

ARTICLE

Martyrdom and Religious Freedom

“The growth of freedom that mankind owes to the martyrs is infinitely greater than that which it could be given by revolutionaries.”¹

— Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)

Christian martyrs have often been the most eloquent defenders of religious freedom. Even when their deaths were not accompanied by an explicit appeal to religious liberty, their acceptance of martyrdom as a consequence of their religious activity was a statement about the limits of the powers of government in relation to conscience. In the broad Christian tradition, martyrs have been understood to die *in odium fidei*, that is, because of a hatred of the Christian faith held by the one who sheds his or her blood. The ancient martyrs of the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire fall within this category, but so do the confessional martyrs of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. In the last hundred years the understanding of martyrdom has evolved to include those who die because of a hatred of the love manifested by the martyr (*in odium caritatis*). This expansion of the concept is tied to the community’s remembrance of believers who gave their lives not for an explicitly religious purpose, but out of love for fellow human beings who had suffered at the hands of oppressors.

Martyrdom is to some degree made necessary on account of the dual loyalties of the Christian citizen. Jesus’ command to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mt 22:22) implies a duality of obediences that the Christian must render, first to the spiritual community on which he or she depends for the means of salvation and for moral wisdom; and second to the state which gives protection to its citizens and guarantees the proper ordering of goods within society. Between these two obediences conscience plays an indispensable role as mediator. Conscience commands that the Christian seek to live in peace with all people and contribute to the welfare of the larger community (cf. Jer 29:5; Rom 13:1-7). So long as Caesar respects the obligations

¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), p. 174.

of Christians to profess their faith and provide for the material support of the church's members, peaceful coexistence and even cooperation with the state are in principle possible.²

The Roman state could not long abide, however, a religion that challenged its own claims to absolute authority over all aspects of life. Unwilling to accept the status of a private religious association, the early church promulgated a message that was in essence public and universal. The gospel makes a claim on all people, for Christ shed his blood for all (1 Tim 2:5f). Thus the collision between church and empire became inevitable within the matrix of Rome's political absolutism. The first disciples understood from the beginning that conscience requires primary obedience "to God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29), even if disobedience to the civil authorities entailed risking physical harm to one's person or even death. The visions of John of Patmos elevated the tensions between the tiny Christian minority and the forces of the empire to a cosmic struggle, in which the martyrs of the Lamb waged spiritual warfare against the Roman "Beast" in a conflict that would ultimately prove triumphant for the followers of Jesus (Rev 6:9).

A theology of martyrdom emerged in the early patristic period that anticipated the modern principle of religious liberty. In *The Apology*, Tertullian pleaded for tolerance of Christianity in a society that permitted "the worship of any god but the true God." Tertullian pleaded for toleration of both pagan and Christian practice: "Let one man worship God, another Jupiter; let one lift suppliant hands to the heavens, another to the altar of Fides; let one—if you choose to take this view of it—count in prayer the clouds, and another the ceiling panels; let one consecrate his own life to God, and another that of a goat. [But] see that you do not give a further ground for the charge of irreligion, by taking away religious liberty, and forbidding free choice of deity, so that I may no longer worship according to my inclination, but am compelled to worship against it."³ The principle of non-coercion in matters of religion was largely

² See Joseph Ratzinger on the delimiting role of conscience: "Conscience, it could be said in this context, is essentially about limitation, the recognition of those limits that are essential to the preservation of our humanity with its openness to transcendence; these limits we call morality. Every false interpretation of conscience sooner or later reveals itself to be a more or less disguised claim to be unlimited, that is, to be God. In the political sphere it leads ineluctably to anarchy and tyranny." *Kirche, Ökumene und Politik* (Balsamo, Italy: Edizioni Paoline, 1987), p. 107.

³ Tertullian, *The Apology*, xxiv in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3; available online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0301.htm>. Accessed on November 5, 2010.

presupposed by Christian authors at least until the reign of Emperor Theodosius (379-395).

In this same period an important bulwark against state incursions into religious freedom emerged in the form of the weekly holy day. Though it was only with Constantine's decree of 321 that Sunday became a legal holiday—that is, free of menial labor at least for city dwellers—the obligation to commemorate the “day of resurrection” (cf. Heb 10:25) had always given the first day of (the Roman) week a quasi-sabbatarian significance for Christians. During the persecution of Diocletian, forty-nine North African Christians defied an imperial decree forbidding Christians to gather for Sunday worship. In 304 the martyrs of Abitene endured brutal tortures after replying to their accusers: “Without fear of any kind we have celebrated the Lord's Supper, because it cannot be missed; that is our law. We cannot live without the Lord's Supper” (*Sine dominico non possumus*).⁴ The “dominico,” which these martyrs demanded be recognized by the Roman authorities as a de facto necessity for Christians, can mean either the Eucharist or the principal day of the week on which it is celebrated.

In the twentieth century Christians of varying confessional loyalties have also shed their blood for having witnessed to the gospel and denounced social and political injustices. Martyrdom functions today as a powerful ecumenical witness because the martyrs' communion with Christ brings about what Pope John Paul II described as a “perfect communion” with all other martyrs. “The witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has,” according to the late pontiff, “become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants.... *In our own century the martyrs have returned, many of them nameless, 'unknown soldiers' as it were of God's great cause.*”⁵

An estimated 100 million Christians face persecution today in approximately forty countries in the Muslim world, as well as in North Korea, China, and India. Forced conversions, infringements on public worship, and physical attacks on Christians occur at alarming rates in what can be described as systemic persecution *in odium fidei*. Yet Christians also face death because of their advocacy for justice and universal human values. St. Thomas Aquinas

⁴ *Acta SS. Saturnini, Dativi et aliorum plurimorum Martyrum in Africa*, 7, 9, 10: PL 8, 707, 709-710. As cited in Pope John Paul II, *Dies Domini*. no.46; http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html. Accessed on January 19, 2011.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 37; http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_10111994_tertio-millennio-adveniente_en.html. Accessed on November 5, 2010. (Emphasis original).

argued that any good can be a cause of martyrdom.⁶ In the last century martyrs like the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (d. 1945), the Catholic priest Jerzy Popieluszko (d. 1984), and the Anglican teacher Lucian Tapiedi (1942) died *in odium caritatis*, resisting totalitarian regimes and advocating for the human rights and dignity of the oppressed.⁷

The history of martyrs who were executed by other Christians has been a source of painful scandal but also an opportunity for the “healing of memories” by those committed to the ecumenical project. Today attention to the religiously motivated violence committed by one’s ancestors in the faith elicits a burden of conscience for many Christians, who see such acts as offending human dignity and the principle of religious freedom. The burden only increases when believers realize that such acts done in the name of faith contradict the very nature of faith as a free act. From the standpoint of the gospel, a coerced faith is an oxymoron. Except for those ecclesial bodies that have made non-violence a binding absolute norm, the historic churches can make their own the words of the bishops of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965): “In the life of the People of God, as it has made its pilgrim way through the vicissitudes of human history, there has at times appeared a way of acting that was hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel or even opposed to it.”⁸ The painful memory of Christians executing other Christians for reasons of heresy, or for allegedly causing public disorder, awakens conscience to defend the societal conditions on which the free assent of faith can be made.⁹

The dialogue of reconciliation between the descendants of the persecuted and those of the persecutors has sometimes included exercises in the “healing of memories.” The dialogue between the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Mennonite World Conference (1998-2003)

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2a, 2ae. Q. 124 ad. 3.

⁷ Whatever may be the limits of his theology, Jon Sobrino makes the correct assertion that a martyr can be defined not only or principally [as] someone who dies *for Christ*, but someone who dies *for Jesus’ cause*... The essence of martyrdom is affinity with the death of Jesus.” Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, tr. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 267.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, no. 12; http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html

⁹ The Quaker martyrs of New England, including Mary Dyer, went to their deaths in 1660 believing that greater religious tolerance would lead to an improvement of the spiritual health of the new American colony. See http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/martyrdom_of_mary_dyer.htm

suggested that such healing begin with a “purification” of memories. First, the dialogue participants reconstruct past events in order to understand the mentalities, conditions, and living dynamics in which persecution and martyrdom took place. Second, members seek to purge “from personal and collective conscience all forms of resentment or violence left by the inheritance of the past on the basis of a new and rigorous historical-theological judgment, which becomes the foundation for a renewed moral way of acting.”¹⁰ Finally, the dialogue moves into a shared re-reading of history as a way of reconciling divergent memories of the past.¹¹

Moving a step beyond a reconciling re-reading of history, Rowan Williams proposes an ecumenically shared honoring of the martyrs. The Archbishop of Canterbury asks how the descendants of the martyrs might be able to make of them a “gift” to the descendants of the persecutors. Two requirements must be met for this to happen: first, the martyr’s community must “celebrate the martyr’s memory in such a way that he or she offers grace and hope to those outside”; second, the community of the persecutors must remember the martyr “in penitence and thanksgiving.”¹² The “apologies” issued by Pope John Paul II in the context of Jubilee 2000 liturgies of reconciliation would seem to approximate what Williams intends by such a remembrance.¹³ The key element for Williams is that of hope, since martyrdom is always a sharing in the resurrection of Christ. Therefore, “to make the martyr a weapon against others is an offense against the resurrection faith, and to make of one’s *own* past of suffering a weapon is no less so.” The whole Church needs for its wholeness, Williams maintains, “the memory both of its capacity for violence and of the great witnesses to the risen Jesus who have appeared in the midst of it.”¹⁴

Martyrdom is a gift for the whole Church because it affirms “the freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21) who are both witnesses and partakers in Christ’s resurrection. Within the ambiance of Paschal faith, love for life does not

¹⁰ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and World Mennonite Council, *Called To Be Peacemakers* (2003), chap 3, no. 192; <http://www.mwc-cmm.org/en/files/Catho-Menno/Report%20cathomenno%20Final%20ENG%20-%20PDF.pdf>. Accessed on November 5, 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid*, no. 193.

¹² Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002; orig. ed., 1982), 50-51.

¹³ See Luigi Accattoli, ed. *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa’s of John Paul II*. Trans. Jordan Aumann (New York: Alba House, 1998).

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

deter such believers from death (Rev 12:11). Thus the Christian community stakes out its territory within society—and it is a territory that the church gladly shares today with other Christians and non-Christians alike—to fulfill the demands of conscience towards the worship of God and love of neighbor. In the final analysis religious freedom flourishes not just when civil statutes favor freedom of expression and the rights of minorities, but when persons of profound religious conviction, like the martyrs, allow conscience to play its dynamic role as arbiter in matters of ultimate consequence.¹⁵

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¹⁵ This article derives from a presentation given on December 4, 2010 to the semi-annual meeting of Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

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