

A Few Fertile Threads:  
Ancient and Contemporary Martyrdom as a  
Neglected Source of Theological Inquiry

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In an essay entitled “Epistemology and Method of Liberation Theology” Clodovis Boff writes: “the relationship between liberation theology and the great theologies of the past is one of critical complementarity” (Boff 1993:63). He quotes Pope John Paul II, stating that liberation theology “must constitute a new stage—intimately connected with those that have gone before” (63). Boff seeks to expand on this relationship, arguing that liberation theology should seek “to maintain a bond of basic continuity” with historical theologies, both reincorporating “forgotten, fertile theological threads that can enrich us” as well as raising challenges to theologies that have neglected and/or oppressed the poor (81).

Matt Lundberg has skillfully offered us a glimpse of what the product of this task might look like, as he connects the martyrology of contemporary liberation theologian Jon Sobrino with the martyrdoms of the early Christian Church. However, I believe a line of continuity could be drawn much more boldly between these two periods of Christian martyrdom than the one Lundberg has already traced. In this brief response, I will both challenge Mr. Lundberg’s definition of martyrdom in the first centuries of the Christian Church, and I will suggest how a more conscientious look at the martyrdoms of this early period supports a closer comparison between ancient and modern martyrdoms and between the way these martyrdoms were interpreted by their contemporaries.

Lundberg has narrowly defined ancient Christian martyrdom as one of confession, since the martyr chooses death rather than the denial of Christ or “some piece of orthodox doctrine.” Lundberg goes on to state that these

“martyrdoms of confession” were driven by a “hatred of the faith.” I contend, however, that this is an over-simplification. I strongly disagree that ancient martyrdom was based so exclusively on a person’s verbal affirmation of belief in Jesus as Lord, nor do I agree that it stemmed primarily from an explicit hatred of “the faith” amongst particular groups or persons. First, it should be noted that there were a variety of waves of persecution before Constantine, ignited by different rulers and groups in distinct regions, and for very specific — and diverse — reasons. Most, if not all of these early persecutions, were lead by rulers who were not necessarily even aware of the particular beliefs of this small sect. However, among the variety reasons for which the ancient church was persecuted in these differing contexts, was the fact that they were a community that lived differently from those around them. They set themselves apart and did not always behave in the ways dictated by the authorities. Their refusal to give in to the demands of society that Christians considered contrary to the message of Christ could be, and sometimes was, considered subversive.

Many are familiar with the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua for example, who like many martyrs of her day, was put to death for her refusal to offer a sacrifice to the gods. The Christians were different, with a new perspective on life and religion, at a time when such newness was very unpopular. They were, therefore, not persecuted simply for holding an “orthodox belief” — since orthodoxy as such had not yet been determined at the time of these early persecutions. Ignatius himself was martyred before the canon was formed, before the creedal councils, and before the word “heretic” was flung onto the scene by Ireneaus. (Perhaps Lundberg here is referring to later “martyrdoms” inflicted by the church itself upon those considered heretics; but these later martyrdoms would not be considered “ancient”.) Nor do I find the Roman Catholic definition given by Lundberg to support the narrow description he proposes. The Catholic statement affirms three times that martyrdom is based on one’s “bearing witness”. Bearing witness is not simply assent to a doctrinal belief. Bearing witness suggests something far more dynamic, and it seems that both forms of martyrdom he describes involve this more multi-layered form of witness.

I appreciate Lundberg’s desire to have those killed for their solidarity with the oppressed in Latin America to be counted among the church’s martyrs, but I maintain that a more comprehensive look at these early martyrdoms would show that one does not need to create and emphasize two distinct categories for martyrdom—one of confession based on hatred of the faith,

and another one of solidarity based on hatred of justice. I argue, instead, that both ultimately stem from an imitation of Christ, a way of life which repeatedly brings people into conflict with ruling authorities and often leads to an imitation to the point of death. This is a connection ripe for investigation and reflection, and I think Lundberg's work would be enriched with a closer look at the communities persecuted in the early centuries.

Not only is it possible to see a clear continuity, in terms of imitation of Christ, between the particulars of ancient Christian martyrdoms and those of contemporary Christian martyrdoms in Latin America, but the martyrologies developed from them also share a common interpretation of the martyrs as manifestations of Christ. This is a radical edge of the discourse surrounding martyrdom which Lundberg seems to attempt to soften, all the while arguing for the prophetic witness of the martyrs. Yet the very quotes of Sobrino he provides in his paper, support a bolder theological claim than the conclusion Lundberg draws. The claim which allows martyrdom to carry such particular theological significance, a significance which Lundberg rightly argues is worthy of careful reflection, is precisely the claim that the martyr becomes a true embodiment of Christ in his or her historical moment. It is this radical interpretation of the martyr which Sobrino holds in common with the theologians of the ancient church and the authors of the early martyr accounts.

Nearing conclusion, I will quickly look at a few quotes from Lundberg's paper and offer a brief comparison to quotations from the martyrologies of the second and third centuries.

Lundberg notes that according to Sobrino martyrdom is always viewed as a witness to something beyond the martyr herself, and "only as it does this is it actually a participation in the reality which it helps to make present".<sup>1</sup> Lundberg footnotes, however, that Sobrino seems to transgress his own rule of interpreting martyrdom as always pointing beyond the martyr, by "talking about the 'salvation' brought by the martyrs." In his note Lundberg offers a way of interpreting Sobrino's statement about the martyrs' salvific power that seem less offensive to mainline Protestant orthodoxy, but Lundberg himself states that a martyrdom can only be interpreted as Christian if it reproduces, among other things, the salvific character of Jesus' death.

It was not uncommon in the ancient church to attribute the salvific effects of Christ's death to the martyrs as well, be it victory over Satan or a sacrifice that covers sins (Frend 1967:268). Origen provides us with a number of examples. He writes, "Just as the Savior's [martyrdom] brought cleansing to

the world, may not [baptism by martyrdom] also serve to cleanse many” (Origen 67). And “perhaps just as we have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus... so some will be redeemed by the precious blood of the martyrs” (Origen 79). And Tertullian says that the only way to ensure salvation is through the second baptism, that of blood (Tertullian 102). The idea of anyone other than Christ providing a form of salvation might run counter to some theologians’ orthodox sensibilities, but there is historical precedent for this conception of martyrdom. Perhaps Lundberg is too quick to explain away some of Sobrino’s bolder claims.

Lundberg also quotes Sobrino’s claim that the martyrs do “not only take us back to theological concepts ... of Christ, but above all they make them present. In this way the martyrs become a source of theological knowledge.” Yet Lundberg again softens this claim by suggesting that the martyrs “give us eyes to understand the cross and resurrection of Christ.” It seems to me, however, that Sobrino, in line with the authors of the early church martyr accounts, is not proposing that the martyrs merely give us eyes to understand, but that they actually provide us with authentic glimpses of the content of the gospel message within their very persons (something Lundberg only attributes to Jesus, as the true prophet). This idea that the martyr helps to make the real life of Jesus, his ministry and message, present in one’s own context is a reoccurring concept in early martyr accounts. The account of the Martyrs of Lyons narrates that when some of the Christians being tortured looked over at another Christian who was soon to be martyred, she appeared to them to be Jesus, recounting that “in their torment with their *physical eyes* they saw in the person of their sister, him who was crucified for them” (emphasis mine).

Both the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom and Ignatius’ letter to the Romans (in which he anticipates his impending martyrdom) speak of their flesh becoming the bread of Christ, taking on a eucharistic quality (Ignatius 231). The account of Polycarp’s martyrdom describes his burning flesh as smelling “like bread being baked”, and says that after he died Christians were “eager to take up his body to have a share in his holy flesh.” Another account goes even further, saying that within those being martyred “the divine trinity was visible also.” Theologians like Maximus Confessor, a few centuries later, might call this radical resemblance another incarnation. The Christian martyrs, in their imitation of Christ, become Christ in his ubiquity, a sign that he can indeed be manifested in a real way in an indefinite number of those imitating him to the point of death. The ancient Christian martyr

accounts thus support Sobrino's interpretation of martyrdom, an interpretation which is echoed, but certainly tamed, by Lundberg who writes, "the martyrs participate in the reality, which they make present—the cross and resurrection of Christ—they are a source, a quasi-sacramental source, [Lundberg clarifies], of theology's access to those realities."

In conclusion, Lundberg has admirably noted a relationship between these phases of martyrdom in the Christian Church. I am suggesting, however, that a closer examination of early Christian martyrologies might well provide some of those "forgotten, fertile threads" that Clodovis Boff suggests can enrich the contemporary task of liberation theology.

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