violence was set has been co-opted by Christianity, and thus the narrative must be reconciled to new institutional circumstances.

If symbolic violence circumscribes meaning, it thus also excludes meaning, so the symbolic violence of the Christian martyrdom narrative also facilitates the misrecognition of systemic violence in Western culture more broadly. This is manifest in dissociating the repercussions of institutional function from individual acts of violence through the imposition of narrative, as seen in the opening example. Agamben (1998) suggests that the irony of *homo sacer* is that in modernity we are all virtually *homines sacri*. We are all subject to violence that furthers sovereign power. While the potentiality of the martyr's autonomous violence is mitigated through its reconciliation to institutional life, political promotion of the sacredness of life masks the exposure of life to sovereign violence. In both cases, the recognition and meaning of violence bear the paradoxical signs of sovereign control.

In light of this understanding, then, I will propose an alternative reading of the martyr, not as Christian martyr but as resistance to sovereign power. In other words, if the traditional reading of the Christian martyr is akin to Agamben's *homo sacer*, then I will suggest a reading of the martyr as *homo profanus*, a figure whose reclaimed death prompts a reconsideration of modes of violence as they inhere in religious tradition and political institutions.

Modalities of Violence and the Historiography of Christian Martyrdom

It is necessary to briefly justify the description of the martyr's action as violent and autonomous. First, violence is an amoral act of transgression, and its moral value is constituted only in the prohibition of that act by sovereign authority (Agamben, 1998; Bataille, 1962; Foucault, 1995). In other words, it is the prohibition of a transgression against sovereignty that first constitutes violence and assigns it a negative moral value. Unwillingness to assign the label 'violent' to the martyr's action is due to an *a priori* assumption that violence is inherently immoral.⁴ Yet an act of violence is not automatically autonomous; it is the particular transgression of the martyr that constitutes autonomy. The martyr refuses sovereign control over life and death by taking her life into her own hands, reclaiming it for her own purpose. Existentially, death functions both as life's ultimate possibility and limit, and hastening its approach may seem an unnatural violation. More

3. Were it not for the death of the martyr, one might argue that this violence is simply grounded in the aims of a minority group against an authoritarian power. This is partly true; however, in the death of the martyr the violence also becomes irreversibly individual, because it appears to violate a universal maxim of self-preservation. I will discuss this further below.

4. Conversely, placing responsibility for the violence of martyrdom solely on the persecutor values the martyr less than granting martyrdom its full transgressive weight. The former removes the consciousness of the martyr from his or her action, in essence performing the same biopolitical separation of existence from life discussed below. See also the following note.

importantly, it is a sovereign violation, yet its punishment is beyond sovereignty's reach, despite the purported illegality and immorality of suicide.⁵ Thus the martyr's conscious usurpation of control over life and death from sovereignty is a violent act that constitutes—and finalizes—a law unto itself.

Though death constitutes the limit of life, it also constitutes life's potentiality. As Martin Heidegger (1962: 303) claims, "*Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility—non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end.*" For Heidegger, *Dasein* indicates the inextricable link between existence and context or 'situatedness' through which 'Being' is experienced, and a relationship to death is crucial to this Being.⁶ First, death's certainty is its limit, while its indefinite nature denotes its possibility or potentiality. Death is inextricably bound up with life itself. Further, as a constitutive part of the human experience, death is individual and thus cannot be taken (or given) away. One's death always remains one's own. Insofar as this is true, and insofar as it circumscribes the potentiality of death, martyrdom's institutional appropriation constitutes another form of violence. It is not subjective violence, but symbolic violence that reconciles the martyr's death to institutional life.

Subjective violence—violence with a visible agent—is the most visible and obvious form of what Slavoj Žižek (2008: 1) calls a "triumvirate of violence." This triumvirate also includes two prevalent forms of objective violence. These are symbolic violence—the creation and thus limitation of the meaning of violent acts—and systemic violence, which is "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems."⁷ The latter form appears variably as collateral damage, unintended consequence, necessary evil, or acts of God. Christian martyrdom takes part in all three of these modes of violence, for whereas the martyr's act of violence is subjective, the violence of its reconciliation with the Christian institution is symbolic. Further, because the meaning of the Christian martyr is given moral valuation and weighted with theological and cultural significance, it facilitates one means to overlook systemic violence, recognizing some deaths and ignores others. This systemic violence is a byproduct of a complex society, and the misrecognition of systemic violence promotes more effective institutional operation (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 2000; Young, 1990).

Differentiating modes of violence is necessary in part because popular and scholarly treatments of religious traditions often make a clear ideological separation between religion and violence, echoing justifications of violence by the traditions themselves. In 2008, for example, author and former nun Karen Armstrong spearheaded a project called the "Charter for Compassion." The charter states that as compassion forms the core of the world's religious traditions, violence has no place in religion. Significant religious figures who signed the charter "call upon all men and women...to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate."

The Charter advances the popular claim that true religion is free of violence. While perhaps an effective tool for religious dialogue, this claim also promotes a religious myth of pure origins. Last year's Boston Marathon bombing provides another case in point. In its immediate aftermath, one scholar suggested that we should look to the alienated psychology of the attackers instead of radical Islam for answers. "The defense of a religion provides a cover for violence. It gives moral license to something horrible that the perpetrators had longed to do...Religion doesn't cause the violence, it's the excuse for it" (Juergensmeyer, 2013).⁸ Violence cannot be blamed solely on religion, and particularly in the case of Islam, the political implications of conflict are often minimized for the sake of a religious scapegoat (Euben, 2002). However, the consistent dissociation of acts of violence from any religious context in order to defend religion creates an artificial barrier that prevents analysis of religion's institutional effects (Avalos, 2013). Against this ideology of "good religion"

5. Indeed, the development of prohibitions against voluntary martyrdom and suicide in Western civilization is intimately linked to the autonomy of the Christian martyr's action (Droge and Tabor, 1992).

6. The designation of 'Being' from 'being' is Heidegger's attempt to show that Being is not simply another entity within the world, but is constitutive of all entities. It is the ontological ground or the 'is' of beings, including *Dasein*. *Dasein* is unique because Being is an question for it. The indivisibility of *Dasein* is a controversial political claim *vis-à-vis* the biopolitical appropriation of *homo sacer*, as we will see below.

7. Elsewhere Žižek (2011) provides numerous other examples of systemic violence from financial speculation, ecological disasters, threats of nuclear destruction, to third-world poverty and exploitation.

8. In the same vein, see also *Terror in the Mind of God* (Juergensmeyer, 2000), which construes religion as a catalyst or vehicle for preexisting social or political violence, and *Religion in Global Civil Society* (Juergensmeyer, 2005), which envisions religion's future contribution to society as a largely ethical one.

versus "violent religion" we can read Žižek (2003: 31), who argues that "it is violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates. Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance." As it refuses the harmony and balance posited as ends by sovereign authority (Vardoulakis, 2013) the freedom expressed in subjective violence must be reconciled to the institution through objective violence, the violence of sovereignty.

The martyr provides a promising type to examine these modalities of violence in the Christian tradition. Castelli (2004) notes that "martyrdom...is hardwired into the collective consciousness of Western culture and is one of the central legacies of the Christian tradition." Yet while the relationship between religion and violence continues to provoke debate, the tradition of Christian martyrdom has played only a small role in discussions of violence. This is not only because of a predominant focus on subjective violence, but also because of the common interpretation of martyrs as sufferers—not agents—of that violence. The third-century Christian apologist Tertullian defiantly claimed that "the blood of the Christians is seed" for the spread of the faith, and though written a century earlier, this phrase has been taken as emblematic of Christianity's triumph over Rome. Much scholarship on Christian martyrdom in the last century (Ferguson, 1993; Frend, 1967; Frend, 1984; Leemans, 2005; Lieu, 2004; Tilley, 1991) affirms this role of martyrdom, following a narrative of Christian growth inaugurated by fourth-century Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea.⁹ Explaining the relationship between martyr and institution, however, has proven controversial. Earlier twentieth-century attempts to isolate the uniqueness of the martyr from her social context often pathologized martyrdom (De Ste. Croix, 1954; De Ste. Croix, 1963; Dodds, 1965; Riddle, 1931). Thus partly in order to destigmatize early Christian martyrs, scholarship in the last decade has instead explained the Christian martyr through the significant difference of ancient and modern contexts, suggesting that understanding the early Christian environment, not necessarily the martyr him or herself, is the key to understanding martyrdom (Middleton, 2006; Moss, 2012a; Moss, 2012b). Even if these latter treatments have been successful in destigmatizing the individual martyr, a question of earlier scholarship remains. If martyrdom was the epitome of Christian action and key to Christian success, why were there so few martyrs?¹⁰ What was different about the martyr? In an existential sense, the exploration of martyrdom has taken for granted a separation of human existence and context to try to understand martyrdom.¹¹

Recent historical treatments of Roman Late Antiquity help provide an institutional context for Christian participation in different modes of violence (Gaddis, 2005; Grig, 2004). Countering the nearly exclusive blame placed on monotheism for intolerance and coercive violence, a familiar trope since Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1896), Hal Drake (2000) distributes responsibility for Christian violence through the demands of broader political or social organization that developed rapidly in the era of Constantine.¹² Building on the premise of these organizational factors, Tom Sizgorich (2009) argues that violence provided a significant means for Christians to create and maintain boundaries. Martyrs became models for authentic Christianity in community discourse. In other words, although communities utilized a prominent discourse of violence, they did not usually participate in the subjective violence enacted by the characters they revered. They participated in the symbolic violence of the Christian martyr narrative, and this justified the subjective, physical violence enacted against heretical or pagan communities by Christian militants. Castelli (2004: 195) suggests that modern Christian narratives of martyrdom remain "simultaneously the 'making of truth' and 'violence.'" These narratives, she continues, reveal a "kind of profound if also deeply unsettling truth about the relationship between martyrdom and memory and about

9. Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the first comprehensive chronology of Christianity's triumph, tracing the tradition's history from Jesus up until Constantine's reign in the early fourth century (Schaff and Wace, 1997). In the history, martyrs play a critical role as portent of Christian success. It should be noted that Eusebius is also considered to be the author of the *Martyrs of Palestine*, an earlier account of many martyrdoms within Palestine from 303–310, commonly inserted between the eighth and ninth books of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The brief twelve chapter account implies the narrative of divine triumph that the *Historia* develops more fully.

10. Candida Moss (2012a: 17) intentionally avoids the why of martyrdom, instead identifying it as "a set of discursive practices that shaped early Christian identities," a broad definition that appreciates the institutional work done with martyrdom in Christian history. I remain convinced that the question of why is not only important, but can be asked without pathologizing martyrdom or avoiding the existential importance of the martyr's death. Without the latter, it is impossible to understand the relationship of modes of violence as they pertain to the martyr.

11. See note 5 and page 6 above for Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein* and 'Being.'

12. For a concise summary of the historiographical development after Gibbon, see also Drake (2011). For the original argument, see Gibbon (1896). Michael Gaddis (2005) classifies Late Antique violence as on a sort of continuum to argue how suffering violence in martyrdom could transfer to committing it in the name of God.

the production of culture and meaning out of suffering." I suggest that we can approach the "unsettling truth" Castelli describes through exploring the manipulations of violence that Christian martyrdom has helped to facilitate.

Homo Sacer and Homines Sacri

Juxtaposed to the martyr, *homo sacer* helps illuminate the process by which objective violence becomes effective for the Christian institution. The ancient Roman *homo sacer*, the figure of the sacred man analyzed in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), provides an analogue for connecting the ancient Christian martyr and modern discourses of violence. Agamben argues that the common element among modern political systems, democratic and totalitarian, is the control over what he calls *nuda vita*, or 'bare life.' Bare life as the basis of sovereignty entails that mere existence can be separated from context, as noted above.¹³ Although a political foundation based upon life as a foundational value appears desirable, through the process of separation bare life is alienated from the political system and may be treated indiscriminately because, from the sovereign perspective, it is outside the law.

The separation of bare life, however, also facilitates the creation of the sovereign subject by providing it with an 'other,' an excluded figure counterposed to the included subjects of sovereignty. Bare life is thus both inside and outside the realm of sovereignty. Its exceptionality to the institution reveals a hidden commonality between sovereignty and bare life and highlights the violence that differentiates them. Following Carl Schmitt, Agamben argues that violence is inherent in the order of law, which produces judgement, and this law is made manifest in the sovereign. Michel Foucault (1995) explains that when the pre-modern crime was committed, recompense was taken out upon the body of the transgressor, not just as punishment, but to display the concentration of the law in the sovereign, who alone had the power to punish far in excess of the original transgression. Agamben (1998: 26) similarly writes that the law does not first appear to sanction transgression, "but instead constitutes itself through the repetition of the same act without any sanction, that is, as an exceptional case. This...represents its inclusion in the juridical order, violence as a primordial juridical fact."¹⁴ The capacity to punish, to inflict violence, is established as the exclusive power of the sovereign, an exception to the general prohibition against violent acts. The paradox of sovereignty then, just as bare life, is the fact that it is both inside and outside the law, included and excluded.

Agamben finds a symbolic prototype for bare life in *homo sacer*, a relic of ancient Roman law. *Homo sacer* (the sacred man) was a figure who was found guilty of some crime that placed him outside the law (Agamben, 1998). He could not be sacrificed to the gods or executed by the state, yet he could be killed with impunity by anyone. At pains to demonstrate the political—not religious—origin of *homo sacer*, Agamben clarifies that *homo sacer* is sacred not because of the ambiguity of his status between sacred and profane, but because he, like sovereignty, is outside both human and divine law. Unlike the sovereign, however, *homo sacer* is defined by the violence to which he is consequently exposed. Although both figures are outside the law, the sovereign is above it, whereas *homo sacer*, who is the sovereign exception, is below it (Vardoulakis, 2013).

In modernity, sovereignty appears to have shifted from its concentration in a single individual or office to the people in general, a popular sovereignty. People are charged with ensuring their own compliance with the law.¹⁵ Democracy is said to be predicated on the sovereignty of the people, but the law maintains an empty sovereignty at its center, a self-legitimization Agamben calls "Being in force without significance" (1998:

13. I am speaking here of sovereignty in terms of a system of political organization, yet as Dimitris Vardoulakis (2013) has noted, sovereignty in truth extends beyond this particular structure as a symbol of the means by which rule or law is fixed on individual and social scales.

14. Georges Bataille (1962: 38) also made this point in his *Death and Eroticism* some years earlier. He notes, "Prohibitions eliminate violence, and our violent impulses...destroy within us that calm ordering of ideas without which human awareness is inconceivable. But if this awareness is to bear precisely on those disturbed impulses of violence, that implies that it has first been able to set itself beyond the reach of taboos: this presupposes that we can direct the light of the questioning intelligence on to these taboos themselves, without whose existence it would never have functioned in the first place." The law prohibits, and yet founds and repeats the transgression.

15. As Foucault (1995) explains, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."

51).¹⁶ There remains a fidelity to the idea of an universal law that is supported by nothing other than our subjection to it. This is the biopolitical form of sovereignty, represented not by a single sovereign figure but by bodiless societal norms.

From this form of sovereignty follows Agamben's claim that in the modern era, *homo sacer* is not easily identifiable "because we are all virtually *homines sacri*" (1998: 115). By separating bare life from context and universalizing bare life as the basis of rights, bare life itself is alienated from those rights. Bare life is excluded by being included and sovereign power makes a rule out of the exception that *homo sacer* represents. "Rights are attributed to man...solely to the extent that man is the immediately vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen" (Agamben, 1998: 128). The rights of citizens of modern nation-states, in other words, presume sovereign control over the terms of the individual's existence.

Agamben (1999) exemplifies the extreme limit of modern *homines sacri* in the *Muselmann*, the mistreated and malnourished prisoner of the Nazi concentration camp. Having been stripped of all citizenship and largely deprived of human necessities, the *Muselmann* becomes "a life that...is defined solely by virtue of having entered into an intimate symbiosis with death without, nevertheless, belonging to the world of the deceased" (1998: 99–100). In his memories of Auschwitz, camp survivor Primo Levi (1959: 103) describes them similarly:

They, the *Musselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

This inability to comprehend death, Agamben continues, threatens the Heideggerian understanding of the Being of *Dasein* and animates the terror of *homines sacri*, for by the time of their death, they have in one sense already died.

It is here, then, that the question of agency—the internal reckoning of the agent with existence, or what Heidegger refers to as 'Being'—is raised. The individual's attitude toward death provides the quintessential example of the connection of bare life to its context. Evidenced by its apparent absence in the *Muselmann*, the primordially of this relationship suggests a possible point of intervention into the problem of *homines sacri*. In Agamben's examples, *homo sacer* appears helpless in his plight, precisely because bare life has already been separated from the myriad ways of living. In the case of us virtual *homines sacri*, however, is it possible to resist the isolation of bare life, thus embodying an alternative sovereignty?

The response to this question begins to trace a connection between *homo sacer* and the martyr. Reconciliation of the martyr with a Christian institutional narrative is an example of what Agamben calls a simulated assimilation, a means by which the autonomous death of the martyr appeared to contribute to the perpetual triumph of the Christian institution. This retroactive transformation of the martyr's death for institutional life is manifest in the rhetorical trope of a suffering martyr that masks the foundation and preservation of violence within its narrative. Sovereignty relies upon a monopoly of violence, and the agency of the resisting martyr exemplifies an alternate figure of sovereignty that threatens institutional control over violence.¹⁷ The martyr is a means to theorize this resistance in a way impossible with *homo sacer* because we can connect the martyr's subjective violence—since the will and violence of the martyr are constitutive of martyrdom—to the symbolic violence of reconciling the martyr's death with institutional life.

16. Although at pains to indicate the political origin of the sacred here, nearly a decade later in the *Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), Agamben will return the source of this zone of indistinction to religion. In this later work, "glory" signifies the emptiness of biopolitical sovereignty, occupied by a power that cannot be seen except through its effects.

17. In subsequent work, Agamben (Agamben, 2005: 98) identifies in Paul's letter to the Romans the role of the Messiah to render the law inoperative without destroying it. He writes, "The messianic is not the destruction but the deactivation of the law, rendering the law inexecutable." Later, he concludes, "The messianic is therefore the historical process whereby the archaic link between law and religion...reaches a crisis and the element of *pistis*, of faith in the pact, tends paradoxically to emancipate itself from any obligatory conduct" (Agamben, 2005): 119). Agamben gestures to the messianic throughout the corpus of his work, but provides little guidance as to its practical application, even to religious audiences (Agamben, 2012). The question of the messianic is raised here in martyrdom, which in the death "emancipate[s] itself from any obligatory content."

Homo Sacer and the Christian Martyr

The most fundamental difficulty in understanding ancient Christian martyrdom is that we can make little historical differentiation between the perspective of the martyr and the institution. Faced with this difficulty, scholarship has often collapsed these two perspectives, assessing martyrologies for historical accuracy as a guarantee of the commensurability between the perspective of the martyr and the community. Thus, though the martyr is usually accepted as an actual historical entity, the content of that entity is void of identity. In a way, then, the isolation of bare life is echoed in the historiographical treatment of the martyr, which also performs a separation of the martyr's existence from the unique characteristics of that existence.

With the martyr we see more clearly the evidence of another perspective absent from the discussion of *homo sacer*. Whereas the agency of *homo sacer* is unknown, the martyr became martyr *because* of a willingness to die, and the death gives substance to the force of this agency.¹⁸ The willingness consummated in death, which I have called autonomy, exposes the possibility of alternative aims to those of the institution. Thus just by acknowledging the martyr's action as a site of volition (Barton, 1994) exercised against sovereignty, we can begin to grasp the subsequent necessity for the Christian institution, as the representative of sovereignty, to reconcile the martyr's death for institutional preservation.

Part of what makes early Christian martyrdom so interesting vis-à-vis *homo sacer* is that martyrdom comes to represent the exception as rule, anticipating the proliferation of potential *homines sacri* in modern politics. Insofar as Christianity began to represent a challenge to Roman identity, the execution of Christians reaffirmed imperial sovereignty and retraced the boundaries of citizenship for those who remained. For early Christians, in contrast, martyrs held multiple meanings as imitators of Christ, sufferers for Christ, cosmic warriors, and models of virtue (Middleton, 2006; Moss, 2010; Moss, 2012a). Sacrifice was neither the only nor the most important meaning of the martyr. What these significations held in common, though, was a resistance to imperial authority evidenced by death. This resistance could not remain unchanged with the liberty given to Christian practice under the reign of Constantine.¹⁹ Christ now ruled Rome, and the two identities were intertwined. Neither, though, could the power of martyrdom be neglected. Martyrdom needed to support newfound Christian sovereignty, and Eusebius of Caesarea provided a model narrative for this new history (Mendels, 1999).²⁰ Thus Christian martyrdom had been for the triumph of Christian institution, and a separation was created between the death and the resistance of the martyr, modeling the isolation of bare life from its lived context.

The reconciliation of the martyr's death with Christianity did not start in the fourth century, for martyrdom had been sporadically commemorated by Christians for two centuries (Limberis, 2011).²¹ However, after the triumph of Constantine over rival emperors who saw Christianity as a threat to Rome, the shift in Christian institutional affiliation, the absence of the threat of immediate persecution, and the pressure for unification

18. Certainly not all who became martyrs died willingly, but we have few glimpses of those who attempted to recant their profession of faith to avoid martyrdom. One example we are given in the ancient martyrologies is that of Quintus in the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp (Schaff and Wace, 1997). Quintus boldly announced his faith to the authorities only to change his mind when faced with death. He sacrificed and was set free. The moral of the story for the recorder of the martyrdom is not to be a volunteer martyr. We can interpret this as an example, even within the larger setting of the fledgling Christian faith against Roman or local authorities, of an attempt to control the conditions of martyrdom, a competition for sovereignty within the Christian cult.

19. Although there is insufficient space to treat it here, the relationship of ascetic practice to martyrdom is significant, providing another possibility for agency within the tradition and another practice to be regulated by the religious hierarchy. Past scholarship (Malone, 1950) has seen the asceticism as a successor to martyrdom, but more recent literature (Brown, 1988; Flood, 2004; Tilley, 1991) problematizes such a simple succession. Undoubtedly, ascetic practice was utilized more broadly in the post-Constantinian world than before for a variety of reasons, ranging from the practical inaccessibility of martyrdom to the dissemination of Christianity throughout the Empire. The regulation of asceticism bears similarities to that of martyrdom and thus creates an analogous need for transformation of its resistance.

20. As Frend (1967: 12) exults, "the examples of these men and women live on, a memorial to the impact which Christianity made on the civilization of the Roman Empire." G. W. Bowersock's *Martyrdom and Rome* (1995), is committed to attributing the development of martyrdom to Roman rather than Jewish origin, but he does not question the prevailing historical trajectory of martyrdom's role in Christianity. See Barton (1994) for a warning against strict separations of Roman and Christian notions of honor, sacrifice, and martyrdom.

21. The growth of Christianity brought a growing Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy into competition with the martyrs for authority. For example, in his *Stromateis*, second century Clement of Alexandria attempted to redefine true martyrdom based on *gnosis*, knowledge, rather than physical death (Migne, 1857). *Patrologiae Graeca*, vols. 8–9; Trans. (Roberts et al., 1890). A century later, Cyprian of Carthage's letters from exile express concern over the ability of martyrs and confessors to provide absolution for apostates, circumventing the authority of the bishop (Clarke, 1984).

of Christian practice entailed a redirection of the perceived objective of martyrdom.²² At the same time, the freedom of Christian economic activity and an institutionalization of its hierarchy allowed martyr stories and relics to spread across the Roman Empire. Stories of martyrdom promoted the locales in which they were told and provided a common language for ecumenical dialogue across the Empire (Brown, 1981). Locally, the deaths of past martyrs augmented the loyalty of Christians to the new sovereignty of the Church.

Through examining narratives of martyrdom from the post-Constantinian Roman Empire, we glimpse at a process by which the martyr becomes a useful tool for social control through rendering the violence of his death as an impetus to Christian virtue. A homily of Basil of Caesarea, a Christian bishop in the mid-fourth century, provides one suitable example. Basil was a native Cappadocian in one of the earliest Christianized areas in the Roman Empire. Along with his brother Gregory of Nyssa, his fervent promotion of the martyr cults helped solidify the institutional importance of past martyrdoms, providing us with several examples of the employment of martyrdom narratives for the Church's benefit.²³ His homily on the Christian martyr Gordius starkly illuminates the symbolic violence of the Christian martyr narrative.²⁴

On the martyr's feast day in 373 CE, Basil speaks to a Caesarean crowd gathered in a shrine dedicated to multiple Cappadocian martyrs. Basil opens the stage for the martyr's story by explaining that its intent is to spur the audience to imitation. He explains in his discourse that details in Gordius's story are sparse. Thus, "it is reasonable that we compare ourselves to painters. For when they translate images out of images, mostly, as is likely, they fall short of the model" (Leemans, 2003: 59). The image Basil creates is all the more lustrous for its lack of historical footing, even half of a century after the events in question. The stage set for Gordius's drama is one of impending apocalypse, with bodies torn to shreds, women dragged through the streets, and the stench of demonic sacrifice throughout the city. Gordius flees his military post and the city, but returns during the festival of Mars and publicly announces his disdain for commands to sacrifice.

Basil distances the would-be martyr from his congregation, for Gordius was "a savage-looking man with squalid hair..., with a long beard, filthy clothes, his entire body hardened, carrying a stick and fitted with a pouch" (Leemans, 2003: 62). Gordius is no longer one of their own. An unnamed Roman official immediately complies with Gordius's desire to be martyred, and he is taken to the spot of execution. His friends weep and attempt to dissuade him, but he is unmoved. He even interprets the pleadings of his friends, like those of the official, as attacks. In a long scriptural apologetic, Gordius chides them.

Men are all mortal, but martyrs are few. We should not wait to become corpses, but depart from life to life. What do you gain from natural death? It is fruitless, profitless, common to men and beasts. For time spends the one coming through birth into life, illness tears him apart, the violent constraints of chance destroy him. Since, then, it is necessary to die regardless, we should undertake life through death. Make voluntary that to which you have been confined. Do not spare life, its deprivation is in any case necessary.²⁵

With those final words, Gordius goes to his fate.

22. Of course, as the idea of orthodoxy continued to solidify throughout the fourth century, martyrs would continue to be made from Donatists, Manichaeans, and other sects deemed heretical (Gaddis, 2005). Orthodox martyrdom was vindicated, but the transgressive nature of volitional death was not.

23. Vasiliki Limberis (Limberis, 2011) has recently published a detailed study of the relationship of the Cappadocian fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus) to martyr cult. She contends that both out of recognition of popular piety toward martyrs as well as their own sincere conviction, they promoted the significance of Christian martyrdom in the now Christian empire, sanctifying themselves through intertwining the history of local martyrs with their own history. Raymond van Dam (2003) also argues that the Cappadocians furthered their interests—including uniting the local community against empire-wide ecclesiastical and political disputes—in promoting martyr cult.

24. Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia XVIII - In Gordium Martyrem*. (Migne, 1857), *Patrologia Graeca* 31: 489–508. Trans. (Leemans, 2003): 56–67).

25. Translation mine. "Θνητοὶ πάντες ἄνθρωποι, μάρτυρες δὲ ὀλίγοι. Μὴ ἀναμείνωμεν γενέσθαι νεκροὶ, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ ζωῆς εἰς ζωὴν μεταβῶμεν. Τί τὸν αὐτόματον ἐκδέχεσθε θάνατον; Ἄκαρπός ἐστιν, ἀκερδῆς, κοινὸς κτηνῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων. Τὸν γὰρ διὰ γενέσεως εἰς τὸν βίον ἐλθόντα ἢ χρόνος ἀνάλωσεν, ἢ νόσος διέλυσεν, ἢ βιαιότερα συμπτωμάτων ἀνάγκαι διέφθειραν. Ἐπεὶ οὖν δεῖ πάντως ἀποθανεῖν, τὴν ζωὴν ἑαυτοῖς διὰ τοῦ θανάτου πραγματευσώμεθα. Ἐκούσιον ποιήσατε τὸ κατηναγκασμένον. Μὴ φείδεσθε ζωῆς, ἣς ἀναγκαῖα ἢ στέρησις" (Migne, 1857), PG 31: 505.

It is safe to say that although they took place in the same locale, no one hearing Basil's homily had seen the original event.²⁶ With only a general story of the martyr to work from, Basil may have supplied the dialogue, and the setting for the martyrdom is clearly rhetorical. The question this raises is why Basil would have Gordius prescribing martyrdom to all those within earshot. There was little possibility of Christian martyrdom in Cappadocia in the latter half of the fourth century.²⁷ Yet what benefit could be gained from having the martyr recommend martyrdom if Basil's aim was to spur the audience instead to imitation, not of death but of the martyr's virtue? Further, what was that virtue beyond intransigence? Basil confidently states that "the account of men who have lived a good life produces as it were a light for those who are being kept safe with regard to the road of life" (Leemans, 2003: 58). Yet it is Gordius's death, not life, that is retold. There is something more than the lack of immediate threat of persecution that allows a monologue commending Christians to death to be interpreted as an impetus to a virtuous life.

Examining Christian martyr stories in the medieval period, particularly from the *Golden Legend*, Karen Winstead (2005: 201) asserts that hagiographers distanced the martyr from the reader using fear. "Fear—its absence in the martyr, its presence in the reader—operated as a mechanism of social control, anticipating and forestalling radical *imitatio* among increasingly broad audiences whose responses might be difficult to predict or channel." The martyr was fearless; this was emphasized by bold opposition to ruling authority and indifference to the threat—or experience—of torture and death. Since it is not acknowledged by the martyr, the fear of torture and death is transferred to the reader. The monologue about Gordius's desire for death serves a similar purpose, distancing him from the reader and allowing the bishop to reinterpret the meaning of the martyr's fate.

Thus Christian martyrdom came to represent both subjective and objective forms of violence as described in Žižek's triumvirate of violence above. Basil used the story of Gordius to engender his congregation's commitment, not to death, but to the local church. The subjective violence of the martyr's death was reconciled through potent symbolic violence. For the bishop, the story of the Christian martyr became a means of social control. For the listeners, the figure of the martyr, despite his death, paradoxically became a means to avoid death. Winstead contends that in distancing the martyr from the reader in the *Golden Legend*, the author appropriates the very same tactics as the villains in his tales. Similarly, whereas tyrants and officials made the death of the martyr a public spectacle to strike fear into other Christians, Basil played upon the fear of death to facilitate commitment to the Church and his bishopric. Further, by deriving virtuous life from the martyr's death, Basil showed his congregation that they could be martyrs without death.

The triumphant Christian martyr as represented by Basil's homily provides an analogy to the enigmatic *homo sacer* and foreshadows the proliferation of potential *homines sacri*. Both the martyr and *homo sacer* serve as a momentary reflection of the sovereign subject. The *homo sacer* of Roman law comes to our awareness as the function of his status is brought to light. He has transgressed and is outside the punishment and protection of society. However, as Agamben explains he leaves a trace at the border of sovereignty indicating his exceptionality. In this sense, *homo sacer* is to ancient Rome what the martyr became to Christianized Late Antique Rome.

Something is added with the martyr, for *homo sacer* remains enigmatic. As exemplified in the *Muselmann*, *homo sacer* remains exposed to death, but he is left undead. He appears, a phantasm, but he has no trajectory. Unlike *homo sacer*, death is constitutive of the martyr. As I noted above, death represents the limit and possibility of human Being, and by circumscribing the trajectory of the martyr's death, autonomous violence is reconciled through symbolic violence. If the martyr exemplifies autonomy in death, then Christianity arrests this autonomy, obscuring the sovereignty of the martyr's resistance.

26. Johann Leemans (2003: 57) contends that because there were some in the audience who 'remember' the martyrdom, Basil's story is generally true. However, if the persecution took place during Galerius's reign, any of those remaining would have had to be at least seventy years old.

27. The Cappadocians recalled the brief reign of Julian as a diabolical threat, but that emperor had intentionally refrained from making martyrs, having seen their motivational power within the church. Hal Drake (2000: 409ff) sees the reign of Julian as a primary turning point for the persecution of pagans and heretics by Christians because of the fear instilled of a pagan revival.

To think of it another way, Basil's homily is a representative example of the martyr's transformation to Christian martyr. Gordius exhorts his hearers to follow him in death as the way to achieve true life. In the bishop's homily, this zeal is redirected to foster earthly virtue. In a time when Christianity began to grow and flourish, when it no longer represented a minority cult but sovereignty itself, the resistance to sovereignty exemplified by the martyr's death was unnecessary and undesirable. Through the reappropriation of the martyr's tale, the martyr dies for Christianity and is deployed, in acts of symbolic violence, for the creation of sovereign subjects, for potential *homines sacri*.

Homines Sacri and Homo Profanus

A recent compendium on Christian martyrdom (Leemans, 2005) begins with the following: "It is not the event of the death per se but rather the martyr's disposition and testimony of faith that attracts and fascinates people." This statement pinpoints the complexity of Christianity's relationship with violence, which minimizes the autonomy of the martyr's death by shifting its meaning to faithful commitment, thereby maintaining a legacy of symbolic violence.²⁸ The compendium reiterates a few pages later, "It was, again, not the purpose that Christians were encouraged to suffer the martyr's death but rather that they were encouraged to incarnate more fully the Christian virtues which the martyr had embodied in such an exemplary way" (Leemans, 2005: xv). Indeed, as we saw in Basil's homily on Gordius above, the bishop encouraged his congregants that the story was intended to spur them to imitate the martyr, not in death, but in virtue. It is understandable that we now—after nearly two millennia—interpret martyrs as a reminder to live virtuously and be witnesses for faith.

Even though Gordius's dialogue was likely fabricated, it nonetheless symbolizes another reading that has been hidden by the normalization of a "Christian virtues" narrative. The martyr testifies to the limit and possibility of death itself. Heir to the long development of imperial Christianity, Western civilization locates the importance of Christian martyrdom—and thus martyrdom—in its relationship to the institution, what the martyr dies "for," while excluding the implications of the volitional death for Being and its relationship to sovereignty. The reading of new Christian deaths as martyrdoms, as at Columbine, are attempts to derive palatable meaning from death, to read the symbolic violence of Christian martyrdom back onto subjective acts of violence that often exceed meaning. While proponents of interreligious dialogue look to sever religion's ties with violence, new deaths are selectively cast into a familiar religious narrative. However, the narrativization of certain deaths is not only insufficient in dealing with the meanings of subjective violence. It also enables the systemic exclusion of those whose violence falls outside these familiar narratives.²⁹ They become the *homines sacri* of the contemporary world because their violence—perpetrated and suffered—does not fit within our realms of meaning.

Christian martyrdom thus provides insight into the proliferation of *homines sacri* suggested by Agamben. A transformation surfaced in Late Antiquity by which Christianity, a minority and illicit cult, aligned with the sovereign power of Rome. In the aftermath of triumph, the martyr's autonomous violence was reconciled to the Christian institution. This reconciliation through symbolic violence still functions to create and limit the possible meanings of violence, indeed what can even be recognized as violence and what cannot. In other words, the martyrdom narrative, by narrowly circumscribing the possibilities of subjective violence, misses the "catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (Žižek, 2008), by which segments of humanity are stripped of significance and exploited with near impunity.

Yet if the Christian martyr is analogous to *homo sacer*, exemplifying our subjection to violence under sovereign power, it is also possible to read the martyr differently, to emphasize not her "testimony of faith," but her autonomy in death. The same tool that contributes to the proliferation of *homines sacri* may also be read as a challenge to sovereignty. In subsequent work, Agamben discusses the notion of profaning, particularly in his collection of essays entitled *Profanations* (2007), which for at least one scholar provides a

28. In much of the Western world, the functionality of this legacy is prefaced upon a perceived control over violence. Slavoj Žižek (2008:29) notes that the first world can hardly imagine a cause worth dying for. "Indeed, the split between First and Third World countries runs increasingly along the lines of an opposition between leading a long, satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent cause." Violence is an intrusion in the West, whereas it is part of daily life elsewhere in the world (Žižek, 2011).

29. The modern creation of narrative seems to be thwarted at every step by the constant question of who constitutes an 'us' in modernity. Lyotard (1984) concisely explains the inability of the structure of narrative to create reality in the postmodern world.

"solution" to the problem of *homo sacer*. Leland de la Durantaye (2008: 29) explains that for Agamben, profanation reverses consecration. "To profane was thus to return the things that had become subject to a state of sacred exception—things that had been consecrated—to their original context." If *homo sacer* signifies separation, profanation refuses to accept, or enacts an alternative to, such separation. In this enactment, *homo profanus* becomes "a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold" (Agamben, 2000: 114). Despite the massive institutional forces working to perpetuate sovereign subjects, Agamben concedes that effective examples of profanation may remain. One such example is the martyr.

As noted, scholarship has largely accepted that the ancient Christian martyr, before his or her institutional appropriation, is inaccessible (Heyman, 2007). From a historical perspective, this is indeed the case. But there is another way to understand the martyr, by returning to the question that has animated the research of many scholars of martyrdom: What is different about the martyr? Christianity has marked the martyr's difference as 'Christian' and shifted the emphasis from the act signified by martyrdom to the significance of the institution. This response begs the question of why there were so few actual martyrdoms. To ask why death can be reinterpreted as institutional life, then, is to isolate the most unique factor common to martyrs. The answer requires an interdisciplinary methodology, because it is not only a historical question, but an ontological one.

If martyrdom is a project of meaning-making, this meaning is not created out of nothing. Individual ancient Christian martyrdoms may have been wholly fabricated, yet the signifier of martyr is prefaced on a prototype. It is created from the constant of death, the horizon of Being. Existence is inseparable from ways of existence, and it is death that provides the limit against which ways of existence are gauged. This is why Agamben locates the failure of modern politics in our status as virtual *homines sacri*. It is shown in the extreme case of the *Muselmann*, who with no cognizance of death, is denied the ability to be conscious of Being. As seen, following the paradigm exemplified by Nazi Germany, the liminal position of *homo sacer* becomes a means to isolate and exterminate bare life. Yet in another paradigm, the liminality of *homo sacer* marks the potential for sovereign resistance. Here *homo sacer* becomes Heidegger's *Dasein*, comprising a whole from which mere existence cannot be separated. Agamben (1998: 153) concludes, "If life, in modern biopolitics, is immediately politics, here this unity...appears as an indissoluble cohesion in which it is impossible to isolate something like a bare life. In the state of exception become the rule, the life of *homo sacer*, which was the correlate of sovereign power, turns into an existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold."

The martyr, the figure of autonomous violence from which the Christian martyr is reconciled to the institution, embodies the potential of this unity Agamben describes.³⁰ If the Christian martyr is *homo sacer*, then recognizing the autonomy of the martyr allows us to reread the martyr as *homo profanus*. The Christian martyr as *homo sacer* represents the symbolic violence of institutional creation and provides a model for which acts of violence are justifiable, and which are not. The martyr as *homo profanus* reverses this reading, symbolizing instead the refusal of bare life, consummating an alternate sovereignty in death. Only after death can the martyr be reconciled with a living religion.

Concentration camp survivors agree that the victims of the camps are not martyrs. "By calling the victims of the Nazis 'martyrs,' we falsify their fate" (Bettelheim in Agamben, 1999: 26). Much can be gained from this insight, which is analogous to a larger project to label the "Final Solution" as a "Holocaust," thus rendering the millions of deaths part of a divine sacrificial logic. The narrative of martyrdom provides meaning at great expense. Yet in reading the martyr as *homo profanus*, the reclamation of death, not the life of the institution, appears as a key constitutive element. This is a critical distinction from *homo sacer*, from the *Muselmann*. It is in this sense we can understand Žižek's claim (2003: 94) that violence is liberation, that the Palestinian suicide bomber at the point of death is, in some sense, more alive than we who are bent on survival. It is not bare life but *Dasein* that steps into the empty space of sovereignty, that challenges the power of Rome.

30. In "Autothanatos: The Martyr's Self-Formation" (2014, forthcoming), based upon the existential primordality of death, I have suggested the name 'autothanatos' for the prototype of the martyr, a name that captures the autonomy and violence behind the action that is subsequently called martyrdom. I provide a more detailed theoretical framework to argue that the significance of the martyr lies in his or her death, using Heidegger's "Being-towards-death" to position both the martyr and those who remain *vis-à-vis* their respective acts of violence.

The full potential of this alternative reading of martyrdom remains to be developed, as I have only been able to indicate its possibility. The liberation of the martyr from the institution as a means to understanding violent and autonomous death is seemingly applicable to other religious traditions as well, and may provide insight into the 'political martyrs' of more recent years. The reading is not another means to ignore the historical life of the martyr prior to death, including professed institutional affiliations. Nor is it a positivist project to affirm a historical martyr prior to institutionalization. Rather, it is to suggest that the martyr cannot be fully explained by such affiliation, and that the appropriation of the martyr by tradition not only constitutes violence, but indirectly justifies further forms of systemic violence. This historical function of violence in the Christian tradition—and thus in Western civilization—warns against an exclusive separation between violence and religion. The symbol of the martyr instead exposes their intimate connection, embodying both subjective violence and its reconciliation to objective forms, the deaths of some exchanged for the lives of others. One need not look far to see this utilitarian transaction taking place today.

If there is a uniqueness to modernity, it perhaps lies in the acuteness of the misrecognition between violence and its institutional function. In this light, a shift of focus toward the peaceful elements of religion perpetuates the very violence it seeks to eliminate. Agamben suggests that "to profane...does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them" (Agamben in Durantaye, 2008: 35). If we are increasingly *homines sacri* as Agamben portends, then the martyr presents us with a possibility of profanation, revealing both our commonality with the martyr's death and the autonomous power of that violent death as a challenge to sovereignty.

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