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EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

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Dr John Roxborogh (jroxnet@ibm.net) was until 1999 Associate Editor of *Evangelical Review of Theology* and Lecturer at the Bible College of New Zealand and is now Lay Training Coordinator at the School of Ministry, Knox College, Dunedin, NZ. This material was developed from the experience of being secretary for the New Zealand Society for the Study of Religion and Communism (in association with Keston College) and from teaching courses on Minority Christianity at the Bible College of New Zealand and at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia. The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Michael Bourdeaux and of students at STM and BCNZ to his understanding of these issues. Web and email addresses included here may change, but were correct as of July 1999.

The Unity of Martyrdom and Communion with Christ

France Quéré

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THE UNITY OF MARTYRDOM

We have seen three periods, and three meanings of martyrdom: the name of Christ, the freedom of the Spirit, and social justice. We separated these ideas only for the sake of clarity and because the historical development prompted us to do so: it is true that some died confessing Christ, others because their conscience would not bend before any human master, and a third group because they were fighting against contempt for and annihilation of the poor.

However, we should go beyond this apparent contrast which dissolves in the profundity of the choices made. Constants appear, if only among the persecutors who have nothing to envy one another for from one age to another in terms of barbarism; they have done all the evil that it is possible to do to human beings. But let us see above all that the different approaches of our martyrs stem from a single centre, belief in Christ, and are constantly interlaced. Who would dare to confess Christ without concern for his or her impoverished brothers and sisters, and without holding his or her head high before Caesar? Who can claim to be free if they do not allow their neighbours to be, because they have no food, and if they do not invoke the supreme dispenser of freedom? Who can believe themselves to be vehicles of justice if they do not attend to the perpetrators of slavery and, taking the side of humanity, do not stand up to the power which takes only its own side; or if they do not serve, in the person of the poor, the figure of the one who made himself poor to crown them with his glory?

The Service of the Humiliated

Causes cannot therefore be dissociated, and the vast number of the oppressed is always present in the actions, taken of their own will, which lead Christians to martyrdom, even if they do not specifically defend their cause as Christian. Neither Jan Hus nor Polycarp died for themselves; had only their own interests been at stake, they would have taken a

course other than dying. Moreover, we should not believe that they fought for heavenly thoughts, in contrast to contemporary commitment to all humankind.

How could the martyrs of times before ours have avoided commitment? The temporal home of the spirit, if it is that which was thought the only one worthy of honour at the end of the Middle Ages, is at the same time the fleshly body and the human city; and the Lord on whom Christians in antiquity called inhabits the same places. As he said, he is present in each one of us, and specially in the person of the poor. No one in the name of faith or honour can neglect these vast areas of history and human individuals.

Thomas More refused to take an oath which dishonoured his country and looked for the unity of the universal church. Behind the voices that Joan heard was the wounded honour of a nation. The apostolic fathers who left writings before undergoing martyrdom bear witness that they too demanded the bread that was the due of the poor. Ignatius and Polycarp preach 'help for the widow, the orphan, the afflicted, the captive, the freedman, the hungry and the thirsty'. Their presence is part of the design of the God for whom they die. Listen to the prayer which Polycarp uttered before being taken away, in which he commended to God those whom he knew, 'rich and modest, noble and obscure', all equally objects of his paternal affection.

These men accepted suffering because their conviction extended beyond themselves to serve the human community and take its part on earth. However, they differ from our age in that they did not make the prince feel ashamed of the miserable state of the world. In this respect they believe him to be ineffective, distant—as he is—and literally irresponsible. It is to the Christians that he turns in looking after the city, since they have received the light. Since they have received it, should they not give it? So let them build their world, let them mould with full hands this glebe tainted with avarice! Let the church be the first glimmerings of the justice that is heralded.

So, far from taking them aside into the heavens, faith nails them to these kingdoms of the earth, which are promised to the meek to inherit and the love of which they sometimes confess.

The Freedom of the Spirit

The freedom of the Spirit did not wait for the end of the Middle Ages to kindle its little flame, which does not flicker under threat. It is interior to faith, and stamps it with original features.

The first is this: thanks to this freedom, the church has not spoken only through the mouth of the wise. The martyrdom of which it is the cause gives a hearing to the voice of a people, without distinctions of class, fortune, education, age and—something which is more rare—sex. Faith invests men and women born to shadows and silence with an authority which is bestowed only on the powerful. Old men and frail young women show it to Caesar. Neither group, however, are rebels in principle. On the modest stage on which they play their part—the city, their workplace, the ties of blood and solidarity—one can see nothing to hold against them. They show themselves subject to those who govern them, whose institutions they judge to be excellent. However, there remains a diffuse yet stubborn opposition to a power which glorifies itself and makes itself an end in itself; the race of free men professes political irreligion. Down with the cult of the emperors! Let them govern, fair enough, but let them respect the two limits which bound human empires: the heaven above them and the conscience which judges them before heaven. Christian martyrdom is based on opposition to a power which takes itself as an absolute point of reference and closes the world in on itself: faith opens it up on the basis of a principle which surpasses human beings, reduces all its grandeur to the humble rule

which measures them: because they are fallen, subject to error, the world is not their work and they must only serve it.

Christians will still die today without having the claim that 'Caesar is Lord' extracted from them. Originally, there was this superhuman silence which deafened a stunned people, everywhere a free mind which buttressed itself against the folly of the great and haunted their sleep. According to Anouilh, the king says to Thomas More, 'As for you, your conscience is always sitting there among us, in robes of state.' But note what puts the powers at risk: a homily in a chapel, voices whispering in the ears of a country girl, a fragile old man praying in silence.

The fury with which the state rages shows that in spite of the disparity of forces it finds its most redoubtable adversary in independent judgment. That was formerly the case with some wise men. Through Christ it becomes the honour of a people, which affirms, before Alain, that 'the spirit never owes obedience'.

Confession of the Christ

However, in the case of Christians the formula is not quite correct. From outside, their freedom looks like rebellion. Within, it is confused with an obedience made an absolute, which has a name because it has a master, Jesus Christ. 'I look to my judge,' exclaimed Joan, 'who is the master of heaven; yes, I look to my creator. I love him with all my heart.' Polycarp echoes this: 'I have served him eighty-six years.' And in this century there is the same obstinate voice of Monsignor Romero: 'We obey the order of God before that of human beings.'

They all explained themselves. They did not depart from the general spinelessness through personal exhibitionism or in the pride of an elitist intelligence. They simply heard the incessant childlike voice which conscience adopts when it begins to speak. They heard in themselves someone whom they knew and loved. Socrates called it his demon, the Christian calls it Christ. The demon was for Socrates, Christ is for us and for ever. That is the difference.

Moreover their personal drama is lost in the vastness of an eternal design into which they throw themselves without fear and sometimes without displeasure. It is not out of false courtesy that so many of them thank their persecutors who have launched them beyond measure into the infinity of which they have dreamed so much: from this position they regard as negligible the favours or the furies of the earth, and simply await the moment when they cross the threshold of blessedness.

So martyrdom is always *a confession of faith*, secret or expressed. In freedom, the right of conscience does not end up in an individual sufficiency: it goes before God in wonder; the law effaces itself before the legislator to whom the faithful commend themselves and others. For their discretion over the mistakes of others is by no means the least feature of their freedom. They do not accuse; they confront their persecutors, full of humanity, if not of humour. If they protest, it is at the evil done by their brothers, never that which they undergo.

Just as in effect freedom is obedience, the cause of the poor in which martyrdom seems to become secularized is also a confession of Christ. The modern age reveals the light of the kingdom in mutual human expectation, human devotion to the values of solidarity which can take political forms and sometimes seems to become swallowed up in them. This broadening of the Christian vocation should not appear as a break in the tradition of martyrdom: that remains a struggle against the powers of darkness which corrupt the heart. The twentieth-century martyrs refuse to sacrifice men and women to mammon, the new idol of our time. Their combat is also spiritual. They persist in confronting oppressive power; they stimulate independence of judgment, insensitive to the seductions of money

and power, and they flourish above all in faithfulness to service of the most abandoned, where faith contemplates the form of Christ in the present.

Risen or Crucified, the Eternal Christ

On one point modern martyrs part company with their predecessors. But is it a separation? They do not encounter Christ at the same stage of his ministry. The Christians of old confess the risen Christ, already entered into his final glory. This kingdom, which has been inaugurated, supplants historical landmarks and puts the martyrs in these new times. The judgment, the supreme manifestation of the divine omnipotence, makes our texts groan with formidable rumblings. That does not terrify these Christians; on the contrary. Nothing seems to delight them more than to announce the sanctions to which the saints themselves are exposed. The gentle Crispina sincerely believes that God reserves eternal punishment for her if she evades the ephemeral persecution of men. The severity which the martyrs feel that they escape only by suffering is the sign of the values that they defend, hence their contentment. Firmly counting on divine justice, they await it, and their patience, which the oppressors exploited to redouble their barbarities, is in antiquity still a process of justice itself.

Our contemporaries have turned their eyes away from the glory of the heavens, obscured by the sorrow of the world, which is almost infinite. So many millions of people are the victims of poverty, oppression, war, meaninglessness. 'How do we talk of God after Auschwitz?' asks Adorno. In any case it is impossible to celebrate peacefully God's power and even his justice, in the old sense of the term, according to which God awaits the end of the human spectacle to judge his creatures. If he is powerful he should intervene instead of waiting; if he is just he should help instead of judging.

'Only a powerless God can help,' said Bonhoeffer, before Elie Wiesel. Faith meditates on the scourged Christ, the power of love bestowed, that is, of passion and suffering, but without the peril of being destroyed. Faith seeks him among the humble, the scorned in whom he is embodied. The Lord of the twentieth century is the suffering servant of Second Isaiah, with wounded face and hands, which also tend the unfortunates of whom he is so intimately the brother.

God has made himself known in history. He has not asked his faithful to love elsewhere than on the earth where they have met him, nor otherwise than as he loved himself, dedicating himself to the liberation of our humiliated race.

COMMUNION WITH CHRIST

More intimately, in their communion martyrs are united with the body and heart of Christ. In Smyrna, in Santiago, under Domitian and under the colonels, in the arena or in the gulag, the same name is cried out or repeated in silence, a single master: Jesus Christ. For each person it is the thought which arouses and harries as much as it fulfils. The martyrs follow Christ step by step, sharing in what he said, did, and underwent.

Suffering

'Be imitators of him', the ancient preaching recommends. And Jesus himself indicated the nature of the obedience which they had sworn to him: 'If they persecuted me they will persecute you.' So to imitate him is to die. The shedding of blood fully accomplishes this 'imitation of Jesus Christ,' the condition and the reward of which are recalled by Ignatius of Antioch: 'If we are not completely ready, with the help of Christ, to run to death, to imitate his passion, his life is not in us.'

We should examine these last words carefully: 'His life is not in us.' For they go beyond the simple ideal of imitation which good disciples seem to pursue. In being conformed to the life of the saviour, his passion and his death, the martyrs are united with him. 'You will forsake me', Jesus had said to his disciples, who were in effect abandoning him. But those who die in his name do not abandon him. How many have dared to confess, before the pallid faces of the executioners, their swords and their stakes: 'I am not alone'.

The trial of the martyrs binds them to Christ by the sacred bonds of the theological virtues. Here we can see the power of faith. Christ is with them, in them, and constrains them with his love. To her warder, amazed at hearing her groaning in the pains of childbirth, Perpetua replies: 'At this moment it is I who suffer, but then another will be in me, who will suffer for me because I too will suffer for him.'

Taken to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts, St Ignatius trembles with joy. 'I am God's grain, I will be milled by the teeth of beasts and I will become the bread of Christ.' He becomes a body with Christ, he makes himself the body of Christ. The evocation of the eucharist and, by others, of a baptism of blood, manifests the presence of the dead and risen Christ, who has become indissociable from the one who has suffered for him.

Hoping

But what will be the bliss of the kingdom if Christ is already their companion on earth! Hope constrains the martyrs, hope of a well-beloved and definitive country which will receive them, transfigured along with their sorrows. Death is a transition, not an end. The witnesses are struck by the cheerfulness or the serenity of the martyrs before their execution. The chronicler of the community of Lyons writes that 'Blandina shone with joy, as if she had been summoned to a wedding banquet and not to be delivered over to the beasts'. This old servant, said to be ugly and doubtless an object of scorn, entered the arena like a young beauty whom a prince comes to escort to a seat at his side at the eternal feast. Thomas More, with his customary humour, counts on taking up in this peaceful realm the 'good conversations' that he had with his royal persecutor. And the theologian Bonhoeffer told his companions on the eve of his execution: 'It is the end, but for me the beginning of life.'

If so many are impatient to die, it is not in order to escape the torments earlier; it is because these torments are not responding quickly enough to the call which rang in the ears of the first to be persecuted: 'Come to the Father.'

And the church does not believe that the martyr is swallowed up in death. Born to a more worthy life, in heaven the martyrs become intercessors to whom the church appeals. This is the way in which a cult of the martyrs developed from the beginning, a development from which would later emerge the cult of the saints.

Loving

Finally, and here the connection is obvious, the martyr achieves love. Christ had said: 'There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Is not loving Christ a matter of loving like him, i.e. to the ultimate offering of oneself? Polycarp calls those who have endured to the end 'imitators of true love'. Not all deserve this title, for it can be that someone's heart fails.

However, in the prisons, the affection which united the captives amazed those who witnessed it: they supported one another. Their sacrifice, far from terrifying the dispersed community of the faithful, strengthened its courage and led to revivals. There was no trace of harshness in the martyrs towards their persecutors. Thomas More still conceded readily to his adversaries the freedom of judgment which he allowed himself, and did not condemn them. The Jesuit Daniel in 1648, encircled by the Iroquois and already pierced

all over with their arrows, repeated as long as he had strength to speak, to God, that he was offering his blood for the flock; and to his murderers, that they would always find the saviour ready to receive them in grace if they had recourse to his mercy.

Witnessing

So it is that the most profound sense of the word martyrdom is witnessing. What power can the fury of hatred have beyond that of killing? Again we must understand that it is certainly possible to suppress a life, but one cannot boast of having taken it, since it has already been offered. Christ himself invoked this supreme independence, exalted by the act which above all seemed to abolish it: 'No one takes my life, but I give it.' From this gift, Charles de Foucauld deduced: 'Live today as if you were going to die a martyr this evening.'

However, it is not so much the person at whom the persecutor strikes but what he or she affirms; it is this that provokes anger. It is easy to strike someone, but hands flowing with blood do not prevent the words from taking wing. Though one voice may be silenced, the whole of the life presses on behind it and continues to bear witness. The scandal of such a death serves to make the message resound. It is the crime which reveals the perfection of a life, the ultimate meaning that supported it, by inextricably intertwining reasons for living and reasons for dying.

It is worth remembering a comment of Clement of Alexandria in the third century: 'Martyrdom', he said, 'is fullness, not because it finishes a human life but because it brings love to the fullest point.' On Golgotha, simply because he had seen Christ breathe his last, a pagan exclaimed: 'Truly this man was the Son of God.' The persecutors collaborate in spite of themselves with the growing influence which they ridicule. Who would remember the African bishop Janani Luwum had he merely devoted himself to his everyday tasks, however conscientiously, and had not given to someone who advised him to flee an answer which made his service an example: 'I am not afraid. I am the archbishop. I must stay.'?

The persecutors were well aware that in killing someone they were bringing the meaning of a life to white heat, definitively demonstrating the force of a conviction, and making not so much a corpse as a martyr. An admirable life and an exemplary death are beyond their grasp.

Conquering

What is left to them? Torture, which serves to dissociate life from death, so closely interwoven in a common task. In this terrible transition the torturers have the victim at their mercy. It is an occasion for destroying before their eyes, and above all before those of the victim, both the physical body and that for which the victim lived. He or she is to die twice, lose both life and the meaning of that life. In this way the torturers count on heaping ignominy on the cause that the martyr defends. That is why the pagans did not choose their sanctions at random. By casting Christians into the arena they forced these people to play roles in a spectacle that they could not bear to watch when they were free; they made them agents in these abominations, hoping that the lofty thoughts which always inspired them would be submerged in ridicule and horror. By torturing their victims, the executioners of the modern age seek to vilify them with the same atrocious obstinacy. What is left of nobility and courage in this heap of flesh, this haggard face, those mad avowals? If those who are tortured speak, they repudiate their gods and repudiate themselves.

But broken, lacerated, burned, the majority hold their heads high. This is what the ancients called combat: not dying, but suffering, without grovelling in the abject misery to

which their executioners have reduced them. They remain human beings. And God does not cease to be born in the amazing manger of their bodies. This criminal whom they seek to silence raises his song of innocence even more loudly; the cause he or she defends takes flight before the scandalized eyes of the world, passes on a message of peace and love, and dares to wash both human beings and their violence in the blood which has been shed. So Bishop Vladimir died with words of forgiveness for those who assassinated him.

The life, the death, the suffering and the profound significance which all these have come together in the absolute form of an invincible witness.

The Church Around Them

But more than persecutor and persecuted are needed to make a martyr. Around them the martyrs also needed the world, for which they are always the sacrifice. Others will speak when the victims are no longer in a position to do so themselves.

If martyrs owe their title to what they were, it is firmly connected with those who spoke of them and finished the story. This story emerges from monuments, from recollections, from books in which the church has a living memorial, and even more, its glory and its substance. 'Martyrdom', says one text from Vatican II, 'is considered by the church to be an eminent grace and the supreme proof of charity.' And if there is no witness to take over from the silence, the church still remembers these obscure servants with just as much respect in its assemblies as those whom it calls 'all the saints'.

To the eyes of faith, violence begins instead of ends, perpetuates what it had thought to break. At the funeral of Cardinal Stepinac, the Archbishop of Milan, later pope under the name of Paul VI, celebrated this proud permanency. 'The passion of Christ continues … It was necessary for the Christ to suffer. It is still necessary for the church to suffer. For its fidelity to Christ, for its authenticity. To renew its capacity to speak to the world and save it. Martyrdom is one of its charisms.' T.S. Eliot, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, expressed such hope like this: 'We rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sin of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men.' And let us remember those of old who approached death as a threshold, certain of entering the kingdom of 'unquenchable light'.

But does one have to be a Christian to perceive a dawn in the heart of such darkness? Let us listen to someone who, without sharing this hope, does not hesitate to write: 'I, who do not believe in redemption, ended by thinking that the enigma of atrocity is not more fascinating than that of the simplest act of heroism or love. But only sacrifice can look torture in the eyes; and the God of Christ would not be God without the crucifixion.'

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This article is reprinted by permission of the publishers from chapters II, III (pages 18–29) of *The Book of Christian Martyrs* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990). The author is a freelance writer. Other contributors to the volume, translated from French original by John Bowden, are Bruno Chenu, Claude Prud'homme and Jean-Claude Thomas.

Towards a Modern Protestant Theology of Martyrdom