

UC Santa Barbara

Beyond Borders: Selected Proceedings of the 2010 Ancient Borderlands International Graduate Student Conference

Title

The Martyr as Homo Sacer: Toward a New Hermeneutic of Religious

Violence

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/45n930gq>

Author

Recla, Matthew

Publication Date

2010-03-31

Peer reviewed

The Martyr as *Homo Sacer*: Toward a New Hermeneutic of Religious Violence

The following is a work-in-progress, my first official foray into a project on martyrdom and identity in Late Antiquity. Within it I intend to examine martyrdom, despite its rhetoric of self-sacrifice, as a project of identity formation for all involved. While I will devote significant space in my larger project to the agency of the martyr as well as the contextualization of martyrdom in Late Antiquity, herein I will discuss the theoretical relationship of the martyr to the individual as mediated by both the individual's community and the larger tradition.

In 1999, contemporary Christian music group DC Talk and the missionary organization Voice of the Martyrs produced a book entitled *Jesus Freaks* that intersperses contemporary accounts of Christian martyrdom with hagiography and Biblical narrative. The book opens with a terse retelling of the death of a Columbine High School student who affirmed her belief in God just before being shot. It ends the account 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!"¹

This short statement faithfully reproduces an ambiguity in interpreting all martyr stories appropriated into Christian tradition. On the one hand we (presumably an audience of Christians) experience freedom because others have given it up, enjoy peace because others have endured violence. On the other hand, we are encouraged to "stand strong," "make a real difference," and "make your life count," suggesting that we should be willing to imitate the martyrs. The relationship established with the martyr is thus paradoxical. One might conceivably be martyred in imitation of other martyrs, or one might rest comfortably in the knowledge that the martyr has become the scapegoat.

It is my contention that this ambiguity is functionally necessary. It is what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'misrecognition' that allows death to be appropriated as sustenance for living tradition.² Life and death, violence and peace are productively co-implicated in martyrology. Yet in studying religious violence, scholars have often accepted the misrecognition performed by the traditions themselves, an ideal of peace, belied by a history of violence. Today, in the midst of a heightened awareness of violence in religious garb, a modified approach is needed in order to demystify the dichotomy that helps sustain religion. To exemplify a need for this modification, I will briefly discuss a sampling of scholarly discourse on violence in the early Christian tradition. I will then suggest how postmodern thought, particularly here the work of Giorgio Agamben, can be fruitfully applied to the *topos* of martyrdom, and will use his theses to recognize the active and functional misrecognition of violence in martyr discourses. Finally, to illustrate the effectiveness of these theories I will examine three different recensions of the martyrdom of Justin and his companions. My guiding aim is to shift the object of inquiry from identifying the historical actuality or theoretical possibility of non-violence in religious traditions, to examining how the discourse of violence changes from one form to another and what conditions bring about such a change. This is established by exposing the inextricability of violence from religion, instantiated both in the individual and the community.

¹ DC Talk, and Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks : Stories of Those Who Stood for Jesus : The Ultimate Jesus Freaks* (Tulsa, Okla: Albury Pub, 1999), 17–23.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

First we must lay the groundwork for the dichotomous relationship of religion and violence. Many historical studies of early Christianity address the relationship of its growth to the decline of the Roman Empire, due in large part to Edward Gibbon's formidable tome on the subject, which pitted Empire and Christianity against each other. The Empire at its best was level-headed and accepting; the faith zealous and intolerant. A focusing point within this discussion of growth and decline is violence, and stories of martyrdom are an established vehicle of communication. Here we note that Gibbon's categorizations were not so novel; they were simply Christian discourses of the 'other' turned on themselves. Martyr stories often recount the martyr's suffering in great detail and describe their opponents in malevolent, even diabolical terms. Their exhortative and apologetic tone seems to rest uncomfortably with the violent turn which the Church itself took in the post-Constantinian Empire. Faced with these subjective and sometimes contradictory sources, scholars have usually fallen into one of two camps, portraying either the Church or the Empire as the main perpetrator of violence and persecution.³

In recent years historians have taken a more nuanced look at the nature of violence in Late Antiquity, the turning point in which Christianity turned from persecuted to persecutor. Countering the blame placed on monotheism for intolerance and coercive violence, H.A. Drake argues in his *Constantine and the Bishops* that the violence present in post-Constantinian Christian government had less to do with monotheism than the exigencies of political organization.⁴ He points out the pacifist strain that had always existed in early Christianity and cautions against the assumption that monotheism was simply waiting for control in order to coerce.⁵ The violence of religion, in short, does not only come from within. This approach advances previous scholarship in its recognition of a shared responsibility for violence, forgoing an exclusive categorization of Christian and other.

With the space cleared to examine religious violence beyond simply accepting its inevitability, Thomas Sizgorich contends in *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* that violence provided a significant means for Christians and Muslims to create and maintain boundaries.⁶ The martyr in particular, one willing to die *imitatio Christi*, was a model for authentic Christianity in community discourse.⁷ Sizgorich further recognizes that the number of martyrs and later militant ascetics was small in proportion to the number of relatively peaceful believers.⁸ In other words, communities that utilized a prominent discourse of violence did not necessarily participate in the subjective violence enacted by the characters in their discourse. However, this relationship

³ Two established scholars, W. H. C. Frend and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, exemplify this ongoing debate. In his definitive work on Christian martyrs, Frend defends Tertullian's well-known dictum that martyrs provided the seed for the church's growth, arguing that the true martyr was the patiently suffering recipient of imperial furor. W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church; a Study of a Conflict From the Maccabees to Donatus* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967). Ste. Croix, on the other hand, convincingly argues that the emotional appeal of martyrdom greatly exceeded its actual occurrence, and that many if not most recorded martyrdoms were voluntary, sometimes even aggressively so. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?," *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6-38. Both, however, presume that the onus of responsibility for violence lies on one side or the other.

⁴ H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops : The Politics of Intolerance* vol. Ancient society and history (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), xvi.

⁵ H. A. Drake, "Lambs Into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance," *Past and Present* 153 (1996): 3-36, 12, 35-36.

⁶ Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity : Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16, 130, 225, 274.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

between manifold violence and the community was one which continued to make meaning and deserves further exploration.

The rhetoric of the Christian relationship to the martyr is one of imitation, just as the martyr imitates Christ, yet the vast majority of adherents do not actually imitate the actions of the martyr. This misrecognition of the martyr's function is maintained because it is productive for sustaining the religious community and its members. Subjective violence is reappropriated in order to preserve life. For the individual, veneration of the martyr reflects a theological relationship of substitutionary atonement. The martyr mitigates the anxiety of death's uncertainty for the believer. The martyr's life-as-death, the sacrifice of the temporal for the promise of the eternal, becomes for the believer death-as-life, the rhetoric of the eternal with the benefit of the temporal. It is critical, however, not to conflate the individual's relationship to the martyr with the community's relationship to the same. It is the martyr within the community, and on a broader scale, the tradition, to which we now turn.

For the community, what can be said about Christian violence should be carefully circumscribed if it is to remain in the realm of history and not theology. Violence may not have its origin in religion, but it is violence that has unceasingly patrolled religion's borders and fueled its *mythos*. Further, perpetual misrecognition of violence allows the tradition to neutralize potentially competing bases of authority; namely, other martyrs. The martyr is subject to no authority; thus, in order to maintain authority the tradition appropriates the martyr. In this way it remains the predominant arbiter of violence.

Giorgio Agamben's discussion of *homo sacer*, a relic of ancient Roman law, is particularly helpful in unveiling the function of the martyr in relation to the community. In a work of the same title, Agamben discusses the operation of the law upon bare life, life which can be killed but not sacrificed. The *homo sacer*, guilty of a heinous crime, could not be put to death ritually, but could be murdered with impunity by any individual.⁹ Such a life exists on the periphery of society, because it does not and cannot participate in the requirements of citizenship. It is outside both human and divine law, rendering it fully exposed to death.¹⁰ Yet because this *homo sacer* is deemed to be so by the law and performs an ongoing role by marking what is outside, he is included in society by his very exclusion.¹¹ As we attempt to apply it to the martyr, an analogous process occurs in two separate iterations: first, in the exclusion and execution of the martyr by his accusers, and second, in the appropriation and control of the martyr by the Christian community. The contravention of customs of sacrifice placed the early Christian martyr outside the boundaries, and consequently the protection, of the Empire. In addition, the voluntary and even intransigent denial of the minimal requirements of citizenship, which seemed to Rome so easy to fulfill, was cause for death. The death served as example both of the concentrated power of the Empire and its inability to countenance bare life. Further, it had the positive function of delimiting the borders of Roman identity.

For the Christian community, however, the martyr was and is a more enigmatic figure. *Vis-à-vis* Rome, the martyr occupies the center of Christian discourse, the model for religious authenticity. This center, however, is for the vast majority symbolic, and the martyr actually occupies the same utilitarian location for the community as she does for the Empire. Having already been excluded from participation in the Christian community (because dead) the martyr is included in it. Yet there is a critical difference. As Agamben explained, *homo sacer* was the

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1995), 71–72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7–9.

man who could be killed but not sacrificed. For the Christian community, though, the martyr becomes the figure who can be sacrificed, but not killed. The corporeality of the martyr is unchangeable, but its significance is perpetually enacted through a recreation of violence.

As we apply this theory to Late Antiquity, we can see that the manifest meaning of the martyr remains unchanged, but the modes of violence by which it was primarily expressed necessarily began to alter as Christianity gained an imperial voice. The pre-Constantinian era was marked by subjective violence against the martyr. The anxiety-producing, life-giving fear that the martyr promised to the Christian was enhanced by the eminent potentiality of death in an environment perceived as hostile to Christianity. The suffering of the martyr had implications for the community, but its benefits were primarily transacted between the individual and the divine. After Constantine, however, the possibility for martyrdom decreased and its legitimization within orthodox practice grew more difficult. In order for the orthodox community to retain the value of the discourse, the martyr's violence became symbolic rather than subjective. The martyr came to be the sacrifice, as was the Christ figure. Orthodox violence no longer took subjective form, yet symbolic violence hid the unnerving fact that the imperial persecutor of the martyr could now only be Christianity itself.¹² The retrospective suffering of the martyr increased as s/he was re/sacrificed to mitigate the anxiety of death and display the new locus of power within rather than outside of the church.

Indications of this transition can be seen in comparing three recensions in the martyrdom of one Justin, believed to be Justin Martyr, and his companions, who were executed in the mid-second century. The versions of the text evolved in a traditional manner, growing longer and more vehement with each recension.¹³ The core of the story is consistent: The urban prefect Rusticus brings Justin and his six closest friends to his court and interrogates them. He asks them a series of questions about their beliefs and practices, all of which culminates in their confession of Christianity. He then pronounces the sentence of death and they are all beheaded.

There are three notable points of difference between the earlier and later texts. Unlike later martyr stories, the earliest recension does not dwell upon the deaths of the martyrs.¹⁴ The culmination of the story is that the martyrs "fulfilled their testimony."¹⁵ However, by the third recension, "they were scourged until their flesh was torn to shreds, and their blood reddened the ground," and this all before beheading.¹⁶ We can see an expanded description of subjective violence in contradistinction to the increased distance from the events. More important, though, is the evolving nature of both persecutor and persecuted. In the first recension, the prefect Rusticus appears simply as an agent of the state. By the third, he is introduced as "the despicable prefect at Rome, a terrible man, and filled with all impiety."¹⁷ In the course of his interrogation as an agent of Satan, he addresses Justin and company as miserable and perverse. Justin is transformed as well; in the third recension he is aggressive, attempting to bait the prefect's anger. Many other changes arc toward the aggressive and away from the uncertainty of death. Justin's

¹² Of course the orthodox church continued to instigate subjective violence, especially on heretics, but they were, by being heretics, no longer orthodox. This is discussed further below.

¹³ The extant texts of the versions date from the ninth, eighth, and twelfth centuries, respectively, but the first recension is believed to be most original form of the text. See Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1972), xviii.

¹⁴ This seems to be a more common characteristic of martyrdoms for public entertainment and those recorded by Eusebius, which is indicative of the shift taking places in modes of violence in the peace of the Empire.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

confidence in salvation in the first recension becomes certitude in the third. Also, by the latest recension the would-be martyrs desire torture and death rather than stoically accepting their fate. Most critically, the conclusion of the story exemplifies the shift in mode of violence. In the first recension, the martyrs simply fulfill their testimony, and in the second, certain Christians take and bury their bodies. The final recension, however, concludes with a plea to the martyrs to grant favor to the now-Christian emperor and preserve his territory in peace.¹⁸

By the final recension, then, the story has shown itself similar to the modern martyrdom at Columbine. The death of the martyr has been given sacrificial meaning: it brings about its own negation. Through turning the power of subjective violence in the martyr's death to symbolic violence, the life and power of the tradition is fueled. The first recension is bare of detail; within the interstices lies its potentiality. By the final recension, however, the cracks have been plastered over and meaning has been made. Potentiality has become actuality. The martyrs actively sought death in a pre-scripted battle between supernatural forces; it could not have been other than it was. By appropriating the martyr's tale, the community controls its power. The crucial similarity masked is that the martyr is equally 'other' to both the persecutor and the Christian; both of the martyr's interlocutors seek to annihilate difference, yet in doing so they exclude by inclusion. As individuals in the tradition, then, we are alienated from the martyr, the martyr's constructed certitude stands in stark contrast to our uncertainty. It is an ambiguous exhortation to imitation: ought one to imitate the death or appropriate it for life, enjoying the freedom the martyr gives? Our lack of certainty, the paradoxical interpretability of the tale, is a trace revealing the violence that is perpetuated in symbolic form.

This interpretation of violence does not intend to overlook the continued subjective violence instigated by the church. The legitimization of past martyrs provided a counter to the active martyrs made from heretical Christian groups that resided on the Empire's borders. It is fitting that along the borders appeared new *homini sacri*, for heretics could be killed, but not sacrificed; martyrs, sacrificed, but not killed. Both were violent transactions which preserved the tradition and its adherents. Today, however, we view the violence of the Christian martyr primarily through the lens of tradition. It is no surprise that the unwelcome proximity of new martyrdoms, of subjective violence, causes us to reexamine the misrecognition within the religious violence of tradition. The martyr is indeed *homo sacer*, excluded by inclusion, preserved as the symbolic center while continuing to mark the borders. In appreciating the sacrifice of the martyr, we do not negate violence, but alter its direction to align with our own tradition. Ironically, this recognition of the ubiquity of religious violence *within* Christian traditions may be an important step in addressing manifold violence *across* religious traditions.

Matt Recla
University of California, Santa Barbara

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.